

“AND THESE SIGNS SHALL FOLLOW”: A CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY
OF APPALACHIAN SNAKE-HANDLING, 1910-1955

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to Caroline Swanton and Denny Williams.

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ABSTRACT

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This paper seeks to understand the creation of a distinct snake-handling culture within Appalachia during the first half of the twentieth-century. As Appalachian snake-handlers molded and created this distinct religious culture between 1910 and 1955 they created a distinct identity in an attempt to make sense of the social and economic battle ground around them. This identity resulted from a distinct cultural process rooted within the power struggle between a regional population (Appalachian natives) and external forces (American modernity), as well as a subsequent desire for social stability and empowerment. Snake-handlers inside and outside of the region turned towards fundamentalist Christianity and Pentecostal doctrine as an escape from the pressures from outside forces like industrialization and mainline Christian ideology within America. They handled snakes as a form of protest to the direction of these outside forces—challenging their cultural exploitation by crafting a set of religious rituals that meet their specific cultural and religious needs. This paper approaches the topic of Appalachian snake-handling from the lens of cultural history. It explores the detailed ideologies and power struggles that motivated the creation of snake-handling, and highlights why the movement occurred inclusively within the Appalachian region itself.

INTRODUCTION

Tension ran high along the state line between eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia on September 24, 1914. Residents from around the countryside, and the local population hub of Chattanooga, flocked to the little town of Cleveland, Tennessee to observe the religious spectacles of George Hensley.¹ Brother Hensley—a fiery Church of God minister who teetered the line between saint and drunkard—cultivated renown throughout southern Appalachia as a worker of miracles and supernatural displays of divine power. He was a strong man, though not overtly broad, with a handsome face marked by an ugly scar from a knife fight with a jealous suitor who ran off with his first wife. Illiterate, Hensley made up for his lack of education with his oratory, claiming fervently that “his sermons were totally unrehearsed...and that the Lord told him what to say.”² As the preacher approached his audience that September night, he did so with a powerful Pentecostal message that stressed mountain holiness, Biblical inerrancy, and most importantly—the handling of deadly serpents.

The tent meeting began smoothly, drawing the condemnation of skeptics and unbelievers. One such dissenter, Oscar Igou, made known his disbelief and “attempted to bluff the Holy Rollers...by bringing in a five foot rattler, with five rattles and a button.” This act failed to faze Hensley and his followers who picked up the snake and “handled it with impunity.” After the snake was passed between the men, the crowd was introduced

¹ “He Can Handle Snakes But Will He Walk the River?,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 24, 1914. 3.

² David L. Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 42.

to yet another spiritual performance as “a 10-year-old child...in an apparent trance from the influence of Hensley, picked up the evil-looking reptile and played with it for several minutes.”³ With this, Hensley and his snake-handling Pentecostal followers had succeeded in their goal. In their minds, the hecklings of unbelief and dissent had submitted to the dictates of God and the Holy Spirit. The power to handle poisonous serpents and escape unharmed proved the authority of their Gospel to an Appalachian people all too consumed by defeat and exploitation. It offered a power that could elevate impoverished Appalachians out of spiritual and physical bondage, and create, in return, a useable religious identity that promised divine victory.

When analyzing the cultural impact of snake-handling within Appalachia during the twentieth-century, it is important to note that the movement and its development of religious identity did not exist within a social vacuum. Snake-handling, like all forms of religion, functioned as a cultural institution that molded to surrounding social pressures. The doctrine of the movement, for example, shifted considerably between 1914 and the 1970s in reaction to the growth of such social factors as industrialization, modernism, and nationalism. These theological changes corresponded smoothly with a gradual evolution in other aspects of the movement ranging from church structure, church leadership, and morality. In essence, snake-handling operated side-by-side with the social evolution of the region. It responded to the changes that impacted the direction of mountain life, and provided a clear religious outlet for a number of disenfranchised mountain folk. It is at the heart of this social flux that the true impact of snake-handling makes its mark on the

³ “He Can Handle Snakes But Will He Walk the River?,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 24, 1914, 3.

direction of Appalachian culture. Moreover, it is within this social flux that the historian can truly grasp the roots of snake-handling culture and the malleable religious identity that it proscribed within mountain communities.

With this said it is important to note that the modern religious application of snake-handling that developed during the 1960s and 1970s exists as a movement far removed from the public revivals and healing services made popular by George Hensley and other itinerant handling ministers during the early 1900s. The spectacles created by these early preachers were largely public events that drew large crowds and large responses by mountain leaders and newspapers. Early snake-handlers publicly promoted their Gospel during the 1910s and 1920s because of the initial fervor associated with the newness of the movement; however, these believers also functioned within a common fundamentalist mindset that dominated many early twentieth-century Christian groups. Convinced that Christ's return was quickly approaching, early snake-handlers within the Church of God (Cleveland) and the Church of God of Prophecy raced throughout the Appalachian Mountains beckoning all to come under their fundamentalist driven professions of faith. These strict doctrines supported the pre-millennial Second Coming of Christ, but they also proclaimed a literal interpretation of the Bible that stressed the subjugation of American and Appalachian society under the mandates of the Holy Word. Within this mode of belief then, it becomes permissible to see how snake-handling leader A.J. Tomlinson stood before his Appalachian following in 1913 and supported the public handling of serpents while subsequently denouncing the social impact of labor unions and

business fraternities as the physical “mark of the beast in hand or forehead.”⁴ To Tomlinson and other snake-handlers within the region, the operations of society were subservient to the dictates of God and the Bible. Snake-handling religion functioned as a public tool that shifted and moved society to its proper position in God’s Kingdom. Thus, the movement operated as the identifying mark of Christ that proclaimed salvation for both the common mountain believer and the region in which they lived.

It was only during the culmination of the Second World War and the out migration of thousands of Appalachian workers to the industrial hubs of the North in the 1950s that snake-handling groups receded from their public platforms and embraced a defensive stance against the pressures of modern society. During this period state judicial and legislative forces throughout Appalachia instituted legal regulations on snake-handling that made the practice illegal and socially reproachable. Angered by the “moral decline” associated with handling and a dramatic rise in deaths associated with the ritual, state leaders throughout Appalachia took charge against sympathetic congregations and forced many believers into religious hiding. This state-sanctioned crusade against snake-handling was compounded by the shifting social atmosphere of the Appalachian region during the 1940s and 1950s. Regional denominations like the Church of God (Cleveland) and the Church of God of Prophecy abandoned their public stances against the vices of industrialization and modernism, and instituted a new theological platform that encouraged the ideals of economic prosperity, progress, and middle-class rationalism.

⁴ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1913), 68. All information from the Minutes of the Church of God’s General Assembly was gathered from a CD compilation of the events entitled *General Assembly Minutes 1906-2002*. This CD compilation contains the all of the original Minutes transcripts recorded by the Church of God from 1906 to 2002 and was accessed from the Special Collections Department of the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN.

This theological shift left little room for practicing snake-handlers whose social, cultural, and economic frame-of-reference diverged from middle-class values. The radical message of handling groups and the cultural framework from which snake-handling derived did not socially function within the context of modernity. As a result various handlers throughout southern and central Appalachia adapted the context of their religious movement to counter the cultural and spiritual attacks of the “fallen world”. A prominent way that this cultural counter occurred was through the adaptation of a defensive religious posture that promoted seclusion from the “outsiders.” Local snake-handling leaders encouraged congregations to publicly promote their Gospel message; however, they pressured these groups to be wary of the legal ramifications of their rituals and protect their religious traditions from the encroachments of the modern society and the law. Migrant ministers like the Ohioan Richard Williams perpetuated this call for a defensive religious strategy and personally pressured handlers outside of Appalachia to periodically return to the mountains for spiritual renewal and fellowship only with other like-minded believers.⁵

As the twentieth-century progressed, the results of this religious and cultural seclusion manifested in the break-down of denominational structures among snake-handling congregations. During the 1940s and 1950s large numbers of Appalachian snake-handlers created their own independent churches that catered to specific regional issues and doctrinal tastes. These churches banded together under common religious

⁵ The ideas of Jimmy Williams and other migrant snake-handling ministers are sprinkled throughout Jimmy Morrow’s book: Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow’s Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus’ Name Tradition*, ed. Ralph W. Hood Jr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005). Insight is also gained from Kimbrough’s *Taking up Serpents*, 171-186.

themes crafted during the formation of snake-handling in the Church of God (Cleveland) during the 1910s and 1920s; yet, it is important to note that these independent congregations championed their theological freedom and the seclusion associated with their small-scale worship structure. They molded snake-handling into a religious vessel that protected them from the vices and persecution of the “outside” world. In turn, these believers refashioned snake-handling to meet their social and spiritual needs in the present. They contorted the movement to the pressures at hand, and fashioned the cultural identity of being a snake-handler into something with which they could defend themselves.

By the 1960s and early 1970s the prospect of seclusion faded from the minds and actions of Appalachian snake-handlers. Federal social programs like President Johnson’s War on Poverty shifted national attention to impoverished regions within American through the use of modern media outlets and news sources. While the effects of this federal mandate assisted in improving many of the social institutions of the within Appalachia, it also succeeded in reinforcing cultural stereotypes that branded mountain folk as backwards and fatalistic. Snake-handlers received the brunt end of many of these stereotypes, and were quickly pushed to the front pages of many state and national newspapers. The effects of this coverage had devastating results on the social perception of snake-handling and subsequently led to reinvigorated legal pursuits by state and federal officials. Government leaders ranging from federal prosecutors and state governors to local sheriffs launched a series of legal attacks throughout the region with the goal of eradicating radical message and ritualism of associated with Appalachia’s snake-handling groups.

The magnitude of this religious assault encouraged snake-handling leaders like Tennessee-based minister Listen Pack to quickly recast the defensive and secluded identity that enveloped the movement and adopt a new spiritual mindset based on the premises of religious liberty and the divine sanction of God. We “believe in handling serpents as part of our religion,” bellowed the fiery Pack as he was threatened with a prison sentence in 1973, “we cannot turn our back now.”⁶ This religious fervor personified the evolution of snake-handling identity into a cultural manifestation of outright resistance. Faced with social pressures that sought to destroy the foundations of their movement, snake-handlers actively attacked the roots of their opposition. Utilizing their Constitutional and individual rights, believers throughout the southern and central Appalachia emerged from their hiding holes deep in the mountains and began practicing their religion in full public view. This identity of resistance was compounded as various snake-handling groups publicly challenged the legality of anti-snake handling laws within Appalachian states. Petitioning the assistance of civil rights groups like the ACLU, these mountain folk countered the measures taken by their enemies, and reasserted the power of their cultural perspective within Appalachia and the nation.

Approaching the construction and perpetuation of snake-handling identity as a product of continual social evolution assists in positioning the movement into its proper place within the fields of Appalachian history and Pentecostal history. By juxtaposing the evolution of snake-handling culture with regional social events like industrialization, nationalism, and the War on Poverty the historian can clearly see how the movement

⁶ “Court Tells Preacher to Stop Handling Snakes in Church,” *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, April 22, 1973.

constantly transformed to meet the spiritual and earthly needs of many Appalachian believers during the twentieth-century. Like many mountain citizens, snake-handlers experienced the hardships of economic exploitation, the external pressures of state and federal regulators, and the ideological influence of modernizing forces that were specific to the Appalachian region. These changes in the social and economic structure of the region dually affected the belief system of snake-handlers and aided in the evolution of the movement and its influence as a tool of identity and power. This is not to say that snake-handling did not have a dominant cultural core by which the movement was theologically and ideologically based. It did. As will be discussed further, this cultural base was rooted within particular Appalachian modes of thinking that were universally shared by the region's various snake-handling congregations. However, the existence of this dominant cultural core does not dismiss the fact that the movement was changed and manipulated by its followers to meet and counter the social pressures of the present. Even when snake-handling workers migrated from the region to industrial zones in the North and West during the 1940s and 1950s, they carried with them a cultural mindset rooted in the mountains, yet malleable to the social forces at hand.

Yet, it is interesting to note that while snake-handling displays such a vibrant lens into the social and cultural direction of Appalachia during the twentieth-century, the topic remains on the outskirts of academia. Appalachian religious historians and scholars of American Pentecostalism have decisively shadowed the movement in the light of other religious groups. The magnitude of this academic oversight is best seen in Randall J. Stephens' most recent monograph on Southern Pentecostalism, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South*. Stephens constructs a well-

researched analysis that highlights the religious roots that led to the creation and perpetuation of Pentecostalism in the South during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book makes a point to mention the Northern Holiness foundations of the Pentecostal movement; however, Stephens is quick to show how Southern spiritualism adapted the “external” doctrines of the Holiness movement to fit the religious perceptions and rituals encountered within Southern society. This process of “southernification” created the cultural inroads that Pentecostalism needed to embed itself within the South, and laid the foundations to the powerful and influential religious ministries of Southern Pentecostals like Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Creflo Dollar, and Jesse Duplantus.

While the assertions and methods projected by Stephens make for a solid historical understanding of Southern Pentecostalism, his approach denies proper attention to the religious impact of snake-handling within the region. Independent Appalachian snake-handling is mentioned in passing during the middle chapters of the book, but Stephens approaches the movement as an abnormality that should be excluded from rational scholarly attention. The basis of this negation rests in the authors’ numerical understatement of snake-handling believers, claiming that by the late twentieth-century the movement held “fewer than 2,500 followers [with] only 10 percent of them hand[ling] snakes.”⁷ While modern snake-handling has receded in numbers since the 1980s, Stephens’ rationale for its exclusion from academic attention bypasses the importance of the movement on the direction of early Pentecostalism in the South. The Church of God (Cleveland), one of the first established Southern Pentecostal

⁷ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 252.

denominations, championed the use of rattlesnakes and copperheads during worship services. Between 1914 and 1928 this fiery denomination orchestrated a large scale revival movement within the Southern Appalachian states that set about the numerical growth of the Pentecostal movement and the popularity of its doctrine. These regional revivals were closely followed by subsequent snake-handling gatherings during the mid-twentieth-century that eventually led to changes in state legislation and the ratification of state-laws against the movement. With this impact historically stated, it becomes evident that snake-handlers heavily influenced Southern Pentecostalism and its reception within the South. The modern numerical insignificance alluded to by Stephens fails to account for the grand social and cultural changes that early snake-handlers instigated during the early portions of the 1900s. By underscoring the importance of these events and the regional impact of snake-handling, Stephens leaves out an important factor in the formation and evolution of Southern Pentecostalism. He hides the historical voice of Appalachian handlers, and nullifies their contribution to the evolution of Pentecostalism in the South and in their local mountain communities.

Outside of the argument of numerical insignificance, historians of Southern Pentecostalism shadow the history of snake-handlers through their approach to source material. Pentecostal monographs like Stephens' *The Fire Spreads* and Robert M. Anderson's *The Vision of the Disinherited* craft their analyses around written source material from denominational magazines and sermons. Stephens and Andersons' use of these primary sources successfully depicts the religious and social foundations of many of the of the larger Pentecostal denominations that fluidly span the entire nation; however, their overt use of formal written documentation overlooks the innate oral

culture that drives the history of Appalachian snake-handling churches. Because of the inherent poverty surrounding the radical ideology of snake-handling during the twentieth-century, practicing congregations grounded their doctrines and worship services with the confines of oral traditions and memories. Handling preachers often shied away from the lofty intellectualism associated with written sermons, and instead formulated their weekly messages spontaneously around memorized Biblical stories. Scriptural passages were often memorized by congregants at an early age, thus negating the use of a written Bible both during worship and in regular daily life. On a more regional level, specific Appalachian practices aided in the perpetuation of oral culture within snake-handling circles. The Appalachian religious ritual of “spiritual migration” by which believers travel between a handful of independent churches throughout the region created a fluidity within congregational attendance and leadership. This fluidity encouraged a constant evolution of doctrine within individual snake-handling congregations that nullified the need for bulletins and a defined written outline of specific church beliefs.

By restricting the range of source material strictly to the confines of written material, contemporary Pentecostal monographs easily bypass the presence of snake-handlers during the twentieth-century. The negation of oral sources and oral culture excludes a large portion of snake-handling material from historical view, and ultimately positions the movement in a cultural light that underestimates its true historical impact. While snake-handling never achieved the numerical power of many of Appalachia’s other established denominations, properly understanding their preference for oral communication over written sermons and congregational documentation makes proper note to their presence within the realm of Pentecostal religion.

This relationship between oral culture and Appalachian snake-handling pushes religious scholars to look beyond the boundaries of traditional researching techniques and incorporate a two-fold approach when constructing the history of the movement. The first approach centers on recognizing the importance of oral sources within this topic, and using personal interviews, documentaries, and memories to fashion a lens into the social and cultural window of snake-handling life. During the past three decades, breakthroughs in media technology and a reinvigorated interest into Appalachian life have birthed new oral-based material for the historians use. Documentaries ranging from independent-based films like “The Holy Ghost People” to high-dollar television productions provide scholars with ample amounts of oral material to analyze and digest. Combined with access to individual believers in snake-handling hotspots like Sevierville (TN), Marshall (NC), Newport (TN), and Sand Mountain (AL) the voice of modern snake-handlers proves accessible and prevalent.

Apart from gathering the oral accounts, the historian must also reevaluate how to approach the written source material surrounding snake-handling practices and the scholarly avenues by which this material is acquired. Over the past three decades, headway has been made in the collection of primary sources surrounding snake-handling and the cultural identity associated with the movement’s practices. The most valuable collection of these sources presides within the original manuscripts of the *Church of God Evangel* housed in the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center in Cleveland, Tennessee. The early editions of this Pentecostal publication—which is still in print today—provide vivid narratives of snake-handling tent meetings, and contain official statements of faith that discuss the church’s stance on handling and the consumption of poison. Traditionally this

written material has been used by Pentecostal historians like Stephens and Anderson to showcase the existence of pan-Pentecostal practices like divine healing and speaking in tongues within rural areas of the South. However by reevaluating the intent of these denominational sources to look specifically at the radical acts of snake-handling, fire-handling, and the consumption of poisons within an Appalachian cultural perspective, new insight into the cultural origins and social evolution of the movement can be accessed within the pages of the *Church of God Evangel* during the 1920s and 1930s. It is important though that these denominational sources are analyzed with a suspecting eye. Like any sympathetic publication, snake-handling periodicals overemphasize the success of handling and fail to address the numerous deaths and mishaps associated with the handling ritual. Conversely, with the rise of bottom-up scholarship within the field of religious history, newspapers and other “secular” documents have emerged as informative primary sources for those looking at snake-handling. Regional newspapers, state and federal legal transcripts, and national publications like *Foxfire* and *Life* magazine convey the radicalism of snake-handling and the regional identity associated with the act. Yet like the *Church of God Evangel*, these sources must be picked apart and placed within the proper cultural context before they can be seriously considered.

Thus with a reevaluation of the numerical importance of snake-handling and a shift in the way snake-handling sources are gathered and analyzed, it becomes evident that the negation of the movement amounts to a serious offense. Yet, it should be noted that this academic oversight is not limited simply to the field of American Pentecostalism, but also exists within an unlikely historical field consumed in the cultural direction of mountain life--this being the field of Appalachian religion. The primary

cause of this historical misstep rests in the assertion that snake-handling does not properly represent the mainstream ideology of mountain religion. Appalachian religious monographs like Troy Abell's book *Better Felt than Said: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in Southern Appalachia* and Loyal Jones' *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* promote a general historical consensus that equates snake-handling to a regional abnormality that does not demand intense scholarly examination.

Utilizing an oral-historical approach, both books acknowledge the deep-seated faith of the region's believers and the diverse forms of spiritualism that make the mountains culturally and socially unique. While these contributions assist historical scholarship in many ways, they neglect to include snake-handling in the academic discourse. Both Jones and Abell provide a description of mountain Holiness and revivalism that discuss a wide range of Appalachian Pentecostals—spreading their analysis to include oral accounts from believers in organized denominations and those in more independent churches. To both of these historians, Appalachia is prime territory for religious emotionalism and manifestations of the Holy Spirit; however, when issues concerning the gifts of the Spirit are brought up, the beliefs of snake-handlers are overlooked and treated as non-existent.⁸

The basis of this neglect rests in some degree to both author's desired intent for each book. Abell's monograph functions as a micro-history that seeks to understand the basis of Pentecostalism within a small community, while Jones' study attempts to uncover the root spiritualism shared among all mountain Christians. These preconditions

⁸ Troy D. Abell, *Better Felt than Said: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in Southern Appalachia* (Waco: Markham Press, 1982); Loyal Jones, *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

explain the negation of the snake-handling voice to some degree, but they do not justify the oversight provided by both historians. In reference to Jones' book, the only mention made to snake-handling appears in the work's section on demon possession; however, rather than using an oral source in similarity to the other examples in the book, Jones' simply turns to secondary material to back up his conclusions. Instances like these highlight the dismissal of snake-handling as an active spiritual force in the region by Appalachian religious historians. Both historians are able to gather the thoughts and feelings of various other Pentecostal groups within Appalachia, yet they underscore the voices of snake-handling groups and the cultural importance of the movement within mountain society. While the fact remains that snake-handling does not represent a large majority of Appalachian Christians, these believers clearly represent a distinct regional approach to religion that upholds a distinct yet influential cultural identity.

Conversely, other Appalachian religious historians support the negation of snake-handling from proper academic discussion with charges that the practice is simply a depiction of regional stereotypes and "popular Appalachian culture." This argument is only strengthened by the popularity of documentaries on mainstream television that limits the scope of Appalachian religion solely around snake-handling Pentecostals. In reaction, Appalachian historians like Deborah McCauley respond to these frustrations by simply underscoring the importance of snake-handling in the region, while simultaneously overemphasizing the cultural significance of other religious groups. In *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, McCauley devotes only a few pages of the book to snake-handlers. She rightly assigns meticulous attention to the influence of denominations like the Primitive Baptist, the Cumberland Presbyterians, and the various independent

Holiness movements on Appalachian culture. Yet in doing so, she reduces snake-handling churches like the Church of God to entities of “popular culture...that were elevated to the position of being the primary representative of what is special and unique about the religion of Appalachia” by social scientists and mainline American stereotypes.⁹

McCauley should be praised for seeking to attack the inaccuracies of these stereotypes; however, by neglecting and minimizing the history of snake-handlers she perpetuates the same historical injustices that she condemns. She hides the cultural ideology of these radical believers behind the structures of “independent holiness churches,” and belittles their identity into nothing more than a regional footnote. Moreover, by reducing snake-handling to a product of “popular culture,” McCauley rids herself of any need to delve into the subject of snake-handing and the complexities associated with the practice. Within her mode of justification, she does not need to highlight the uniqueness of handlers, their seclusion, and their worldview; nor does she have to encumber herself with finding and interviewing believers, deconstructing source material or becoming immersed within the particularities of their cultural outlook. By dismissing snake-handlers as tools of pop-culture she reduces the social and cultural complexity of the movement, and in turn glosses over an important component of Appalachian history that deserves proper academic respect.

This historiographical look into the negation of snake-handling from Pentecostal and Appalachian history should not be viewed as an outright attack on the historical

⁹ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 18.

advances of these two fields during the past thirty years. Both specialties showcase the monolithic leaps of the historical profession to include the voices of disenfranchised social groups. Instead, this quest to uncover the history of snake-handling and its cultural and social impact in Appalachia during the twentieth-century must be viewed as a continuation of the historical shift to include the stories of the nation's most overlooked populations. Giving a proper historical voice to snake-handlers succeeds in showcasing these forgotten stories, and subsequently provides new insight into the social and cultural evolution of Appalachia during the twentieth-century.

However, it is not historically plausible to highlight the implied cultural and social importance of snake-handling within Appalachia without first attempting to justify the specific Appalachian-based roots of the movement within the region. Like every Christian movement in America, the ideological foundations of snake-handling can be traced to the prescribed doctrines of established denominations and particular religious leaders. Yet, it is important to note that these prescribed doctrines had to collide somehow with particular cultural and social mindsets unique to Appalachia to allow the formation and perpetuation of snake-handling within the minds and pews of mountain believers. These specific cultural and social ideals highlight the reverence and importance of snake-handling within the field of Appalachian history, and provide clear ties between the region and movement during the twentieth-century.

The most profound example of this cultural and social relationship rests within the contours of geography and region. The roots of snake-handling were founded in the hills of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina under the leadership of Christians whose heritage rested within the crests of the Blue Ridge Mountains. During the early

years of the movement, handling remained insulated within this region, expanding quickly into the central Appalachian Mountains as snake-handlers migrated into the coal fields of West Virginia and Kentucky between 1917 and 1930. The movement made inroads into mountain timber villages and random textile towns along the borders of Appalachia by means of traveling preachers, regional revivals, and evangelists from handling denominations like the Church of God (Cleveland) and the Church of God of Prophecy.¹⁰ Within this denominational framework, it is interesting to note that when the Church of God (Cleveland) began to expand outside of Appalachia during the 1930s, the ritual of snake-handling lost ground as an official tenet of faith. It was when the geographical barrier was broken that the hierarchy of the Church of God redacted its cultural identification within snake-handling and embraced a more modern theology and social ideology directed towards Americans outside the region.¹¹

Thus when looking at this juncture in the history of snake-handling, the cultural and social importance of geography comes to light. The creation and evolution of the movement within the geographical bounds of Appalachia assisted in the creation of a regionalized religious mindset that was not hampered by the doctrines and ideas of individuals outside of the mountains. While the formation of the movement attributes some influence to outside Pentecostalism and Holiness doctrines, the growth of the movement between 1910 and the 1970s rested upon the religious suppositions of individuals who lived in the mountains and functioned within a genuine Appalachian

¹⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 19-30.

¹¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-91.

discourse. By remaining insulated within the mountains, snake-handling was continuously molded by the belief systems of Appalachian Christians. These believers shaped the movement into a working identity that utilized specific cultural ideologies that could not be culturally comprehended or appreciated by people groups outside of the geographical bounds of Appalachia. Along with this, the movement was forced to adapt to the wide range of social and economic transitions that pressured these believers during the twentieth-century. Though many of these transactions, like industrialization and modernization, impacted regions outside of Appalachia, mountain folk approached these changes in ways removed from other citizens throughout the nation. The result of this geographic religious insulation ended in the creation of a distinct depiction of fundamental Pentecostalism that functioned fluidly in the region for a particular portion of the region's population.

Historian David Kimbrough elevates the importance of this geographical/religious relationship in his book *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky*. While Kimbrough dually acknowledges the unique cultural and social roots ties between snake-handling and the Appalachian region itself, he makes note to broaden the geographical boundaries of Appalachian influence to include the various Northern migration destinations of Appalachian workers between the 1930s and 1950s. During this period, thousands of mountain laborers flocked to Northern industrial hubs looking for jobs that would supplement their family's income, and subsequently provide living conditions superior than those found within the impoverished towns of Appalachia. Workers in these areas quickly banded together, filling in working neighborhoods within like-minded Appalachian families who held similar cultural beliefs and ideals. These neighborhoods

created solidarity among mountain workers; however, from Kimbrough's perspective these population hubs also created the perfect breeding ground for the growth of cultural practices like snake-handling. Itinerant snake-handling leaders like George Hensley and Raymond Hayes traveled sporadically to Appalachian suburbs surrounding Northern industrial cities like Cleveland, initiating snake-handling revivals and starting prayer meetings. The growth and popularity of these services experienced continual growth, and eventually evolved into self-supporting congregations that clung to the cultural roots of their Appalachian homelands.

The inclusion of these migrant Appalachian communities into the historical discourse of snake-handling succeeds in expanding the regional bounds of Appalachia on an ideological scale. While Northern based handlers did not actually live within the physical boundaries of the Appalachian Mountains, they perpetuated a cultural mindset internally created and ingrained within the region. This cultural mindset enabled the formation of an imagined regional community, tied to the social and cultural customs of their mountain homelands. The importance of snake-handling thrived within these imagined regional communities, and provided a tangible experience by which some mountain migrants could remain connected to the cultural and social roots that defined their cultural identity. Kimbrough adds to this point, stating that snake-handling secured a recognizable "collective memory" among some Appalachian migrant groups that rooted the believer within a cultural mindset "in which tradition and belief [were] deeply ingrained."¹² This collective memory provided a sense of cohesion among migrant snake-

¹² David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 5.

handlers, and allowed these believers a way to practice a regional religious ritual outside of the true geographical confines of the Appalachian Mountains.

Apart from geography, snake-handling also showcases regional historical importance through its display of Appalachian individualism. As with many indigenous Appalachian churches, a large portion of snake-handling churches after the 1930s successfully operated outside the bounds of organized denominational structures. Many of these churches depended upon the guidance of the local congregation for spiritual direction, often leaning on localized church votes on important issues like church administration and discipline. Though some larger denominations like the early Church of God (Cleveland), The Church of God of Prophecy, and the Church of God with Signs Following functioned within the bounds of some form of established hierarchy, it is important to note that the denominational structure of these churches stressed that administrative power be placed in the hands of either a strong local congregation or a spiritually assertive minister. Oftentimes, ministers emerged from within the congregation, and were chosen by their peers because of their extraordinary faith and understanding of the Scriptures. Strong believers, like George Hensley, Jimmy Williams, John 'Punkin' Brown, and Glen Summerford, used this social position to mold themselves into regional leaders whose faith allotted them fame and respect. These figureheads often orchestrated local rivals and tent meetings around their persona that introduced adherents to manifestations of divine healing, snake-handling, and various other miracles. Such services originated outside the bounds of any form of church structure, and function completely around the theology and biblical understanding of the religious leader.

The scale of this religious individualism highlights the many of the social and cultural connections between snake-handling and the religious atmosphere of Appalachian-based Christianity. As with the various independent Holiness and independent Baptist churches that formed in the region during the late nineteenth-century, snake handling privies the autonomy of both the local church and the individual believer. Historian Mary Lee Daugherty points out the cultural importance of this independent nature in her essay “Serpent-Handlers: When the Sacrament Comes to Life.” She asserts that like other independent churches in the region, snake-handling’s “religious beliefs developed in the isolation of the rugged Appalachian mountain terrain and the economic instability of a rural subsistence farming and mining economy.”¹³ This lack of proper transportation and the prevalence of poverty created a disconnect between many Appalachian Christians and mainstream American religious ideology. Appalachian churches did not have the economic luxury to import trained ministers, nor did they have the resources to truly perpetuate their influence outside of the region during the early and mid-twentieth-century. In turn, many of these independent churches, in which many snake-handling congregations are included, depended on local leadership for spiritual guidance and religious survival. This congregational independence reinforced the importance of individualism within the confines of indigenous mountain churches, and provided the cultural and social means by which a definite Appalachian-based individualism was condoned and expressed by mountain snake-handlers.

The impact of this individualism successfully ties the cultural and social roots of

¹³ Mary Lee Daugherty, “Serpent Handlers: When the Sacrament Comes Alive,” *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill Leonard (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 147.

snake-handling to the notion of Appalachian religious plurality. Since the foundation of twentieth-century snake-handling stressed congregational independence and the individual inspiration of the believer, snake-handlers saw it culturally feasible to base their religious experience around the creation of new theological ideas. Regional historian and practicing snake-handling minister Jimmy Morrow highlights the prevalence of this pluralism, drawing into focus the various snake-handling sects that thrived within the region after the 1930s. In his book *Handling Serpents*, Morrow looks specifically at the religious conflicts between the movement's Jesus Only congregations that thrived within Kentucky and central Appalachia, and the conflicting Trinitarian churches within Eastern Tennessee and Western North Carolina. He asserts that while all snake-handling groups contained core cultural, regional, and theological beliefs that could be traced back to the movement's inception during the 1910s and 1920s, twentieth-century Appalachian snake-handling itself existed as a heterogonous collection of independent minded believers.¹⁴

The significance of religious pluralism within the confines of snake-handling rests in its resemblance to the spiritual direction of Appalachian religion as a whole. Because religious expression in the region stems from a distinct notion of individualism, Appalachian Christianity exists as a cultural manifestation that thrives in its multiplicity. Appalachian scholar Bill Leonard tightens this argument, exclaiming that "Appalachia itself is not one region, but many; it is not one culture but is composed of a multiplicity of

¹⁴ Jimmy Morrow's book *Handling Serpents* makes note of a wide range of different snake-handling groups throughout Appalachia during the twentieth-century. While each of these different groups is innately independent in structure and doctrine, he denotes snake-handling churches either fall into the Trinitarian or Jesus-Only camps.

cultural and social experiences, ideals, and subgroups.”¹⁵ Leonard is not suggesting that Appalachian Christianity does not perpetuate specific cultural norms that are distinct to the region. Rather, his statement implies something different. This is that Appalachia Christianity is not a singular cultural ideal, but rather a spiritual manifestation of spiritual diversity that is produced in the wake of religious individualism. This spiritual diversity, in turn, enables individual Appalachian believers to subjectively break-down the meaning of Christianity to fit their particular spiritual perspective and understanding. The culmination of this process ends with the creation of a pluralistic Appalachia that meets the religious and cultural needs of the heterogeneous population in its borders.

Looking at the history of snake-handling through this pluralistic lens, especially after the 1930s, showcases that snake-handlers embraced the notion of Appalachian pluralism, and actively integrated the cultural ideals of mountain individualism to periodically change the movement to meet individual social needs. Snake-handling did not exist as a stable and solid movement, but was conformed by believers into the religious expression they desired. This correlation between snake-handling and other forms of indigenous Appalachian Christianity, places the movement secularity within the cultural confines of Appalachian religion. It strengthens the bonds between snake-handling and Appalachian cultural expressions, and brings the movement closer into unison with a large segment of Appalachian historiography.

Though it is crucial to note the cultural importance of snake-handling and its relevance in the discussion of Appalachian religion, serious inquiry needs to be placed on

¹⁵ Bill Leonard, *Christianity in Appalachia*, xvi.

why believers turned to handling and poison drinking as forms of spiritual expression.

Asking this question not only provides historical insight on the various social and economic foundation of the movement, but also brings light to the various cultural ideals that insulated the movement specifically within the region.

When looking at the historiographical progression of this question the most prevalent answer also succeeds in being the chronologically the oldest. In his epic but archaic masterpiece *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash became one of the first influential historians to truly note the existence and socio-cultural importance of snake-handling in the New South. Approaching snake-handlers in the regional Church of God (Cleveland) from the bounds of economics, Cash depicts the movement as a form of socio-economic release from the pressures of modern industrialization. Throughout his analysis of snake-handling worship services, he explains the “fits, jerks, barks, and rolling frenzies” of practicing believers as coping mechanisms used in response to the rise of wage labor and the corresponding breakdown of communalism.¹⁶ He continues with this correlation, asserting that these “Holy Rollers” turned to spiritualism as a response to the “rapid expansion of Southern industrialism...and the rapid widening of the physical and social gulf between the classes.”¹⁷ From Cash’s perspective then, the question of why snake-handling emerged as a legitimate religious outlet in southern and central Appalachia rests in the movement’s particular historical and geographical position during the turn of the twentieth-century. The combination of Southern spiritualism and fundamentalism with the economic tensions of rapid industrialization created the prime environment for the

¹⁶ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 297.

¹⁷ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 296.

religious radicalism posed by snake-handling congregations.

While modern historical approaches to Southern culture tend to shy away from many of the obtuse and stereotypical ideals fashioned by Cash's thesis, the effects of his socio-economic understanding of snake-handling remain strong in the current historiography of the movement. Thomas Burton provides the most prominent example of this current methodological adaptation in his book *The Serpent and the Spirit: Glenn Summerford's Story*. Burton emphasizes that the root justification for snake-handling revolves around the issues of mountain poverty. Looking specifically at the infamous Glenn Summerford trial of the mid-1990s, Burton reduces snake-handling to an expression of financial discontent and a reaction against the pressures of capitalism and wage-labor. He contends that handlers, like Summerford, turn to the practice as a method of spiritual and material release. To these individuals, the movement allows believers to look past the trials of the present and depend on the heavenly blessings of the future. It moves them to bypass the subjugation associated with their poverty and become spiritual victors that represent the true blessings of God.¹⁸

Though this analysis and Cash's perspective offer some light into the popularity of snake-handling among the Appalachia's most impoverished, both explanations do not justify its creation. If snake-handling is simply an expression of poverty, why does the movement not reflect the belief system of all impoverished mountain Christians? Other regional denominations like the Regular Baptists, Methodists, Free-Will Baptists and various other Holiness-Pentecostal groups, appeal to the theological and ideological

¹⁸ Thomas Burton, *The Serpent and the Spirit: Glenn Summerford's Story* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004).

mindsets of impoverished believers in the region. Many of these groups hold similar doctrines to those of snake-handlers and display similar cultural perceptions that are shaped and contorted by the effects of poverty, yet they do not handle serpents or drink battery acid as declarations of faith. Moreover, though the social implications of early industrialism imparted chaos into the lives of many Appalachian workers, it is not historically sound to correlate the creation of snake-handling directly to this socio-economic transition. Doing so undervalues the cultural implications of the movement, and the fact that early snake-handling functioned smoothly within the confines of an industrialized economic structure. Therefore, while Burton's and Cash's approaches shine light on an important note to the demographic and economic factors surrounding snake-handling, they both fail to address why snake-handling exists as a viable religious alternative within Appalachia.

Apart from poverty, historians also attribute the effects of Appalachian fatalism to the formation of mountain snake-handling. Made popular by various local-color writers who flocked to the region after the Civil War, the idea of mountain fatalism remains a common theme within the historiography of the region.¹⁹ Historians who affirm this belief make note that the poverty, spiritualism, and emotionalism that thrives within Appalachia functions as a push factor that motivates mountaineers to bypass future success and stability for temporal enjoyment and satisfaction. Issues like long term health, education, and frugality, for example, are sacrificed for the thrills of fast living and risk taking. In essence, these scholars believe the plight and overt spiritualism that

¹⁹ Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 3-31.

consumes Appalachia motivates people within the region to discredit life and challenge death within careless and irrational choices.

Dennis Covington approaches the topic of snake-handling from this perspective in his book *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Covington explores the lives of individual snake-handlers within central and southern Appalachia, and probes into the cultural and social interactions that make handling a viable religious outlet to mountain believers. Approaching the subject as a journalist/popular historian, he actively befriends handlers in the small town of Sand Mountain, Alabama---enmeshing himself with the community to such a degree that he actually finds himself handling snakes and leading local worship services. The material gleaned from this process proves rich and insightful; however, its effectiveness is covered by Covington's persistence in correlating snake-handling and its practitioners with the fine points of fatalism and hopelessness. He makes constant references to the poverty of the region and the assumed backwardness of the people—asserting clearly that handlers practice their religion as a way to escape the mundanely of the material world and the tribulations of their social position. Thus in essence, he assumes that snake-handlers participate in their rituals because they have nothing to live for in the material present and nothing to look forward to in the material future. They only have heaven and the promise of spiritual rewards for spiritual faith. By reducing handling to a simple form of apathy, Covington only perpetuates the stereotypes associated with fatalism, and underscores the true richness of snake-handling culture. Fatalism acts as a simplistic explanation of causality that allows scholars to substitute complex cultural forces with loaded terms like poverty and laziness. Covington's reliance on this ideal then only

reinforces the weakness of his argument, and its inadequacy when dealing with Appalachian religion.²⁰

Though the prospects of industrialism, poverty, and fatalism all contribute in some degree to the fabric of Appalachian snake-handling, the question of why the movement exists must be explained culturally, socially and economically. All three of these factors in unison provide a solid historical base that properly analyzes the formation of snake-handling and its perpetuation throughout the twentieth-century.

The primary force in the creation of snake-handling rests initially in the rich Appalachian cultural atmosphere that justified the theological roots of the movement and its radical implementation. Twentieth-century Appalachian snake-handling functioned within a cultural mindset that upheld particular mountain suppositions and modes of belief that simply did not correlate with other cultural ideals inside and outside of the region. Known from here on as Appalachian dualism, this cultural perspective affirmed the interconnectivity of the spiritual and material within the functions of daily activity. Keeping in tune with Leonard's assertion of cultural plurality within the region, Appalachian dualism did not project the cultural mindset of all Appalachians; however, it provided a cultural rational through which snake-handling could be understood and practiced.

The spiritual portion of this dualism mirrors the traditional spiritualism that thrived within the region from the time of the Second Great Awakening in the 1830s. Birthed from the revivalism of Scots-Irish Presbyterians who migrated into Appalachia in

²⁰ Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake-handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

the late eighteenth-century, this spirituality championed the supremacy of emotions and the supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit. It pressed the importance of revival services and itinerancy, and by the cessation of Great Awakening gatherings in the 1850s, this religious understanding had evolved into a religious mindset that encouraged public display of signs and wonders as justification of God's presence. This spiritualism was supplemented by the introduction of Holiness/Pentecostal doctrine into the region during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and strengthened by zealous evangelists who spread these doctrines throughout the mountains.

Conversely, the material proton of this cultural dualism finds its roots within the Appalachian tradition of folk healing and naturalism. Folk healing existed as a popular alternative to modern medical practices in Appalachia throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth-century because of the relative isolation of mountain families and the lack of sufficient transportation systems. This seclusion often discouraged the dissemination of modern medical ideas within mountain communities, and forced medical doctors to limit their practices to coal mining villages and industrial cities. The medical void instigated by the lack of medical professionals moved many isolated and impoverished mountain families to utilize the material properties of the environment as medical alternatives for healing and comfort. Folk historian Anthony Cavender makes note that this natural approach to medicine effectively transcended into all aspects of life for the practicing Appalachian. It created a distinct cultural outlook that centered the functions of life on the physical properties of nature, and intertwined the notion of existence with one's relationship with the surrounding mountain landscape. Moreover, this heightened connection with the material aspects of the environment manifested in the creation of

distinct physical rituals and superstitions that equated success with proper alignment with the natural elements.²¹

The cohesion of these spiritual and physical factors within the cultural parameters of Appalachian dualism brings into focus the rationale behind the creation of snake-handling. Appalachian dualism constructs a cultural mindset that connects the ingrained spiritualism of the region with the impact of material rituals and nature. It asserts that spiritual manifestations are rooted in the completion and participation of corresponding material actions within the ritual process. When specific physical rituals are performed by believing participants they effect the direction of the spiritual realm, and emanate in the manifestation of spiritual happenings within the material world. Snake-handling functions directly within the structure of this cultural outlook. To snake-handling Christians, spiritual grace and favor could only be properly experienced when reciprocated with a specific physical ritual that represented their religious faith and belief. When believers took up snakes, they did so as participators within a material ritual processes that, in their mind, prompted particular spiritual responses from God.

This symbiotic relationship between spiritual and physical more often than not took the form of snake-handling; yet its preeminence within snake-handling communities can also be seen in the popularity of other distinct rituals used by believers to petition divine favor from the Almighty. Acts such as the consumption of deadly poisons, the laying on of hands, foot-washing, and the handling of fire and hot coals all provide examples of material rituals utilized by Appalachian snake-handlers to illicit spiritual

²¹ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 31-54.

miracles within their lives. Snake-handling believers did not view these “sacraments” as a means to conjure up personal glory or shock. Instead, they viewed each religious ritual within a specific cultural outlook that equated proper physical actions with spiritual rewards.

By looking through the cultural lens of Appalachian dualism then, it becomes plausible to see why snake-handling emerged as a viable religious outlet within the region. However, it is not historically beneficial to limit the confines of this question specifically to the aspect of culture. While it is true that Appalachian dualism provides the cultural rational needed to justify the handling of snakes as a religious outlet, the foundation of snake-handling must also be analyzed through the contours of social and economic influences. Social movements like industrialism, nationalization, modernization, and religious liberalism offered the social stimuli that allowed this cultural mindset to actually occur within the public sphere. These social forces among others, pushed snake-handling to transcend the bounds of a simple cultural ideal and manifest into an actual religious force that had historical meaning.

Moreover, specific economic prospects influenced the creation of snake-handling and altered its practice within the region during the twentieth-century. The radicalism of snake-handling, its push against prescribed “middle-class” ideologies, and its focus on spiritual riches in the afterlife gave the movement economic life among Appalachia’s most impoverished citizens. These poor mountain folk, while disenfranchised to a certain degree because of their class, provided the grassroots following snake-handling needed to evolve from a cultural idea to a religious movement.

This thesis seeks to build upon these cultural, social, and economic structures and

thoroughly analyze the historical significance of Appalachian snake-handling from 1910 to the late 1970s. It intends to give a historical voice to a people group who not only has been overlooked by American historians, but by scholars of Appalachian and Southern history. Snake-handlers offer a unique picture into the vibrancy and plurality of Southern religion, as well as the complexities associated with American culture and regional identity. Their voice adds another layer to the cultural structure of Appalachian heritage. It is a culture that must be made known—that must be brought into proper academic light.

This thesis drives to understand the basis of snake-handling, and how the religious movement impacted the culture and social structure of Appalachian life. Early snake-handling cannot be seen as simply an object of causality. It simply was not birthed and left to sit. Rather, snake-handlers interpreted their purpose as a religious mission, with the goal of transforming Appalachia and the institutions within the region. During the twentieth-century various groups of snake-handlers proselytized their Gospel throughout the hills and hollers of the mountains, using peculiar rituals to win converts and transform lives. Within this crusade, they not only peddled Christ, but also their cultural outlook and their dualistic approach to the world. In turn, Appalachia experienced change and was reshaped one revival at a time. Whenever a soul converted to the doctrine of snake-handling, the surrounding regional atmosphere changed and aligned itself with these “Holy Rollers.”

The result of this influence manifested itself in conflict. Handlers were often harassed by other denominations within the region, and were often mocked in local newspapers and periodicals. Social groups like the Klu Klux Klan often targeted snake-

handling churches because these congregations projected a radical message that threatened the solidity of the “Solid South.” Moreover, as disciples of snake-handling grew in number during the 1930s and 1940s, regional denominations that once accepted the practice (ex. Church of God [Cleveland]) dismissed handlers from their ranks—branding them as heterodox and wayward.

The nature of these conflicts also exuded from sources outside of the mountains. Between 1940 and 1970, Appalachia faced the brunt of a growing wave of Americanization that sought to incorporate “underdeveloped” regions into the nation’s mainstream. The prospect of regional identity failed to line-up with the perceptions of the nation’s hierarchy and government programs were enacted to downplay the local importance of regional culture. State and federal judges, national publications like *Life* magazine, and federal programs like the War on Poverty, launched an assault on the otherness of Appalachia, and subsequently on snake-handling itself.²² Snake-handlers were beat down with stereotypes that highlighted illiteracy, fanaticism, and regional stupidity. They were stripped of their legal right to worship through the guiles of political, judicial, and other legal bureaucrats who sought to replace the peculiarity of Appalachia with unified and national culture. In essence, they were persecuted for their beliefs, and made martyrs for the religious worldview they held so dear.

My thesis seeks to understand this modern day martyrdom. I will show the intensity of these cultural and religious battles, and display how snake-handlers approached and challenged the encroachments of those who did not understand their

²² Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 172-179.

culture. Mountain handlers used their religious practices to counter the cultural assaults aimed against their particular mindset. These handlers acted as active agents who delved into their beliefs not as a sign of poverty or fatalism, but as an act of obedience to God and their own religious convictions. Conflict succeeded only in affirming their beliefs and strengthening their zeal. Looking at the tensions that in ensued from these religious battles conveys the uniqueness of Appalachia as a region, and the complexity of snake-handling culture itself.

It is the hope of this thesis, that this religious and cultural complexity will be presented in a manner that gives credence to the believers involved. For too long, the rituals and voices of Appalachian snake-handling have been hidden under the confines of regional stereotypes and regional prejudice. It is time for these demeaning labels to be removed, and a rational and insightful analysis of the movement to take place.

CHAPTER ONE: “WHO THEN CAN BE SAVED”: THE CULTURAL CREATION OF
APPALACHIAN SNAKE-HANDLING

*How are you living, my brother?
What are you doing today?
Millions are groping in darkness,
Will you not show them the way?*

*What is your life in the service of God?
How do you pass time away?
Shall the reward of the faithful be yours?
What are you doing today?¹*

The healing power of the Holy Spirit made its way into the northern Georgia home of W. J. Parsons on the night of October, 28, 1918. Overtaken by the harsh influenza outbreak of that year, Parsons’ wife teetered between life and death. Lying in her death bed she struggled for breath, surrounded by family members and close friends. Everything looked bleak. Death was near. Yet in the midst of this despair, Parsons and those around did not give up hope. Prayers and divine petitions filled the room with growing intensity until Parsons’ young daughter, in a fit of spiritual enthusiasm, “fell under the power” of the Holy Spirit. Invigorated by faith, the young girl convulsed on the floor and “began to beg God to sanctify her and give her the Holy Ghost.” After regaining her ability to stand, the child rushed to the bedside and “laid her hands on [her mother’s] head” while “speaking in tongues.” The effect was miraculous. Without hesitation W. J. Parsons’ wife stood to her feet—completely healed of the malady that

¹ “What is Your Life,” *Holiness Hymns* (Lenoir City: B. O. Rosenbaum), 8. This collection of hymns was accessed electronically from the Special Collections Archive at The Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN.

had overtaken her body. Struck with the power of the Holy Spirit herself, she “danced under the power for a long time,” praising God for his power over sickness and death.² Outside of northern Georgia, the effect of this heavenly power was dually experienced by other individuals who, like Parsons and his wife, were desperate for a divine touch. One of these fraught...was an elderly woman who forced her way into a ‘Holy Roller’ revival in the hills of northern Alabama. Complaining of an “eating ulcer” that had left her all but completely debilitated, the woman told the gathering that she “dreamed that she was going to die” because of the pain associated with her stomach ailment. Physically, she was beaten. Bruised by what she understood as an attack from Satan and his demonic cohorts. However, her faith was not crushed. As she petitioned the Lord for her healing, believers began “handling serpents [and] handling coals of fire” throughout the tent--calling on the Father to see their religious obedience and answer her prayer. Miraculously, “as the Word was given to her, she believed...accepted the Savior as her healer and the pain left her and the ulcer...gradually heal[ed] up.”³ These two narratives represent only a fraction of the spiritual happenings reported by secular and religious publications in southern and central Appalachia during the first quarter of the twentieth-century. Throughout this period, stories of snake-handling, divine-healing, speaking in tongues, and the handling of fire blanketed the front pages of the region’s numerous media outlets--projecting in their actions and beliefs the

² W.J. Parsons to Editor, *Church of God Evangel*, November 2, 1918, 3. Accessed electronically from the Special Collections Archive at The Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN. At the time of writing The Dixon Pentecostal Research Center had electronically copied editions of the *Church of God Evangel* from 1913 to 1923.

³ *Church of God Evangel*, February 26, 1916, 3.

foundation of what would come to be known as Appalachian snake-handling.⁴

As with other cultural outlets that emerged in the region during the turn of the twentieth-century, the introduction and perpetuation of snake-handling religion in Appalachia was met with a wide range of responses.⁵ For many of the region's upper and middle class citizens, the brash fundamentalism and zealous ritualism associated with snake-handling demonstrations elicited a degree of reserve and contempt. Following in the framework appropriated by Pentecostal historian Robert Mapes Anderson, these mountain elites viewed snake-handling in the same light as many other elites depicted Pentecostalism outside of Appalachia; specifically, as an outlet of public chaos and regression.⁶ For these individuals snake-handling revivalism operated within a stagnant lower-class mentality. It thrived within a backwards traditionalism that stunted the Progressive ideals of industrialization and modernization, and centered Appalachia away from the assumed notions of 'progress' that enveloped the region since the 1880s. Taking lessons from Progressive intellectuals like W.J. Cash among others, these social elites saw no use for the enthusiasm and faith projected by snake-handling believers. Nor did they see any

⁴ The importance of religious publication in the dissemination of early Pentecostal narratives and theology is touched on in great detail by Randall Stevens in his book *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 186-229. The importance of newspapers in the spread of Appalachian snake-handling is also attested to by David Kimbrough in *Taking Up Serpents: Snake-Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 39-48.

⁵ Other substantial cultural/ religious outlets that influenced Appalachia during the period were found within the coal industry as mentioned by David Allen Corbin in *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 156-167. These outlets are also attested to by Ronald Eller in *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 161-198.

⁶ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 195-222.

value in the ritualism that solidified their religious expressions.⁷

Yet for the countless number of common mountain folk that existed along the lower echelons of Appalachian society, the spiritual and cultural contours of snake-handling were viewed quite differently. As with the two women mentioned above, the emergence of snake-handling religiosity offered a degree of power and autonomy that met the needs of these disenfranchised believers both physically and spiritually. Beat down by the pressures of social change and economic transition that overtook Appalachia between 1880 and 1920, snake-handling came to provide these people with a viable outlet of expression unmatched by any other religious alternative in the region. It became, as historian David Kimbrough alludes, an effective coping mechanism for numerous mountaineers torn asunder by the turmoil of Progressive politics and modern industrialization.⁸

As the first two decades of the twentieth-century came into being, the influence of snake-handling would emerge with vigor across the hills and hollers of southern and central Appalachia. Draped in the blood of economic injustice and the sweat of decades of social inequality, the Appalachian Mountains provided the right environment for the cultural and religious foundation of snake-handling to emerge and expand. For those who molded themselves to the contours of the handling movement, a new religious era was at hand. An era of rituals, signs, and heavenly wonders.

⁷ W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1941), 297.

⁸ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 92-93.

To properly understand the true cultural and religious influence of snake-handling within Appalachia, proper attention must first be given to the economic and social transitions that led to its creation. Between 1870 and 1910, Appalachia existed as a region in flux. Overtaken economically by an influx of exploratory capital from businessmen outside the region, Appalachian folk found themselves constricted within a new social framework that seemed all to foreign. The introduction of modern industry, and the subsequent stripping of natural resources, succeeded in altering many established cultural and social norms that had secured mountain life before the Civil War.⁹ Prior to 1865, Appalachia functioned within the parameters of a quasi-subsistence economy that thrived within local trading networks and staple agriculture production.¹⁰ Drawn to the region predominantly by low land prices and familial ties, mountain farmers participated in an economic system that diverged in some degree from the dominant agricultural ideologies throughout much of the South. Historian Mary Pudup notes that the region differed remarkably from the rest of the South prior to the 1860s; highlighting the fact that Appalachian yeomen refrained from limiting production to cash crops like cotton and tobacco, and instead focused attention on crop diversification, livestock, and sustainable living.¹¹ The separation of many Appalachian families from advanced forms of transportation only increased the importance of this subsistence based life style, and

⁹ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, xv-xxvi.

¹⁰ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 6-22; Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company 1962), 19-31.

¹¹ Mary Beth Pudup, "The Limits of Subsistence: Agriculture and Industry in Central Appalachia," *Agricultural History* 64 (Winter 1990), 61-89; John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 125-126.

secluded many mountain folk from the pressures of wage labor.¹²

The presence of this subsistence based economic system does not suggest that the region did not participate within the structures of capitalism or industry for the 1860s. Nor does it suppose that the historian can effectively codify a pre-industrial Appalachia from its industrialized counterpart. As historian Kenneth Noe's points out "modernization did not strike a primitive [Appalachian] culture in the 1880s."¹³ The region had always perpetuated some form of industry--some form of capitalist exchange since its European settling in the mid eighteenth-century.¹⁴ For the most part, these capitalistic and industrial drives functioned off of the region's natural resources. Early nineteenth-century backwoodsmen, found the rich hardwoods of the central and southern Appalachian forests perfect for furniture making and construction. Handfuls of circular and water saw mills sprung up along the outskirts of the Allegheny Mountains between 1820 and 1850, outsourcing quality lumber to thriving cities in the northeast and Ohio valley. The popularity of Appalachian hardwood increased to such a level that by the cessation of the Civil War over fifteen steam-operated circular saws operated in West Virginia alone.¹⁵

¹² Harry K. Schwarzeller, *Mountain Families in Transition: A Case Study of Appalachian Migration* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 9-22. Though this source looks at the semi-subsistence existence of an Appalachian community during the early twentieth-century, the isolation of the Beech Creek community makes the core content presented applicable to the 1880s and 1890s.

¹³ Kenneth Noe, *Southwest Virginia's Railroad: Modernization and the Sectional Crisis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 6.

¹⁴ The best explanation of pre-1880s capitalism in Appalachia is presented by Ronald L. Lewis in *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside: Railroads, Deforestation, and Social Change in West Virginia, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 31-44; Ronald Lewis, "Industrialization," *High Mountain Rising: Appalachian in Time and Place* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 59-64.

¹⁵ Roy Clarkson, *Tumult on the Mountains: Lumbering in West Virginia, 1770-1920*, (Parsons, McClain

Along with lumber, Appalachian farmers also profited from other means of trade and capital investment. Although these were often small scale endeavors, they succeeded in placing a fair amount of coin into the hands of cash strapped mountaineers. Livestock raising, mineral collection, and in some cases the salvaging of natural medicinal plants like ginseng all existed as viable ventures for Appalachian families before the 1860s-- linking these individuals to the larger “market revolution” that swept through the nation during the early and mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶ Yet, it is important to note that while elements of industrialism and capitalism functioned within the mountains, its influence was not fully encompassing. Trade, cash crops, and industrial production all worked in tandem alongside a thriving subsistence structure that kept economic networks local and communities close.

The end of the Civil War and the introduction of Reconstruction saw the gradual erosion of this subsistence based culture and the growth of a new industrial economic system in its place. New railroad lines punched their way through the rocky ravines of the Appalachian Mountains during the 1870s and 1880s, opening isolated communities to the prospects of wage-labor and a host of new consumer goods.¹⁷ Industrial barons from around the nation funneled capital into central and southern Appalachian population hubs

Printing Company, 1964), 14-22.

¹⁶ Ronald L. Lewis, “Industrialization,” *High Mountain Rising*, 60-63; Fletcher Green, “Georgia’s Forgotten Industry: Gold Mining,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 19 (1935): 93-111, 210-28; R. Bruce Council, Nicholas Honerkamp, and M. Elizabeth Will, *Industry, and Technology in Antebellum Tennessee: The Archaeology of Bluff Furnace* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 65-86; Ronald Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 57-80; Benjamin Kline Jr., “The Nature of the Logging Railroads of West Virginia,” *Log Train* 2 (January 1984), 12-15.

like Chattanooga, Knoxville, Asheville, and Lexington, crafting in their wake demographic zones geared for industrial output and production.¹⁸ Appalachian scholar Ronald Lewis makes note of this population boom, claiming that worker migration to industrial hotspots like “the central Appalachian plateau grew dramatically,” expanding from a population of “less than 200,000 in 1870 to more than 1.2 million in 1920.”¹⁹ These migrations quickly altered the economic landscape of central and southern Appalachia, and solidified the region around what Ronald Eller describes as more “modern” social structures.²⁰

Appalachia’s industrial growth between 1870 and 1910 corresponded directly with economic shifts in environmental standards and natural resource production. The promise of cheap mountain land and the political backing of industrial minded New South bureaucrats who blanketed the halls of southern state legislatures provided many northern capitalists with the assurance they needed to establish their businesses within the virgin Appalachian forests.²¹ Uprooting themselves from the rapidly depleted woods in the northern mid-west, large-scale timber corporations like the Chicago Lumber Company and American Associates Ltd, constructed huge lumber mills throughout the central and southern portion of the region.²² These large companies used their influence

¹⁸ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 232-233.

¹⁹ Ronald L. Lewis, “Industrialization,” *High Mountain Rising*, 65.

²⁰ A description of what Eller means by “modernism” is found in *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, xxii-xxvi. For the duration of this thesis, this definition will be used.

²¹ Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 103-130; Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 41-49.

²² Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 134-

and capital to effectively manipulate mountain folk--enticing local cash strapped residence with large acre buy outs at extremely reduced rates. Relying on their enormous wealth, these corporations also utilized their economic strength to lay claim to the various small-scale timber enterprises that previously resided in the region. Over the course of only a few short decades, many of these local and family-owned businesses saw their businesses picked apart, dominated by the power of wealthy absentee capitalists who held little regard for the health and well-being the Appalachian environment.²³

By the turn of the twentieth-century, other timber and pulp wood corporations bypassed this localized method altogether and utilized their political pull to acquire land at exploitative prices.²⁴ The Champion Fiber Company that established itself in the hills outside of Asheville, North Carolina in 1906 used its political leverage in the North Carolina State Assembly to rid itself of numerous environmental and legal hurdles that thwarted its financial growth. Pushing state representatives to adopt favorable right of way laws and tougher foreclosure mandates, the leaders of Champion effectively pushed hundreds of mountain folk off of their land and into the confines of the company's newly established pulp mill town.²⁵ Peter Thompson, owner and chief operator of Champion

135); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 47-83.

²³ Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 47-64; Ronald Eller, "Industrialization and Social Change in Appalachia, 1880-1930: A Look at the Static Image," *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case* (Boone: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978) 37-42; John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 53-54.

²⁴ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 54-55.

²⁵ Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 33-39.

Paper from its establishment until his death in 1931, justified this forced exile with an assortment of paternalistic rhetoric and ideology. Like so many other capitalists who came to exploit Appalachia's natural resources during the turn of the twentieth-century, he asserted that his business introduced progress and a fruitful work ethic into the region. Ignoring the potential environmental pollution associated with the mill's production, he laid claim to the benefits of his establishment, emphasizing the point that Champion countered the inherent laziness of the Appalachian people by providing "employment...to people who...wanted to make an honest living."²⁶ By the end of 1908 this influence and ideology won Champion the ears of numerous state representatives and the acquisition of 400,000 acres of prime forest. As the 1910s and 1920s progressed, this land would eventually succumb to the effects of deforestation and harsh repercussions of chemical contamination.²⁷

These industrial practices were compounded by the discovery of heavy coal reserves throughout West Virginia, Kentucky, and portions of Tennessee. Like the timber business, coal opened many of the regions citizens to the precepts of wage labor and introduced them to many of the new pressures associated with "modernization". Mining jobs allocated a quick and effective source of hard cash for mountain workers disillusioned with the toil associated with farming and subsistence living.²⁸ The development of stable coal towns during the turn of the twentieth-century strengthened the economic pull of the mining industry, and succeeded in drawing thousands of

²⁶ Quoted from Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters*, 45.

²⁷ Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters*, 39.

²⁸ Ronald Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 260 .

working families away from the region's farms and into these new mountain communities.²⁹ Historian Crandall Shifflett emphasizes the demographic extent of this industrial migration to "coal counties", asserting that during the first quarter of the twentieth-century "the population of mountain counties grew by 55 percent" as a result of coal related production.³⁰

Within the confines of these coal towns, however, mountain-folk discovered an existence filled with danger and strife. Working ten and sometimes twelve hour days, mine workers were often subjected to unsafe working conditions that plagued their health and lives. The threat of mining cave-ins, mineral inhalation, and injury due to mechanical mishaps loomed over the heads of mountain miners everyday they took up their tools and went about their work.³¹

Above ground, the conditions of the regions coal towns did not prove any better. The political and economic pull generated by coal operators placed the prospects of mining regulation and legal jurisdiction in the hand of mining owners and their sympathizers. These owners used their power to craft pro-mining safety rules that were bent against mountain miners and the encroachment of the United Mine Workers Association (UMWA) and other workers unions. They also used their power to elect pro-owner sheriffs and county deputies who had the authority to evict and jail "wayward" miners as

²⁹ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 21-23; Ronald Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside, 259-262*; Paul Salstorm, *Appalachia's Path to Dependency: Rethinking the Region's Economic History, 1730-1940* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 60-82.

³⁰ Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 20.

³¹ David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: the Southern West Virginian Miners, 1880-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 10-18; Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 101-107.

they saw fit.³²

These threats were compounded by the regular employment of private detectives and anti-union thugs by mine owners who used their power to enact physical and psychological damage to those resistant to the poor pay and anti-union dictates of the mining companies. Implementing a wide range of tactics that included the use of religious manipulation, violence, and death threats, these corporate thugs succeeded in enacting a reign of fear within coal towns that effectively bound the will of early mining workers to the dictates and whims of their industrial bosses.³³ Historian David Corbin claims that the vivacity of these threats and abuses were so repressive during this period of transition that they resembled a form of “industrialized slavery” that effectively tied the Appalachian miner to the dictates and desires of his capitalist master. While these mountain miners did periodically unionize and acquire more freedoms after the First World War, their migration to the coal fields often symbolized a new life of bondage and repression.³⁴

The evolution associated with the spread of industrialism did not remain secluded within the parameters of the region’s economic structure. The stresses of economic change also penetrated the social core of Appalachia, instituting new social relationships that did not fully exist before the 1860s. The most fundamental of these changes dealt with evolving relationship between mountain folk and the natural environment. By 1910,

³² Ronald Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 193-195; David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 11-18; 209-212.

³³ Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 121-131. David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 150.

³⁴ David Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 76-78.

the rapid discovery of coal deposits, the popularity of clear-cutting, and the subsequent construction of vast mining towns, drastically altered the region's perception of how the environment was to be treated and economically utilized. Straying from antebellum notions of subsistence living and naturalism, industrial capitalism pushed many in the region to reduce the environment to a simple commodity that could be utilized with little moral supposition. Land became a tool of economic progression, a tool of capital gain that exceeded precepts of sustainable living and environmental responsibility.³⁵

Effects of this new social perception of the environment can be seen in the massive deforestation pushes instituted by absentee landowners and corporate leaders during this period. In West Virginia alone, the expansion of tributary railroad lines and streamlined lumbering techniques into the wooded periphery of the state contributed to a massive increase in clear cutting and an inevitable "disappearance of the Appalachian forest."³⁶ John Alexander Williams asserts that the effects of clear cutting by timber and coal companies was so extensive in West Virginia between 1870 and 1910 that nearly 80,000,000 acres of virgin had been either gutted or burnt over.³⁷ The resulting runoff created by this deforestation was compounded by the active pollution emitted by paper

³⁵ John Gaventa, "Property, Coal, and Theft," *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, 141-157; Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 235-262; Apart from timber, coal and other natural resource extraction, changes in the social relationship between man and nature is also visible in the solidification of mountain and upland agriculture. Between 1880 and 1920, mountain agriculture shifted from a more subsistence-based agriculture that depended on a wide range of crops to a market crop mentality that focused on cotton, corn, and in some cases tobacco. This transition equated to a dramatic shift in the social conception of land and the environment as contested by Steven Hahn in his book *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 158-165.

³⁶ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 250.

³⁷ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 249-250.

mills, coal mines, and various chemical factories.³⁸ Residents who lived near the banks of the Pigeon River in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee attested to the filth and pollution of the river's water by the early 1910s. Apart from giving off a sulfuric smell and a black, oily color, these mountain inhabitants emphasized to company and state officials that they could no longer catch or eat the contaminated fish that lived in the river.³⁹ Like so many other mountain folk during this period, their dependence on the river and the natural environment for sustenance and existence had been thwarted by the exploitation of industrialized interests and the creation of new social relationships with the mountain's environmental structures.

The effects of this new social-environmental relationship acted in tandem with the outgrowth of new domestic and familial relationships in the region. Faced with the prospects of pollution and the commodification of the regions land and natural resources by powerful corporations, many mountain families underwent major social transitions that transformed the essence of domestic life.⁴⁰ The pollution of fish filled rivers and the private purchase and enclosure of pasture land by timber and coal companies after 1880 instituted the most prolific challenge for those in the region who wished to remain

³⁸ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 246-252. Apart from coal and timber companies, Williams also draws attention to the pollution emitted by chemical facilities--the most influential of these being the American Enka Corporation in western North Carolina.

³⁹ Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters*, 40-45.

⁴⁰ Harry K. Schwarzweller, *Mountain Families in Transition: A Case Study of Appalachian Migration* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 67-70; Patricia Duane Beaver, *Rural Community in the Appalachian South* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 37-38; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 31-36.

tethered to the land.⁴¹ Coupled with the economic draw of company towns and ready cash wages, these new environmental pressures pressed many Appalachian families to reconfigure the confines of their domestic structure and the resulting power structures that dominated family life. As with the “market revolution” that transformed the domestic structure of the American North between 1830 and 1860, Appalachian families during this period witnessed the gradual erosion of “traditional” family ideals and the implementation of new “modern” domesticity in its place.⁴²

Mountain men found it more economically viable to move their families from farms along the countryside to industrial hubs that offered more stable employment opportunities. Young men often followed suit, leaving home and forgoing early marriage in hope of finding better paying jobs in the region’s coal mines and timber fields.⁴³ Wives and young women also felt the pull of the marketplace. Rather than remaining with the domestic sphere and sacrificing potential income, many women found work in factories or devoted time and energy to profitable ventures outside of the home.⁴⁴ In a somewhat

⁴¹ Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters*, 56-64; Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers*, 53-78.

⁴² For insight into ‘traditional’ familial norms see Harry K. Schwarzweller, *Mountain Families in Transition*, 58-61; James K. Crissman, *Death and Dying in Central Appalachia: Changing Attitudes and Practices* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 9-16. For more information on the historical concept of the American market revolution and its impact on family structure see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-33; Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 16-17.

⁴³ Crandall Shifflett, *Coal Towns*, 23-26. Shifflett refers to this process as farm-to-industry migration. He asserts that this process functioned in a symbiotic push and pull method that was both complex and stressful for the individuals involved. Also see Ronald L. Lewis, *Transforming the Appalachian Countryside*, 155-161.

⁴⁴ Richard Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, 187-188; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like A Family*, 152-168.

gradual fashion, these new social and economic pursuits slowly took hold of mountain families—pulling them away from the prospects of subsistence and the outright dependence on the environment for survival.

This is not to say that the prospects of rural life and domestic paternalism completely vanished in Appalachia during this period. Aspects of “traditional” mountain family life continued on throughout the region, albeit with some dramatic social alterations. Florence Bush makes note that while many mountain families witnessed a gradual shift away from subsistence living, pre-industrial domestic practices thrived with some vivacity well in to the first two decades of the twentieth-century. Mothers continued to spend most of their time around the family home tending gardens, cooking, mending clothes and taking care of children. Moreover, a majority of Appalachian fathers continued to hold their domestic position as the preverbal “head of the household”, using their time and energy not spent in the timber and coal fields either hunting or growing cash crops like tobacco and corn.⁴⁵

However while these traditional domestic relationships persisted between 1880 and 1920, their existence was always shadowed by the growing social prevalence of wage labor and industrialization. For men, fishing and hunting moved from primary endeavors, to actions that took place after coal was mined and timber cut. Crandall Shifflett highlights the fact that many coal miners used excess company land to grow subsistence gardens and small yield cash crops, yet these agricultural ventures could only be tended

⁴⁵ Florence Cope Bush, *Dorie: Woman of the Mountains* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). Also see Harry K. Schwarzweller, *Mountain Families in Transition*, 28-32.

to during the night or on Sunday afternoons after church.⁴⁶ In regards to mountain women, housekeeping and childrearing became secondary domestic issues and were often completed after mill shifts came to an end.⁴⁷ During the fall and winter months, these domestic responsibilities were even more stretched. The constant arrival of boarders and migrant mountain workers looking for seasonal labor came to demand the primary attention of mountain wives. Corresponding with the traditional female responsibility during the fall harvest, the stresses created by these migrant tenants molded the mountain home into a more complex environment that provided little if any peace and rest.⁴⁸ As the economic lure of coal towns and mill villages collided with the environmental reduction of useable farm land, this domestic transformation would only become more powerful and damaging. Little by little, the prospects of traditional Appalachian domestic life eroded to the pressures of industrialism—

leaving in its wake new familial, economic, and social relationships that seemed all to surreal.

It quickly becomes evident that the economic and social transitions that enveloped Appalachia during the turn of the twentieth-century successfully plunged the region into a new and foreign reality. The stresses of migration, wage-labor, industrialism, and environmental destruction brought about new complex problems that had never fully

⁴⁶ Crandall Shifflett; *Coal Towns*, 111-112. Also see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like A Family*, 153-154.

⁴⁷ Lois MacDonald, *Southern Mill Hills: A Study of Social and Economic Forces in Certain Textile Mill Villages* (New York: Alexander. Hillman, 1928), 53; Victoria Byerly, *Hard Times Cotton Mills Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1986), 98-99..

⁴⁸ For details into the stresses of boarding on Appalachian families see Florence Cope Bush, *Dorie*, 77-84.

impacted mountain life before. New gender, economic, and social relationships separated many individuals in the mountains from traditional coping outlets, and forced many Appalachian citizens to look for alternate means to deal with the social flux that surrounded them.

However, this social hopelessness did not remain stagnant among the region's population. Though discouraged and confused, mountain communities gradually began constructing new identities that addressed their evolving perceptions. Acknowledging the fact that many "traditional" Appalachian practices and modes of belief had dissipated under the pressures of capitalism and industrialism, mountain-folk started re-cultivating the foundations of their cultural outlook to fit the parameters of their newly modernized world.⁴⁹

These new cultural constructions varied throughout Appalachia during the turn of the twentieth-century, and functioned as a method for mountain-folk to conceptualize a cultural worldview that was safe and familiar. Some of these new cultural ideals came from sources outside of the region, often by individuals who were unaware or unsympathetic of the intricacies of mountain life. Traveling local-color writers and missionaries from the North and South provided the backbone of much of this "external" transition. Many of these so called reformers interpreted it as their goal to institute external cultural norms within Appalachia in an effort to instigate a more progressive culture throughout the region. Writers like James Lane Allen and scholars like W. J. Frost

⁴⁹ Ronald D. Eller, "Industrialization and Social Change in Appalachia, 1880-1930: A Look at the Static Image," in *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, ed. Helen Mathews Lewis (Boone: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 35-42.

pushed for the creation of new Appalachian cultural identities that embraced the principles of a self-proscribed modernization that was linked to the new social and economic promises of the New South.⁵⁰ These external pushes greatly influenced the cultural direction of the region's newly established middleclass in that they provided ideals that justified their social and economic practices.⁵¹

The efforts of local color writers and missionaries were not the only factors that contributed to the recreation of cultural ideals within Appalachia. The combination of industrialized work, capitalistic exploitation, and "modernized" concepts of daily life came together during the turn of the twentieth-century to synthesize new cultural identities that appealed to the toil of the region's evolving working class. Within Appalachia's coal fields, industrial hubs, and textile regions groups of distressed and bewildered workers adopted new forms of cultural and social expression that addressed the changing and ever harsh world around them. For some of these workers, cultural identity emerged along ethnic lines. Migrant workers from eastern and central Europe closely clung to the traditional ethnic ideals of their yesteryears--creating ethnic neighborhoods and outposts within the region's timber and coal towns. This ethnic solidarity--often mixed with various other cultural ideals that existed in Appalachia--worked to bolster strong cultural ties among these migrant workers. It assisted in creating the effective coping mechanisms needed during this chaotic period, and ushered in a

⁵⁰ Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 122-126; 157-163.

⁵¹ For more information into the evolving cultural identity of Appalachia's middleclass during the turn of the twentieth-century see Sandra L. Barney, *Authorized to Heal: Gender, Class, and the Transformation of Medicine in Appalachia, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

sense of security and safety.⁵²

Apart from ethnicity, cultural identity among the region's emerging working class also developed institutionally--often in the form of unions and various collective workers groups. Labor historian David Corbin draws attention to the cultural solidity formed in the wake of the United Miner's Association in central Appalachia during the turn of the twentieth-century. He asserts that in religion like fashion, UWA members and organizers flocked around the ideals of unionization and labor rights in an effort to combat their economic exploitation and cultural duress. Corbin states that union meetings provided "religious" spaces for these union believers. They offered a cultural arena for the creation of a collective cultural identity that securely placed the ideals of mine workers above the pressures of "blacklists, depressions, lockouts, strikers, murderous explosions, and slate falls, and mine guards."⁵³ As the early 1900's progressed these unionized spaces emerged into bastions of cultural expression and development. Union halls and union homes evolved into safe areas where letters of grievances could be read, rituals of initiation could be conducted, and ideas and thoughts could be freely discussed and implemented. Going along with Corbin's emphasis, it becomes apparent that the atmosphere created by the UWA and the various other unions that existed in Appalachia during this period crafted an environment where new cultural identities could emerge, and untimely, in some sense,

⁵² Ronald L. Lewis, "Industrialization," *High Mountain Rising*, 66-67; Margret Ripley Wolfe, "Aliens in Southern Appalachia: Catholics in the Coal Camps, 1900-1940," *Appalachian Heritage* 6 (Winter, 1978), 45; Kenneth R. Bailey, "A Judicious Mixture: Negroes and Immigrants in the West Virginia Mines, 1880-1917," *West Virginia History* 34 (1973), 141-163.

⁵³ David Allen Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 160.

flourish.⁵⁴

However, the construction of new cultural identities within Appalachia did not solely correspond with the influence of new external ideals. Pressed by the intrusion of new economic and social pressures, many individuals within the region turned steadfastly to a wide assortment of more traditional cultural precepts that existed in the region-- bringing into the forefront various "old-time" ideals that defined a mountain life outside of industrialism, wages, and the assumed notions of progress. For many of these mountain folk the prospect of forming a cultural identity based around the aspect of Appalachian traditionalism took form in a institutionalized way. Disgusted by the encroachments and lifestyles projected by industrialist and missionaries from outside the region, these individuals strengthened many of the preexisting mountain institutions that provided them cultural identity. Historian David Kimbrough makes note of this process and its relation to the growth of Appalachian specific denominations like the Primitive and Anti-Missionary Baptists during the turn of the twentieth-century. He states that many Appalachian believers who were turned off by the "Gospel of Progress" touted by mining ministers and Northern-based itinerants, rallied around the Primitive and Anti-Missionary Baptist churches in an effort to recreate a cultural worldview that diverged from their industrialized peers.⁵⁵ Asserting a reinvigorated notion of Appalachian independence and self-sufficiency, these denominations provided a cultural outlet for believers who wished to remain somewhat separate and disconnected from the social and

⁵⁴ David Allen Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 140-169.

⁵⁵ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 74-76.

economic change that was gripping their region.⁵⁶

Outside of the confines of institutions, those Appalachians wishing to re-center themselves around the ideals of traditionalism also looked to other means for cultural solidity. Traditional Appalachian cultural outlets like folk singing and instrumental music became pillars of cultural identity for mountain families and communities seeking to reconnect themselves to the ways of the past. The mountain dulcimer, for example, experienced a virtual renaissance during the turn of the twentieth-century, reclaiming its central position as the traditional musical instrument of the Appalachian Mountains by individuals longing to assert their cultural heritage. Musical scholar L. Allen Smith makes note of this importance in highlighting the corresponding physical and cultural changing in the construction of the dulcimer and its role among the region's population after the 1880s. Looking at the layout of post-1870 dulcimers, Smith emphasizes the fact that mountain musician's purposefully altered the appearance of the instrument to give it a more traditional look and sound. He states that while many of the dulcimers created during this period contained some "modernized" woodworking characteristics, the instrument inevitably took on a shape and tone that resembled the old German dulcimers that thrived in the region throughout the late eighteenth-century.⁵⁷ As with the growth of

⁵⁶ Melanie L. Slovine, "Traditionalism, Antimission, and the Primitive Baptist Religion: A Preliminary Analysis," *Reshaping the Image of Appalachia*, ed. Loyal Jones (Berea: The Berea College Appalachian Center, 1986), 32-44; Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 8-43. For insight into the role of religion and cultural identity in Appalachia also see Charles H. Lippy, "Popular Religiosity in Central Appalachia," *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill Leonard (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 40-48.

⁵⁷ L. Allen Smith, "Another Look at the Appalachian Dulcimer and Future Research," *Reshaping the Image of Appalachia*, 14-22.

traditional Appalachian denominations, the reemergence of such musical practices succeeded in rallying some Appalachians around the cultural precepts of traditional mountain life and created a viable cultural identity that was stable and somewhat recognizable.⁵⁸

It is important to note, though, that the foundation of these new cultural processes were not positioned in the confines of real cultural practices, but were rooted within the cultural desires and memories of the mountain folk involved. For one, the external cultural ideas that had migrated into the region from the North and South were not true cultural expressions of these outside regions; rather they were representations of what some Appalachian's perceived these cultures to be. Many middle-class Appalachians who had acquired new wealth with the rise of the timber and coal mining businesses clung to these perceived notions of modern culture that existed outside of the mountains because they sought to mimic the practices and perspectives of the wealthy outside of the region. Conversely, the same held true for the region's lower and working classes. The cultural identity brought forth by unions and bargaining groups were constructed from social and economic ideals that *entered* Appalachia from outside of the mountains. While the workers who formed and supported the cultural identity crafted by these unions, they

⁵⁸ The historiographies of many of Appalachia's Consensus historians have projected this quest for traditionalism in negative terms. Works like Harry M. Caudill's, *Night comes to the Cumberland: The Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), Jack Weller's, *Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965), and John B. Stephenson's, *Shiloh: A Blue Ridge Mountain Community* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1968) interpret traditionalism as a negative defect of Appalachian life that has come to weaken the region and its people. I seek to diverge from this understanding of traditionalism and its negative historical undertones and instead assert that traditionalism and the cultural identity associated with traditional are positive ideals that affirm Appalachia's exceptionalism and cultural depth. For more information on the negative connotations of traditionalism see John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 321-326.

were simply recreating cultural perspectives issued to them by union leaders who lived and operated outside of the Appalachian region.

This process was the same for those mountain-folk who downplayed the value of these external cultural mindsets, and constructed a cultural identity that mimicked “traditional” Appalachian practices. Drawn to the idea of traditional mountain culture, these individuals recreated the qualifications of true Appalachian-life based upon their own memories and understanding of the past. The ability to focus on particular cultural ideals that subjectively mirrored supposed traditional Appalachian norms permitted these individuals to construct romanticized cultural identities that challenged the social and economic turmoil brought by modern industrialism. Like their middle-class and other working-class contemporaries, these individuals were simply creating cultural mindsets based upon memories and presumptions. The strength of modern industrialism succeeded in altering the social landscape of Appalachia--implementing a new cultural paradigm where antebellum concepts of culture could not be reproduced and enacted. Therefore as these new “traditional” cultural identities took form during the early 1900s, they did so within a social framework that was essentially fabricated by the direction of modern industrialism.⁵⁹

Yet, the existence of this cultural construction does not diminish the power of these new identities. The ability to mold the contours of culture provided a means of power for a regional population hungering for an outlet of control. It gave many mountain folk the ability to choose how they related to the new social contours of an

⁵⁹ John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History*, 203-206; Michael Ann Williams, “Folklife,” *High Mountains Rising*, 136-146.

industrialized Appalachia, while simultaneously providing these individuals with a pluralistic assortment of cultural identities to choose from. Moreover, the fact that these new cultural identities were constructed by Appalachians within the region showcases the indigenous nature of these new frameworks and the potential influence they had on the continual evolution of Appalachian society.

Thus, it is here, within this distinct cultural process, that the fabric of snake-handling finds its religious foundation. Like similar cultural identities that were being formed in Appalachia during the 1900s and 1910s, the cultural roots of snake-handling were fashioned within an evolutionary process that sought to impart stability and solidity to mountain families. Known from here on as *Appalachian dualism*, this cultural mindset did not hold an initial dominance over the cultural direction of the region; however, as the twentieth-century progressed the influence of this identity succeeded in gradually expanding throughout the region's population.⁶⁰

As with many of the cultural outlooks being formed in the region during this time, those who ascribed to the cultural ideals of Appalachian dualism sought to build an identity centered around the prospects of various "traditional" cultural norms and other "external" cultural ideals imported from outside the region. These norms upheld a variety of constructed memories and presumptions about Appalachian life--most specifically the structure and functionality of mountain religion. The most significant of these religious suppositions was a belief in the coequal interaction of the spiritual and the physical.

⁶⁰ The foundation of this term and the cultural ideals surrounding it are built upon the material/supernatural cultural synthesis defined by Anthony Cavender in his book *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)36-53.

Linking this belief with the religious practices of early Pentecostalism and the regional popularity of natural folk healing practices, these individuals clung to the idea that spiritual manifestations like miracles, divine healing, and eternal salvation came about through the material exercise of specific physical rituals. The early snake-handling revivals that developed within Appalachia during the early twentieth-century incorporated this dualism into their religious structure. Those within the movement pressed believers who desired spiritual healing and divine grace to perform tangible and physical sacraments as a means of showcasing their faith. Given the obvious strength of this cultural/religious relationship, proper emphasis must be given to the correlation between Appalachian dualism and snake-handling. More importantly, it becomes necessary to understand the parameters of this cultural identity to properly understand the historical and regional importance of twentieth-century Appalachian snake-handling.

Turn-of-the-century Appalachians who adhered to the cultural precepts of Appalachian dualism fashioned the physical ideals of their identity around the ritualistic practices of mountain folk medicine. Based in essence around the folklore of traditional Scottish and Irish medical practices, Appalachian folk medicine permeated within the tacit knowledge of the regional society. Mountain women were taught at a young age how to cultivate vibrant herbal gardens and medicinal plants like catnip, blood-root, boneset, and mint. Once harvested these plants were sun dried and either ground into medicinal powders or stored for future use.⁶¹ Apart from growing medicinal plants, mountain youths were also instructed how to scavenge the dense forests for helpful roots

⁶¹ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 62-69.

and herbs. Natural foliage like oak bark and ginseng were often taken from forests and boiled by mountain family, forming southing teas that aided maladies. Appalachian anthropologist Anthony Cavender, denotes this process as “decoction”, and asserts this method was used “to ‘draw the strength out of a plant’.”⁶² Mountain folk often used these teas as blood thinners with the hope of cleaning the blood and balancing the humors. In their minds, the body functioned as an extension of the environment around them. Influenced by the natural abundance of herbs and medicinal plants in the region, mountaineers looked to the soil for their health and longevity.⁶³

Between 1830 and 1900, this regional understanding of medicine was elevated by publishers and professionals who grasped onto the tacit knowledge of Appalachian folk healers and incorporated their practices into regional medical books. A majority of these books were published within the geographical confines of Appalachia, and succeeded in conveying many of the regions folk practices in a concise and simplistic fashion. The most popular publication, John C. Gunn’s *Domestic Medicine, or Poor Man’s Friend, in the Hours of Affliction, Pain and Sickness* rejected the haughtiness and ineffectiveness of the modern medical practices of the time. Adhering to the regional distaste for professional medicine, Gunn diminished modern “physicians of eminence” who overwhelmed common individuals with “glass jars, gallipots, and drawers” of medicine with long names “in large letters and impelling capitals.”⁶⁴ He insisted that modern

⁶² Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 65.

⁶³ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 55-77; Michael Ann Williams, “Folklife,” *High Mountains Rising*, 141.

⁶⁴ John C. Gunn, *Domestic Medicine, or Poor Man’s Friend, in the Hours of Affliction, Pain and Sickness*, 1830, Reprint (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 135.

medicines were harmful to the body, and in essence functioned as “shameful impositions [that were] practiced on the mass of the people, by the quackness connected with medical science.”⁶⁵ Instead of ingesting distasteful drugs, Gunn pushed mountain folk to look towards the environment and the bountiful medicines that littered the regions forests. He urged individuals to seek the material aid offered by natural herbs, plants, and other physical rituals.

Many of these rituals perpetuated in regional medical guides like Gunn’s went past the simple ingestion of concoctions, and involved the inflicted individual’s active participation in healing acts. One ritual, known as “measuring”, was utilized to cure asthma by placing the hair of a child in a predrilled hole in a mountain oak tree. This presumed physical bond between the child and the tree afforded healing energy to the adolescent if an asthma attack ever occurred. Moreover, because the tree and child were linked by the mixture of hair and bark, any sickness that fell upon the tree would subsequently negatively affect the child.⁶⁶ Other ritual cures called for the incorporation of animals into the healing process. One treatment for rheumatism required the infirm to gather a large number of bees into a paper bag and insert the affected hand or limb. The resulting stings would loosen the joints and counter the effects of the arthritis.⁶⁷

The popularity and accessibility of folk medicine in publications like Gunn’s

⁶⁵ John C. Gunn, *Domestic Medicine, or Poor Man’s Friend, in the Hours of Affliction, Pain and Sickness*, 136.

⁶⁶ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 83.

⁶⁷ Wayland D. Hand, *Magical Medicine: The Folkloric Component of Medicine in the Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 254.

Domestic Medicine provided the cultural ammunition for Appalachian dualism to develop. The physical portion of this cultural perspective delved deep into the naturalistic roots of mountain life, and utilized memories of past rituals to impart a sense of solidarity among Appalachian families. The social and environmental destruction brought on by the growth of modern industrialism only succeeded in fueling the cultural significance of folk healing practices to individuals affected by the exploitation of their native mountains. In choosing to approach nature as a tool of healing rather than profit, these individuals actively challenged the destruction imposed by industrialism. They implemented an approach to the physical world that restructured the function of the environment away from modern capitalism and into a role that resembled their understanding of pre-industrial mountain life. This understanding included a reverence for the environment, a respect for supposed traditions, and a belief that equated personal health and vitality with a proper respect for the surrounding mountain side.⁶⁸

Apart from the material nature of mountain folk medicine, the cultural boundaries of Appalachian dualism were also constructed around “traditional” and “external” conceptions of mountain spirituality. While a wide assortment of new religious ideologies assisted in the formation of this cultural process, none of these organizations impacted the parameters of Appalachian dualism more than the Pentecostal movement.

Prominent historians of Pentecostalism like Randall Stevens and Robert Anderson, trace the roots of American Pentecostalism to teachings of Charles Parham

⁶⁸ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 55-60.

and William Seymour in Los Angeles, California during the early 1900s.⁶⁹ These leaders proposed a theology that intertwined the notion of personal salvation with physical acts of emotionalism and divine miracles. Upholding the doctrine known as the Second Blessing of the Holy Spirit (also known as Holy Spirit Baptism or the Baptism in the Holy Ghost), these leaders beckoned their followers to “Go Deeper” in prayer until “the Spirit pervaded every heart and filled the room, and gave [believers] a pentecostal shower of blessing as of God.”⁷⁰

This shower or Second Blessing took form in signs and wonders as the physical world was altered by the presence and power of the divine. The faithful would often speak in unknown tongues as evidence that they had been “separated from the world by having [their] sins all taken away” and that they were “fully consecrated by God.”⁷¹ The evidence of tongues was often equated to the prospect of the Christian being purified by fire and elevated by God to a more holy position of discipleship. The believer’s faith placed them in direct communication with God, and established these individuals as mediums between God and the material world. This power bestowed by the Second Blessing motivated Pentecostal converts to believe that their faith that could move God to hear their prayers more thoughtfully and more fully. Moreover, this mindset drove them to acknowledge the power of the spiritual realm and the workings of the Holy Spirit in

⁶⁹ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁷⁰ “Go Deeper,” *Samson’s Foxes*, August 20, 1901, 1. This edition of *Samson’s Foxes* was accessed electronically from the Special Archives Collection at the Dixon Pentecostal Research Library, Cleveland, TN.

⁷¹ “Receiving the Holy Ghost,” *The Way*, September, 1905, 1.

the material world.⁷²

It was within the parameters of this theological understanding that the notion of miracles entered the region and influenced the formation of Appalachian dualism. The prospects of spiritual enthusiasm and revivalism had always been present within Appalachia since the migration of the Scots-Irish into the region during the mid-eighteenth century. Appalachian historian Deborah McCauley asserts that the Scots-Irish “had a persisting influence on religion in the Appalachian region through expressive and ecstatic worship practices and their revivalist traditions.”⁷³ These unique traditions of spiritual ecstasy and fanaticism prompted a belief system in the region that upheld particular faith in the supernatural and an undoubted trust in the religious ideals of sanctification, pietism, miracles, and angelic visitations. During the many religious revivals that took hold of Appalachia between 1830 and 1900, these religious beliefs quickly took the fore-front of Appalachian spiritual thought, and succeeded in provoking mountain believers to acknowledge both the existence of the spiritual realm and its importance within the interactions of daily life.⁷⁴

This spiritualistic understanding of religion thrived throughout the mountains during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and provided the foundation necessary for

⁷² Marsha Maguire, “Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 38, (Summer, 1981), 169-170

⁷³ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 145.

⁷⁴ Richard A. Humphery, “Development of Religion in Southern Appalachia: The Personal Quality,” *Appalachia Journal* 1, (Spring, 1974), 244-254; Marsha Maguire, “Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia,” 168-169; Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 156-200.

the success of various movements like Pentecostalism. The gradual popularity of Pentecostalism within the region between 1900 and 1930 seized the parameters of mountain spiritualism and elevated the preeminence of the divine to new heights. A wide assortment of independent Holiness-Pentecostal churches emerged in response to the signs and wonders associated with the Second Blessing. Often these new congregations stripped members from neighboring Holiness and Methodists churches that had been in the region for decades; however, many Pentecostal converts in the mountains also came from families who had either rejected the Christian faith or simply remained un-churched by circumstance.⁷⁵

The growth of Pentecostalism within Appalachia during this period imposed a degree of spiritualism within mountains that permeated throughout the region's culture. Intertwined with the religious underpinnings of Scots-Irish revivalism, Appalachian Pentecostals stressed a theological outlook that recognized the legitimacy of the spiritual world and the divine interaction of the Holy Spirit. By acknowledging the power and presence of God within the material world, Pentecostal congregations challenged mountaineers to look past the temporality of life and look instead to the miracles promised in the Bible. The promise of miracles placed the prospect of physical healing in the hands of believers themselves. All a Christian had to do, in their minds, was to have faith in the promises of God and depend on the Holy Spirit to heal the maladies that affected them. This faith was controlled and altered by the believer, and subjected to his or her trust in the Bible and God's divine hand. If he or she simply chose to believe, they

⁷⁵ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 255-275.

would be cured. The inclusion of Pentecostal spiritualism thus provided an environment that accepted the power and might of the divine realm and the workings of miracles.⁷⁶

Thus, when looked at independently, the contours of this spiritualism and the corresponding physical dynamics of natural folk healing fail to correlate the cultural ideals of Appalachian dualism with the practice of snake-handling. In themselves, both segments represent different interpretations of reality that are grounded within diverse ontological structures. However, the historian must venture past the temptation to see these two forces as singular cultural entities, and instead observe the cultural product of their coequal interaction. Those who clung to the prospects of Appalachian dualism refused to completely differentiate the physical realm from that of the spiritual. They chose to combine the materialism and naturalism of folk medicine with the spiritual inner-workings of Pentecostalism. This process formed a cultural synthesis that acknowledged a world where divine happenings like miracles could become tangible products of reality. A world where the common individual could, by faith, move God to endow spiritual blessings by completing simple physical rituals. The implementation of ritualism within the contours of Appalachian dualism further developed the cultural environment in which snake-handing ultimately took form. In and of itself, the rituals of folk healing remained a simple outlet of mountain folk healing that was utilized sparingly to accrue health and well-being. However as Appalachians connected this practice with the spiritual nature of Pentecostalism, the functionality of this ritualism evolved and

⁷⁶ A great monograph that highlights the mindset of Pentecostal divine healing within Appalachia is Loyal Jones' book *Faith and Meaning in the Southern Uplands* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Jones offers a detailed oral history of faith in Appalachia that looks outside denominational stances and probes into the minds and beliefs of individual mountain believers.

changed. The act became a tool that connected the physical aspects of mountain life with the promises and blessings of the spiritual world.

Snake-handling fashioned itself to the functionality of this ritualism, and subsequently utilized the physical/spiritual cultural structure projected by Appalachian dualism to meet specific cultural and religious needs. Incorporating the physical nature of mountain folk medicine, snake-handlers molded their religious practices around the incorporation of natural elements of the environment. Handlers used deadly serpents, hot coals, venom, poisons, and other natural implements found in the surrounding mountain forests as ritualistic devices to procure spiritual blessings. They supplemented the power of this naturalistic and physical minded process by synthesizing its cultural properties with the Pentecostal doctrines of tongues, faith, and prayer. These theological suppositions supported the material manifestation of divine workings, and assisted snake-handlers in their ritualistic struggle to receive spiritual blessings within their physical bodies. The magnitude of this physical/spiritual religious understanding appropriated by the cultural direction of Appalachian dualism, justified a supernatural understanding of reality far removed from the limitations of progress and industrialism. It afforded a religious mindset that offered power to the disenfranchised, hope to the impoverished, and a new cultural framework that substituted the pressures of lower-class existence with the riches of the divine world above. These cultural aspects appealed to the socio-economic needs of those within the snake-handling movement and assisted in crafting a new identity that encouraged the undertaking of the religiously charged rituals that handlers held so dear.

While the assertion that twentieth-century snake-handling thrived under the

banner of one cultural mindset seems to generalize the movement into one monolithic ideology, it is important to note that significant differences divided the snake-handling community. Snake-handling, from its inception, thrived as a movement with diverse interpretations and church structures. On a regional level, snake-handlers in Kentucky and West Virginia functioned under a different theological understanding than believers in North Carolina and eastern Tennessee. Moreover, within similar areas, and even in the same church, individual snake-handlers declared a wide assortment of theologies that pertained to the formation of the Trinity, the involvement of women, and even participation within snake-handling rituals themselves. However, as heterogeneous as this belief system was, the fact remains that all snake-handlers shared a set core of beliefs defined by the cultural ideals of Appalachian dualism. Every snake-handling congregation and practitioner interpreted their regional and religious worldview through the physical/spiritual synthesis that formed this cultural identity. The religious suppositions of snake-handling, the simple need to perform naturalistic physical rituals to acquire spiritual blessings, found their simple roots within Appalachian dualism and the corresponding socio-economic changes that overtook turn-of-the-century Appalachia.

It is because of this monolithic nature of Appalachian dualism that the rituals that surrounded twentieth-century snake-handling remained cohesive and constant. During the formal creation of the movement during the 1910s, snake-handlers abided by a particular set of rituals that affirmed the cultural ideals and cultural direction of Appalachian dualism. Each of these rituals were commonly used by all practicing snake-handlers throughout the region, and were utilized as universal religious mediums that could connect the believer to God and his Biblical promises. Outside of affirming their unique

cultural outlook and interacting with the heavenly Father, snake-handlers performed these acts as a means to counter the turmoil of industrialization and capitalism. These rituals became tools of protest that sought to counter the effects of modernism and change, and subsequently affirmed modes of thinking that catered to snake-handlers' perceptions of past traditions and ways of life. As with other cultural identities in the region that sought to recreate a new Appalachia void of the pressure of an industrialized modernity, snake-handlers used their rituals to secure a similar effect. Thus it was through the generalized affirmation of a common set of rituals that rallied every snake-handler around the cultural precepts of Appalachian dualism, and the regional significance this newly constructed identity represented.

During the initial formation of the movement, the rituals of snake-handling and fire-handling quickly emerged as the two most widely implemented religious practices. These two rituals occurred most frequently within snake-handling services, and were commonly documented in regional newspapers and religious publications like the *Church of God Evangel*.⁷⁷ Believers approached these acts with Pentecostal inspired zeal--claiming that the miracles appropriated by snake-handling and fire-handling heightened their connection within the spiritual realm, while subsequently providing physical power over pain, poison, and death. Snake-handlers justified cultural and religious provocations of both rituals citing the Biblical affirmation found in Mark 16:17-18 where Christ beckoned his followers to handle serpents and perform miracles, asserting that "in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up

⁷⁷ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville, The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 83-91

serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them.” Handlers also utilized passages in the Old and New Testaments like Daniel 3:19-30 that correlated fire to spiritual and material purification. The Scriptural leverage behind these verses merged perfectly with the cultural outlines of Appalachian dualism and, in turn, crafted the spiritual justification needed for the material rituals of snake-handling and fire-handling to occur.⁷⁸

One such happening took place during a cold January night in 1914 during a local tent meeting at the Church of God in Hiwassee, Tennessee. A local member, Tenny Carson, made note of the emotional zeal that encompassed the meeting and emphasized the “fire” and “power” that took hold of the congregation during worship. Invigorated by the presence of the Holy Spirit about him, the church’s minister, Brother Walker, began addressing the crowd when a member beside him “was drawn by the power of God” to showcase his physical faith by thrusting his arms into the raging fire in the corner of the room. The Spirit-driven believer remained untouched by the heat of the ambers, and with no apparent pain “took his hands and lifted up the fire...and handled fire all over the house.” This act of God lifted the spirits of the audience, and soon after “the power fell on all the saints and they nearly all handled fire.”⁷⁹

Fire-handling demonstrations like the one described by Carson did not normally occur independently, but were often followed or accompanied by displays of snake-handling and serpent throwing. One of the many examples of this religious undertaking

⁷⁸ Mary Lee Daugherty, “Serpent Handlers,” *Christianity in Appalachia*, 142-143.

⁷⁹ *Church of God Evangel*, January 10, 1914, 4.

took place in 1917 at a Church of God revival in Sand Mountain, Alabama.⁸⁰ In the midst of the revival, “two brothers came across a copperhead” that was resting in the forest above the church grounds. Influenced by the sight of miracles from the previous night’s tent revival “the power came on one of them and he took up the reptile” and handled the snake in the midst of a gathering crowd. As he handled the snake “it bit him on the back of the hand [and] he received the full force of the poison.” However, rather than becoming ill and swollen, the man “felt no pain then or thereafter.” Church of God minister J.B Ellis relayed these events to *The Church of God Evangel*, making note to spread the effects of God’s anointing to every Church of God in southern and central Appalachia. He declared that he knew “others [who had] taken up a great number of snakes and been bitten over a hundred times by all sorts of serpents and felt no harm.” To Ellis, these Christians exemplified the true faith that Christ had mentioned in the Bible. “They...have the gift of miracles, and could as easily command the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the deaf to hear if they would only use their gift to profit withal.”⁸¹

These visible signs and wonders supported a distinct cultural outlook that encouraged the practice of snake-handling and fire-handling as legitimate religious expressions. The physical/spiritual framework provided by Appalachian dualism presented the environment necessary for these two rituals to place. It justified the use of material properties like serpents and fire to actively become ritualistic mediums that

⁸⁰ The history and growth of snake-handling in Sand Mountain, Alabama is best illustrated in Dennis Covington’s book, *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Covington takes an in depth look at snake-handling within Sand Mountain and southern Appalachian as a whole, and provides an up-close lens into the lives and rational of modern snake-handlers.

⁸¹ *Church of God Evangel*, May 9, 1914, 8.

could be used to acquire spiritual favor and divine healing. Believers like J.B. Ellis and Tenny Carson were able to utilize these culturally rooted rituals as modes of relief that shifted their focus off of the social and economic changes around them, and on to the stability of a religious outlet they could control and emotionally experience. These individuals interpreted the handling of snakes and fire as a call to “prevail with God for greater achievements” and a new spiritual and cultural direction for their region.⁸² Thus by clinging to the rituals of snake-handling and fire-handling, these mountain Christians, and others like them, were able to thrive within a cultural setting that confronted the temporality and chaos of industrialism. They were able to shape the parameters of their own lifestyle by practicing rituals that they helped construct and perpetuate.

Another set of rituals initially championed by snake-handlers were the acts of anointing with oil and the laying on of hands. Both of these sacraments, while addressing two distinct parts of the person, functioned in one accord to cleanse the physical body of spiritual infirmities and infuse the sick with the healing power of the Holy Spirit. Prior to the incorporation of the act by Appalachian snake-handlers during the turn of the twentieth century, anointing a believer with oil was commonly practiced by the region’s Primitive and Old Regular Baptist denominations. For these Christians, the act of anointing represented the divine forgiveness and humility that purified the soul and mind. As with the sacrament of communion and baptism, Appalachian Baptists rejected any physical or material attributes associated with anointing, and subsequently separated the

⁸² “Pray, Pray, Pray,” *Church of God Evangel*, January 21, 1914, 2. This argument is also made in the November 21, 1914 edition of the *Church of God Evangel*.

act from the process of physical healing.⁸³ The laying on of hands also experienced the same ritual demystification. Introduced into the region by Welsh Baptists in the eighteenth century, the laying on of hands initially represented the inclusion of an individual into a local church or into the professional ministry. Baptists in the region incorporated the act into worship portions of their services and into alter calls where hands would be laid onto those who required prayer. However like foot washing, the act remained a symbol of spiritual proportion that had no effect on the body of the believer.⁸⁴

This theological understanding did not mesh with the cultural perceptions of snake-handlers like Mattie Pope who lived within the parameters of Appalachian dualism. Stricken with a case of “chills and a fever” and convinced that her “time had come,” Pope petitioned the Holy Spirit at a local revival to heal her of her infirmities. Those in the congregation noticed Pope’s ill health and “egged [her] to have a physician,” but she adamantly refused and “called the saints to come and pray” and lay hands upon her. Days after the ritual occurred, Pope received her divine healing from the “heavenly physician”—making note to tell all those who lived near how Christ “heals the body just the same as He saves, sanctifies and baptizes with the Holy Ghost.”⁸⁵

The same attitude was held by Ambrose R. Hudson. Stricken by the feebleness of old age and apparent anemia, Hudson relied on the physical healing brought by the spiritual ritual of anointing. As he rested on his bed, struggling for breath, the believer’s wife “anointed him with oil and prayed for him.” After this ritual was performed, Hudson

⁸³ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 224.

⁸⁴ Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion*, 222-223.

⁸⁵ Mattie Pope to Editor, *Church of God Evangel*, January 13, 1917, 2.

refused to take any medication and simply trusted in God to enact his will. However, even though the snake-handler took the steps necessary to preclude health, death overtook the believer and he “was carried away on wings of love to be with Jesus forever more.”⁸⁶ While the occurrence of death in cases like Hudson presumably caused some believers to question their faith and their cultural understanding of the world, snake-handlers often remained firm in acceptance of faith healing. The security and “traditionalism” ingrained within the rituals of anointing and the laying on of hands overtook doubts caused by death and continuous illness.

By strictly adhering to the ritualism encompassed within the laying on of hands and oil anointing, snake-handlers showcased their belief in their traditional beliefs and practices above the advances of newer medical practices. These rituals were furnished within the cultural structure of Appalachian dualism, and functioned within the constructed memories of pre-industrial folk healing practices. The physical process of laying hands and anointing an ill believer with oil represented a legitimate method for these individuals where spiritual healing could tangibly enter the material body of the infirm. These rituals refuted the new industrialized world-view that encapsulated the region by interjecting a form of healing that was completely separated from the capitalistic endeavors of doctors and professionals. It allocated a religious response that was not only constructed and supported by the cultural fabric of Appalachian dualism, but it also presented a cultural outlet where believers could realistically influence the direction of their own health. In essence, these rituals bestowed a degree of power to

⁸⁶ D. L. Atkins to Editor, *The Pentecostal Holiness Advocate*, January 17, 1924, 13.

snake-handlers, and offered an avenue of control to a regional group torn about in the midst of a changing landscape.

The last ritual overtly undertaken by Appalachian snake-handlers was the consumption of poisons. The basis of this tenet corresponded with the prominence of snake-handing, and utilized many of the same verses that justified the ritual handling of vipers. Interpreted within a literal reading of the Bible and under the constraints of Appalachian dualism, verses like Mark 16: 18-17 and Acts 1:28 were recognized as calls for the believer to actively consume poison in spiritual faith to accrue healing and divine favor.⁸⁷ The consumption of poison was used as a method to flush the body of the physical toxins that eroded health, and refill the soul with the spiritual vigor wrought by true faith in the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the ritual was also used as a display of sorts that functioned simultaneously as a tool for revival based evangelism and as personal indicator of the strength of a believer's individual faith.⁸⁸ Yet within these different modes of application, the cultural and religious foundation of the ritual remained founded in its role as a physical medium that connected the snake-handler with the divine power of the Father above.

The emphasis upon the consumption of poison as a ritual retains some correlation with the use of teas and herbal drinks within the confines of Appalachian folk medicine. As alluded to beforehand, the process of tea drinking often corresponded with the desire to regulate the body and bring the inflicted humors into aliment with each other to spur

⁸⁷ One of the biggest proponents for the healing properties of drinking poison was Brother Charles Prince. Prince was known to consume multiple types of poison during his life for his own personal healing and for the healing of others. See Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 63-67.

⁸⁸ Paul F. Gillespie, *Foxfire 7* (New York: Anchor Books, 1980), 481-482.

health and alleviate pain. Mountain folk healers often used natural resources like ginseng and honey in the brewing process in an effort to restore the body to its proper medium; however, these individuals also used teas and natural drinks as a way to increase physical strength, maintain vitality, and strengthen reproductive function.⁸⁹ By drinking poison, Appalachian snake-handlers perpetuated this cultural ideology, and molded these “traditional” practices in an endeavor to connect the physical body and soul with the spiritual realm. These believers asserted that by consuming poisons they were actively cleansing their physical body, and thus bringing their material existence into alignment with the divine power of the Holy Spirit. This fusion between the physical and spiritual would in essence prompt the body to regulate itself and allow healing and divine miracles to take place.⁹⁰

The cultural influence of this ritual was practiced by early snake-handlers throughout the region; however, poison drinking became chief doctrines in Appalachian-centric snake-handling denominations like the Church of God (Cleveland) and the Church of God of Prophecy.⁹¹ The impact of these two denominations will be discussed further. Yet it is important to note that the believers within these groups successfully defined and articulated the formal process of poison drinking within the snake-handling movement.

⁸⁹ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia*, 65-66.

⁹⁰ “Drinking Deadly Poison,” *Church of God Evangel*, April 14, 1917, 1. Information also gleaned from Jimmy Morrow and Ralph W. Hood’s book *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow’s Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus’ Name Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press 2005).

⁹¹ For more information on religious rituals in the Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy see Ralph H. Hood Jr., *Them that Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 52-71.

In the pages of the official Church of God (Cleveland) periodical, *The Church of God Evangel*, church leaders affirmed the use of the ritual within services, its usefulness as a physical sign of the spiritual faith a believer entailed. “It is evident that this sign (drinking poison) shall follow the believers,” stated the *Evangel*, “only when they obtain such a degree of faith and power that will enable them to do it.” Thus it was only in times of extreme duress, times when faith was at its greatest, that poison could be consumed and the healing nature of the ritual released. The publication went further and asserted that while the drinking of poisons could not constitute a “proof of salvation” or church membership, the ritual was to act as “a demonstration of God’s grace and power.”⁹²

Snake-handlers took statements like these as liberty to showcase the power of God’s divine power within the physical bodies of the sick. Since the consumption of poison represented the apex of faith for the believer, it was only necessary to integrate ritual into the healing process to move the Holy Spirit to restore the health of the ailing and power to the true believer. Denominational periodicals like the *Evangel* only perpetuated these cultural understandings. In the words of the philosopher Thomas Khun, these writings furnished the constructed “texts” necessary for the growth of practice and its full integration within the process of Appalachian snake-handling.⁹³ As the movement entered its formal creation during the first decades of the twentieth-century, the ritual of drinking poison only grew in popularity. Mountain believers turned from simple natural poisons and began consuming strychnine, battery acid, and harsh cleaners to display

⁹² “Drinking Deadly Poison,” *Church of God Evangel*, April 14, 1917, 1.

⁹³ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 1-2.

spiritual faith and purify their bodies of physical duress. The foundation of this ritual rests within the belly of Appalachian dualism and the popular denominational texts that prompted the acts widespread acceptance.⁹⁴

Thus with the entirety of this process in mind, it becomes evident that the religious and regional significance of Appalachian snake-handling attributes its creation to the social, economic, and cultural change taking place in Appalachia prior to the turn of the twentieth-century. The rationale of these believers, and the unique aspects of their doctrine, cannot be simply limited to the singular effects of economic deprivation. Instead, the movement must be analyzed in a holistic manner that takes every medium of change into consideration. The construction of Appalachian dualism by disillusioned mountain-folk and its subsequent cultural appeal to snake-handlers thrived only because specific conditions were met. Turn of the century Appalachia, with its specific economic, social, and cultural structures, provided the ideal environment for snake-handling to take root and manifest. Without the complete interaction of all of these factors, the movement

⁹⁴ The popularity of drinking poison as a ritual during the second half of the twentieth century is seen in the spike of deaths associated with the act. Regional newspapers in Appalachian states like Tennessee, North Carolina, and West Virginia made it a point to highlight the deaths of Appalachian Pentecostals during rituals. Newspapers reported range from the *Chattanooga Daily Press*, *Knoxville News-Times*, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, and other smaller regional papers. For more information on periodicals covering this topic see David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 49-58; 95-116.

could not have formed, and could not have prospered.

The presence of a cultural system in the mountains that accepted the dual interaction of the physical and spiritual world bred a social environment where miracles could exist. The cohesion of a naturalistic understanding of the physical world with the spiritual gifts provided by Pentecostalism prompted an understanding of reality that accepted the powers of the temporal and the divine. As Appalachian snake-handlers took up the rituals that promised them healing, they did so within a medical framework that they constructed on their own terms and within their own parameters of truth. This process allotted these Christians with a degree of social power and knowledge that their cultural understanding held meaning. As the impact of snake-handling progressed into the twentieth-century, these believers continued to hold onto the cultural provocations provided by Appalachian dualism. Be it their regional location, class, or theological preference, each snake-handler held onto a singular cultural mindset that justified their practices and unique assortment of rituals. It is because of this cohesion that snake-handling formed within the mountains of Appalachia, and it is because of this cohesion that the movement flourished in the magnitude that it did.

CHAPTER TWO: “AND THESE SIGNS SHALL FOLLOW THEM”: THE
DENOMINATIONAL GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF SNAKE-HANDLING IN
APPALACHIA

*They are honored by our blessed Lord with mighty signs and deeds,
Though the world has turned against them, He supplies their every need.
And I'm glad that I can say I'm one of them.*

*In His name they cast out devils, handle living coals of fire,
Talk in tongues and take up serpents thus arousing satan's ire,
But to God they give the glory who has saved them from the mire,
And I'm glad that I can say I'm one of them.*

*They believe that Jesus' blood atoned for every ache and ill,
Hence they have no use for medicine nor for the doctor's skill,
They are fully trusting in the Lord who made their health His will,
And I'm glad that I can say I'm one of them.¹*

Chapter 2

Tom McLain and his wife sat on the front porch of their mountain Tennessee home confident and unmoved. Invigorated by the local Church of God revivals that had recently overtaken their small community during the previous weeks, the two snake-handlers joyfully welcomed the handful of new reporters that graced their home on the evening of September 15, 1914. As McLain rested in his seat, he turned towards his guest, with a degree of spiritual zeal. “See this,” exclaimed the handling preacher as he displayed a large gash on the side of his hand to the reporter beside him. “A rattlesnake pilot did that.” The severity of the gash surprised the visitors surrounding the couple. So much that one reporter asked the minister if the injury caused any pain or damage to his hand. “No,” shot back McLain with confidence, “it just pained me a little, but I threw it

¹ “I’m Glad I’m One of Them,” *Holiness Hymns* (Lenoir City: B. O. Rosenbaum), 23.

off.” He continued, “I was at first afraid of taking that snake...then I heard ‘Take this snake in the name of Jesus’. I went for it and it went for me.”

The reporters pushed McLain on, asking him give details of the handling account. “The blood spurted out of the place where it fastened on my hand,” the pastor exclaimed in response, “the pain got in my elbow, but I just praised God a little harder.” McLain continued, explaining how the pain quickly moved to his shoulder and overtook his arm; however rather than succumbing to the poison in his veins, the Church of God leader asserted that he gave his body and health completely over to the Father. “I just pulled myself together, and shook it off [in faith]”, he said with boldness. “It hasn’t bothered me since.”²

McLain’s near death narrative did not end the conversation, but only succeeded in deepening the couple’s insight into snake-handling. The minister’s wife pointed out to the reporters around her “how she handled the serpents without the least fear.” She continued on with the conversation, aided by her husband, and spoke of the miracles performed by numerous new converts like Finely Goodwin who had recently been “bitten on the hand by a copperhead snake” at a local Church of God meeting. Like her husband and numerous other believers who had been bitten, Mrs. McLain proclaimed that Goodwin was unscathed by the encounter. He remained pain free and in good health. The confidence of the two snake-handlers accounts moved the reporters into a state of astonishment. “How did you get started to having snakes in meeting” asked one of the visitors in response. “Well you see [it is] what the Bible says,” countered McLain, “that

² *Chattanooga Daily Times*, “Proselyting with Snakes,” September 16, 1914, 3.

was quoted and sinners go to bringing snakes to meeting to test us. They keep on bringing them. So you see the sinners are simply helping along the Church of God.”³

When looking at the context of McLain’s narrative, it becomes evident that the mountain minister upheld a religious and cultural ideology that strayed from the norm. The apparent shock of the surrounding newsmen and the undue calmness of the preacher and wife highlight the religious chasm that separated the couple from the accepted perceptions of those around them. The thought of handling snakes as a viable religious ritual did not sit well with the reporters, nor did it resonate with the editors of the *Chattanooga Daily Times*, who presented the interview as evidence that McLain and his fellow Church of God believers were “victims” of insanity. They attacked the organization, claiming that the believers were radical “Holy Rollers” who were using religion as a “campaign to win... financial and material support to their organization.”⁴ To these local individuals snake-handling was simply a new and dangerous fad that would subside under the pressure of communal scorn and public resistance.

During the next couple of months, the attacks generated by the *Times* increased in length and detail. Local ministers used the pages of the periodical to challenge the theology of snake-handling, and warn potential converts away from the growing Church of God revivals that featured the practice. One of these religious dissidents was Rev. W. F. Pitts, a rural Methodist minister from eastern Tennessee who openly contested the social and religious direction of the regions snake-handling believers. Pitts claimed the

³ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, “Proselyting with Snakes,” September 16, 1914, 3.

⁴ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, “Proselyting with Snakes,” September 16, 1914, 3.

Church of God handlers were spiritual deviants who were sent by Satan to confuse mountain congregations and “tempt the Lord Almighty.” The minister was enraged by the supposed theological ignorance of the recent movement and openly mocked the spiritual suppositions behind the handling revivals. “No one ever heard of Jesus Christ playing with snakes just to show that he was endowed with special power from God,” asserted Pitts, “I think it is the duty of an intelligent and Christian public to restrain by law the foolish practice of playing with snakes.”⁵

Pitts’ call for legal and judicial interference was championed by numerous other ministers and public officials within eastern Tennessee during the latter months of 1914. These community leaders all contended that the revivals acted as a public nuisance and heaped undue stress upon the surrounding populace. However, despite public warnings and attacks, the Church of God snake-handling revivals continued to grow and expand. During the next decade, central and southern Appalachia would be at the center of a regional revival bent on spreading the Gospel of snake-handling and religious ritualism associated with the movement. Behind these revivals rested a unique cultural worldview that justified the doctrinal suppositions of Church of God snake-handling, and supported the formation of a distinct religious identity that focused on the salvation of Appalachia and America at large. Snake-handlers clung tightly to this religious identity. They handled fire, passed around snakes, and consumed deadly poisons as physical expressions of the spiritual purity that presided within their bodies. These believers fully believed and actively preached that by completing these rituals, they would move the hearts of an

⁵ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, “Sermon on Snakes and Religion,” September 28, 1914, 3.

unbelieving world away from the ploys of “modern” temptations and towards the ancient truths of the Holy Scriptures.⁶

As the fabric of the Church of God snake-handling revivals matured throughout the 1910s and 1920s, these spiritual feats acted as tools that progressed the social goals of the religious organization as a whole. Tied closely to the acts of snake-handling and poison drinking was a well formulated social perspective that challenged many of the stances of modernity and “progress”. Church of God ministers and lay believers alike used snake-handling revivals to counter the effects of industrialization and capitalism within their region. They utilized these platforms as mediums to preach against the evils of unionism, business fraternities, and the ills of capitalistic medical practices. Subsequently, these individuals showcased their unique doctrines in public venues as a way to share their particular understanding of proper moral and gender norms to a regional populace that they depicted as lost and confused.

As this spiritual agenda gained popularity and support throughout the region, it succeeded in eliciting anger and conflict from mountain elites and various established institutions within Appalachia. Business leaders and union organizers evolved as some of the strongest denouncers of snake-handling revivalism and its stance against industrialism. Mountain ministers from the region’s Presbyterian, Methodists, and Baptist denominations also took aim against snake-handlers within the Church of God, citing that the movement teetered on the edge of heterodoxy and religious fanaticism. Yet, within

⁶ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 39-68. Crews highlights the growth of a distinct religious ideology within the Church of God between 1910 and the mid-1920s. While he does not relate it directly to snake-handling, he emphasizes that this religious identity concerned itself with the salvation of America both spiritually and doctrinally.

this conflict and discontent the snake-handling movement also experienced its greatest strength and growth. The Church of God snake-handling revivals offered mountain folk a viable religious expression that countered the intrusions and pressures of modernity and capitalism. It provided a mode of belief that catered to a different understanding of the world--a different identity embedded in powerful cultural and religious perceptions. As the Church of God rapidly expanded within Appalachian and along the periphery of the region between 1914 and 1928, it did so with a bold Gospel filled with fire. As the twentieth-century progressed this enthusiasm would remain fresh within the region, and lay the foundation of a religious perspective that would shape the spiritual direction of Appalachia for decades to come.

When looking at the religious and regional significance of early snake-handling revivalism within the Church of God, emphasis must be given to the historical foundation of the movement within the denomination. As with the basis of all subsets of mountain snake-handling, practicing believers that took part in the church's revival fashioned their religious beliefs around a distinct cultural outlook that supported the use of physical rituals to acquire spiritual blessings. Defined in the previous chapter as *Appalachian dualism*, this cultural identity was fabricated by handlers looking for an outlet that allocated some degree of social stability and personal power. However as with the development of any cultural identity, the creation of Appalachian dualism and its association with snake-handling ritualism within the Church of God took place gradually. The Church of God did not immediately emerge as a strict snake-handling organization upon its creation, but slowly incorporated handling rituals into their cultural and religious

structure. It took years of constant theological change before both the core leadership of the denomination and the average lay believer adopted the cultural mindset necessary for snake-handling rituals to occur.

Prior to the appearance of snake-handling in 1914, the Church of God existed as a small regional association under the headship of Richard G. Spurling of Monroe County, Tennessee. Spurling began his ministry as a licensed preacher of the Missionary Baptist Church; however, dismayed by “certain traditions and creeds which were burdensome and exceedingly binding on the members” the minister and a number of followers left the Missionary Baptists and constructed a small meeting house in the woods of the Tennessee hills in 1886.⁷ Known initially as “The Christian Union,” the small congregation championed the autonomy of individual churches, and correlated this understanding of personal freedom with various Holiness doctrines that stressed a more Arminian approach to spiritual matters.

Unlike the Calvinist teachings of the region’s various Baptists and Presbyterian churches, these Holiness and Arminian undertones led Spurling and his followers to highlight the free nature of the human will and the undeniable role of man in his own spiritual salvation. Spurling focused his messages on the loving nature of God and stressed a Gospel where the holy actions and the free exercise of grace trumped the unfounded fears of predestination and sinful wrath.⁸ Following in line with the Holiness

⁷ A. J. Tomlinson, “Brief History of the Church that is Now Recognized as the Church of God,” in *The Last Great Conflict*, ed. 1 (Cleveland: Press of W.E. Rodgers, 1913), 184. Accessed in a box entitled “Serpent Handling” at the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN.

⁸ Donald N. Bowdle, “Holiness in the Highlands: A Profile of the Church of God,” in *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 245-246; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 9-10.

ideology that swept across Appalachia between the 1880s and 1920s, this religious understanding molding the minister's small church into a space where believers could freely express the joys of their salvation to a loving God who accepted their faith and righteous deeds. In the words of Spurling himself, the congregation acted as a temple of righteousness, "free from all *menmade* creeds and traditions" other than the simple "privilege to read and interpret . . . as [one's] conscience may dictate."⁹

While this band of Appalachian Christians remained rather small during the 1880s and 1890s, the group continued to attract mountain believers who sought a spiritual alternative to the larger more established denominations that thrived through the region. This slow but steady growth continued up until 1896 when a sudden revival overtook the spiritual direction of the church's leadership and lay membership alike. Like a rush of divine wind, "the influence and excitement" of the local revival "spread like wildfire, and people came for many miles to investigate, hear and see the manifestations of the presence of God."¹⁰ Over the course of the next two years the scale of the revival continued to expand across eastern Tennessee, winning over a hundred new converts to the church and its doctrinal message. Spurling interpreted the exponential growth associated with the revival as a sign of the Father's favor. The minister heightened his emphasis on holiness living, and also began crafting revival sermons to include discussion of miracles and signs and wonders. Undoubtedly, these fiery messages effected the spiritual attitudes of those who filled the revival tents erected by The

⁹ A. J. Tomlinson, "Brief History of the Church that is Now Recognized as the Church of God," 186.

¹⁰ A. J. Tomlinson, "Brief History of the Church that is Now Recognized as the Church of God," 184.

Christian Union. Dozens of local “men, women and children” who embraced Spurling’s word miraculously “received the Holy Ghost and spoke in other tongues under the power of the mighty Spirit of God.”¹¹

The power of this revival did not cease or subside.¹² To Spurling and his followers’ astonishment, the miracles and wonders experienced by the Christian Union continued to thrive and dominate local church meetings well into the early years of the twentieth century. The spiritual direction of the minister’s message succeeded in stirring the hearts of local mountain communities to the point that his organization won the following of several other small churches within the region. Many of these new congregations, while remaining semi-autonomous in their denominational structure, aligned themselves with Spurling’s interpretation of doctrine. They favored the revivalist mindset set forth by the minister, and integrated his understandings of moralism, free-will, and miracles into their theological structure.¹³

However, by 1906 the fabric of these quasi-denominational relationships began to cave under the growing pressure of Spurling’s influence. During the early part of the year, the energetic minister met with his followers with the goal of establishing an official denomination with the “Churches of East Tennessee, North Georgia, and Western

¹¹ A. J. Tomlinson, “Brief History of the Church that is Now Recognized as the Church of God,” 187. For information about the numerical growth of the church see page 189.

¹² I refer to this charismatic revival as being pre-Azusa in that it took place before the official demarcation of the Pentecostal movement in 1906 at the Azusa Street mission in Los Angeles. Recent Pentecostal studies have revealed many charismatic revivals taking place before 1906; however, these revivals did not have the cohesion or world-wide effect that transpired from the Azusa revivals.

¹³ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 10.

North Carolina.”¹⁴ Spurling’s wish soon came true, and by the end of the meeting the official Church of God was born. To those present, the new name of the denomination held utmost importance. In their minds, the church most-fully resembled the “articles of faith inspired and given...by the Holy Apostles and written in the New Testament.”¹⁵

Within the new organization, there would be no division, no separation, and no rifts. Only the true Gospel of Christ.

Even with this new spiritual direction, the theology and cultural outlook of the infant Church of God did not produce the environment necessary for snake-handling to abound. The revivalist heritage imparted to the infant denomination by its ties to the Christian Union pointed the organization in an unique direction that differed from many of the region’s other established churches. Yet the intensity of this theological perspective was toned down by the absence of an approachable doctrine where more radicalized rituals could take place. The holiness and revivalism that encompassed the early Church of God allocated only so much room to religious enthusiasm and spiritual freedom. Believers could jump, dance, and scream, but strict limitations were placed on how far believers could go with their religious expression. Historian Mickey Crews highlights this religious process and its role in dictating the actions of early Church of God members. He asserts that while enthusiasm was encouraged, particular modes of expression like extreme asceticism and chaotic demonstrations of “deeper mystical religious experiences,” that verged on the edge of occultism were chastised and

¹⁴ *Minutes of the First General Assembly of the Church of God* (Camp Creek, 1906), 1.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the First General Assembly of the Church of God* (Camp Creek, 1906), 1.

condemned.¹⁶ Thus while spiritualized shouts and more radical forms of expression were accepted and condoned within the church, the thought of handling snakes and drinking poisons remained far removed from normal thought and proper church practice.

Over time, however, these religious barriers gradually eroded to the pressures of religious and cultural change. The incorporation of new doctrinal and cultural perspectives within the organization introduced a new mode of thought that not only accepted the prospect of snake-handling but actively encouraged it. The inception of this transformation took place in 1909 by the hand of G.B. Cashwell, a rural Church of God minister who had recently returned from the great Pentecostal revivals in Los Angeles.¹⁷ For many holiness-minded Church of God ministers like Rev. Cashwell, the content of these Pentecostal revivals proved inviting and somewhat familiar in doctrine and approach. The Pentecostal ideals of spiritual purity, free-will, and enthusiasm resembled much of the theology embraced by the Church of God and its membership. Moreover, the Pentecostal affirmation of miracles presented religious framework closely tied to many of the spiritual doctrines that had been developing within the Church of God since the turn of the twentieth-century.¹⁸ However despite these similarities, the fabric of Pentecostalism also incorporated particular spiritual ideals that proved to be somewhat foreign to the Church of God and its hierarchy. Unlike the more reserved positions held by the Church of God, the Pentecostal revivals in Los Angeles pushed believers to express

¹⁶ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 10-11.

¹⁷ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 201-204.

¹⁸ Donald N Bowdle, *Holiness in the Highlands*, 244-249.

their faith and devotion to God subjectively, without any restraint or reprobation. Participants were encouraged to actively prophesy during worship services, and were given the freedom to ask God for healing and physical health. Along with this, Pentecostal leaders used the ensuing revival atmosphere to exorcise demons and even pray for changes in the weather.¹⁹

This new understanding of religious expression struck the core of Rev. Cashwell, and quickly shifted his personal understanding of spiritualism and church structure. Upon his return from Los Angeles, the empowered minister related many of the Pentecostal ideals he had witnessed to his local congregation and the upper ranks of the Church of God. During one empowering sermon at the Church of God's Annual Assembly in Cleveland, Tennessee in 1909 the fiery minister related to the crowd around him the miracles and wonders that he witnessed. He highlighted the spiritual vigor that enveloped those present in at the revivals in Los Angeles, and made note of how the religious and theological freedom experienced during the revivals manifested in acts of healing, prophesy, and miracles.²⁰

His enthusiasm struck the hearts of those present and prompted many present at the General Assembly to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. The subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit manifested itself throughout the duration of the Annual Assembly. Church members and leaders alike began speaking in tongues and shouting

¹⁹ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 62-73; Randall J. Stevens, *The Fire Spreads*, 184-204.

²⁰ "Original Handwritten Minutes: Fourth General Assembly" (Cleveland, 1909), 31-32. Accessed on electronic CD entitled *General Assembly Minutes 1906-2002* from the Dixon Pentecostal Research Center, Cleveland, TN; A. J. Tomlinson, *Diary of A. J. Tomlinson* (New York: The Church of God, World Headquarters, 1955), Vol.1, 25-28.

praises to the Lord.²¹ The most important conversion within the Assembly's meeting was that of the Church of God's official overseer A.J. Tomlinson. Tomlinson had assumed leadership of the denomination in January of 1909 after rallying support from other church leaders in the region. As with Spurling, the young minister incorporated holiness practices in the church's official structure; yet, with Tomlinson's powerful conversion into the Pentecostal camp, the Church of God witnessed a sudden shift in theological leaning. Over the next year, Tomlinson oversaw the Spirit Baptism--or the initial speaking in tongues--of hundreds of mountain believers throughout the region. In the Church of God in Chattanooga, Tennessee, "about 75 received the Baptism with the Holy Ghost."²² These conversions were followed by subsequent spiritual displays during the yearlong revival in the rural town of Cleveland, Tennessee where nearly "300 professed and about 250 received the Baptism of the Holy Ghost."²³

The extent of this theological transformation directly impacted the religious and social direction of Church of God members. Combined with the revivalism that already animated the denomination, the incorporation of Pentecostal doctrine provided members with a distinct religious outlet that promised a new level of spiritual power and personal control. According to Church of God members, this spiritual power manifested itself through particular divine gifts like divine healing, speaking in tongues, prophesy, and the exorcism of demons and other wayward spirits. These new spiritual gifts allowed believers to transcend the harsh reality of the physical world, and supplement their

²¹ Allan Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 115.

²² "Original Handwritten Minutes: Fourth General Assembly", 2.

²³ "Original Handwritten Minutes: Fourth General Assembly", 2.

present turmoil with Biblically inspired promises and miracles.²⁴ Tomlinson quickly grasped the religious and social implications associated with this spiritual power and went about instituting Pentecostal practices within established congregations throughout the mountains. In his mind, Pentecostalism offered a productive outlet that presented believers with a vibrant religious outlet and a viable haven from surrounding social hardships.²⁵

In his personal diary, Tomlinson routinely linked many of the region's religious and social problems to the injustices committed in the name of modernity and industrialization. He noted "the rude huts, the rough home-made bedsteads, the stone fireplaces and stick and clay chimneys" in which many Church of God members were expected to live, and openly correlated these harsh living conditions with the existence of low wages and outright greed.²⁶ To Tomlinson, and the impoverished mountain folk within the Church of God, Pentecostalism represented a freedom from the confines of economic plight and an answer to the social injustice that enveloped Appalachia. Thus for Tomlinson, incorporation of charismatic doctrine into the theological structure of his organization, allocated a new social understanding that separated power from the dictates of industrialists and placed control into the hands his faithful followers.

As the early twentieth-century progressed, the organization's Pentecostal perspective continued to evolve and change. Between 1909 and 1913, the church developed a more

²⁴ For information into the theological aspects of Pentecostalism and their social effect in Appalachia see Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 259-275. Also see Paul F. Gillespie, *Foxfire 7* (New York: Anchor Books, 1980), 470-473.

²⁵ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads*, 252-253.

²⁶ A. J. Tomlinson, *Diary*, July 2, 1907.

extreme interpretation of Pentecostalism that challenged accepted religious norms and practices. Early Church of God leaders, who embraced the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, pushed their congregations to constantly increase their level of faith and raise the intensity of their public enthusiasm during worship services. They encouraged believers experiment with their spiritual expressions, and moved these individuals to utilize spiritual gifts in an effort to please their heavenly Father and procure miracles. Revivals quickly became more heated and more intense with these pushes. Instances of Holy Spirit baptisms grew exponentially as members tested the boundaries of their perceived spiritual power and the rational limitations of Biblical mandates.²⁷

One such believer was George Hensley. Hensley came into the Church of God fold in 1908 during a weekly worship meeting conducted by A. J. Tomlinson and his son Homer. Feeling conviction for his past indiscretions, which included moonshining and other brushes with the law, the broken Hensley rushed to the alter and renounced his wicked ways. During the following weeks, Hensley immersed himself in the Holy Scriptures. He devoted long hours to prayer, and was often found deep in spiritual meditation and thought. These spiritual encounters soon manifested into divine power, and by 1910 the young convert claimed that he had received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.²⁸

²⁷ For insight into this transition within the Church of God see Robert Mapes Anderson, *The Vision of the Disinherited*, 114-121. Anderson highlights that the Church of God was not the only Pentecostal denomination to experience an increase in emotionalism during early Pentecostal revivals. Many Pentecostal churches throughout the nation underwent theological shifts towards more 'radicalized' forms of worship between 1910 and 1930. However, he asserts that Appalachian and Ozark Pentecostal churches expressed a more heightened form of spiritual expression during this time.

²⁸ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 40-42.

The importance of this event was not lost in Hensley or to others in the church. The spiritual intensity brought about by his conversion, and his subsequent love for public preaching and divine healing quickly surrounded the young man with the admiration and devotion of his fellow believers. Under the invitation of A. J. Tomlinson, Hensley was ordained into the ministry of the Church of God in 1912 and rapidly rose through the ranks of the regional organization.²⁹ While the minister experienced some fame as a proponent of Pentecostal doctrine after his spiritual baptism in 1910, it wasn't until his formal ordination that the more extreme aspects of the young man's understanding of Pentecostalism came to light. As with other Church of God ministers, Hensley found it acceptable to push theological boundaries in an attempt to procure faith and prove God. Yet, unlike his contemporaries, he instituted religious rituals that had never been attempted within the Church of God. In revivals around Cleveland, Tennessee in 1912, Hensley astonished believers and critics alike by handling an assortment of rattlesnakes during his sermons. Hensley justified these acts with both biblical and doctrinal support. Linking Biblical passages like Mark 16: 17 that prompted believers to handle venomous snakes with the Pentecostal push to vibrantly express one's faith publicly, Hensley procured the personal rationale he thought necessary to handle rattlesnakes and copperheads.³⁰

²⁹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 83-84.

³⁰ Ralph W. Hood, Jr., *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 41-44. The issue over Hensley's first display of snake-handling is a topic of debate among some historians of Appalachian snake-handling. Hood and Kimbrough assert that the event occurred in 1910 in Owl Holler, while Steven Kane places the event in 1913 in his article "Appalachian Snake Handlers," *Perspectives on the South: An Annual Review of Society, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1987). Oral accounts by A.J. Tomlinson's son Homer Tomlinson place the event at 1908.

News of Hensley's actions quickly spread among many of the rural Church of God congregations within southern and central Appalachia, and within a few short weeks similar instances of snake-handling began to materialize. One such occurrence took place at a local revival at the Church of God in Straight Creek, Alabama. During a heated portion of the worship service, non-believers from the surrounding country-side challenged members of the congregation to take up a handful of rattlesnakes as a display of faith. Invigorated by the recent displays by Hensley in Cleveland, Tennessee, the members took hold of the snakes and began dancing and speaking in tongues. The intensity of the ritual overtook those present, and soon the whole assembly took turns handling and passing the poisonous serpents.³¹ Church of God leader J.B. Ellis reported later in his autobiography that the event led to numerous believers being bitten, but that no deaths or apparent harm ensued.³²

The early introduction of snake-handling during these meetings brought about a complete shift in the religious structure of the Church of God. Hensley's understanding of Pentecostalism instituted a new theological direction that pushed the boundaries of accepted religious behavior to the point that snake-handling and other unique rituals could be practiced and generally accepted. The spread of these new rituals within other Church of God congregations only strengthened Hensley's resolve, and further solidified his growing influence within the ranks of the regional organization.

However, it is not enough to simply consider the establishment of snake-handling

³¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 84.

³² J.B. Ellis, *Blazing the Gospel Trail* (Cleveland: COG Publishing House, 1941), 46.

within the Church of God solely to these spiritual means. Other, more materialistic means, must be analyzed for this religious and cultural shift to truly make sense. Like many Appalachian's during the turn of the twentieth-century, Hensley functioned within a regional mindset that understood the correlation between the physical body and constructed rituals. He operated within a distinct form of "regionalized" knowledge that accepted the use of natural properties for healing, luck, and physical well-being. As mentioned in the first chapter, these material rituals flourished throughout Appalachia during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and became the basis of the construction of various cultural identities and mindsets that were projected by various Appalachians as being traditional and exclusive to the region.³³ Hensley, and other early Appalachian practitioners of snake-handling, successfully integrated this traditional knowledge with the new doctrines championed by the Church of God---forming within this synthesis a perfect cultural environment for the handling of snakes and the construction of other snake-handling rituals.

Following Hensley's initial handling revivals and the subsequent displays in Straight Creek in 1912, the prospect of snake-handling as a faith-incurring ritual gradually took root within the Church of God. The new culture introduced by Hensley and other snake-handlers within the organization provided the stimuli necessary for other believers to embrace the practice and implement the ritual in new ways. Church leaders, enthused by the reactions and conversions associated with the practice, allowed willing members to integrate snake-handling and fire-handling into local revivals and worship

³³ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 40-41.

services. These spiritual allocations remained isolated between 1912 and the early months of 1913. Yet by the culmination of 1913, the practice gained enough support to elicit the support of the church's upper leadership who had previously been reluctant.

By the time the organization met for the Eighth General Assembly in 1914, the popularity of snake-handling and fire handling had become so widespread within the church that it attracted the attention of A.J. Tomlinson. In his annual sermon to the Church of God leadership, Tomlinson openly spoke of the importance of snake-handing and other miracles in the progression of the denomination's growing regional influence. Recently "many miraculous cases of healing have been witnessed," thundered the overseer before his audience, "Wild poison serpents have been taken up and handled and fondles over almost like babies with no harm to the saints. In several instances fire has been handled with bare hands without being burnt."³⁴ Tomlinson informed those around him that these signs and wonders were not products of chance, but real and tangible signs of heavenly favor. "I have seen no reports of anybody outside the Church of God performing this miracle," he boasted, "We are beginning to surpass all others in miraculous signs and wonders."³⁵

In his address, Tomlinson connected these apparent wonders with a divine call to extend and perpetuate the revivalist goals of the Church of God. The Pentecostal group was "making history" in the mountains of Appalachia, he asserted, and was specifically chosen by God to peel away "the rubbish of seventeen hundred years of decay."³⁶

³⁴ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1913), 15.

³⁵ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God*, 15.

³⁶ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God*, 9.

Tomlinson declared that the cracked social foundation of region and the nation as a whole “must be removed and the walls rebuilt.”³⁷ The time had come for the true Church of God to rise from the shadows of religious inferiority, utilize the divine rituals bestowed upon them, and actively transform the spiritual atmosphere of a lost and dying world.

Throughout the meeting, Tomlinson encouraged other church leaders to arm themselves over the course of the next year with prayer and spiritual discernment, and prepare to lead their congregations into a spiritual battle that would burst forth from the hills of their beloved communities. As the General Assembly reached its peak, he stood in the pulpit and prophesied to those within his presence “that within the passing by of twelve fleeting months there may be some additional proof discovered that might help to show forth God’s great plan for us and better satisfy those who seem...in question.”³⁸ These “proofs” did manifest within the following year and continued in religious meetings for next decade and a half. Miracles of the Holy Spirit took hold of church leaders and members during these revivals—expressed in instances of divine healing, poison consumption, fire tossing, and snake-handling. The establishment and distribution of a new religious identity was at hand.

The main thrust behind the dissemination of this new religious identity took place within the denomination’s systematic use of local revivals and tent meetings. Conducted by a wide variety of lay preachers and church leaders, these meetings often took place along the outskirts of towns and cities where snake-handling rituals could be performed

³⁷ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God*, 9.

³⁸ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God*, 10.

both in front of large crowds and away from the threats posed by law enforcement. The radical rituals enacted during these meetings remained legal between 1914 and 1924; however, this promise of legality did not stop law enforcement officers from harassing snake-handlers for disorderly conduct or charges of public indecency. Nor did it hinder dissident preachers and skeptical onlookers from harassing snake-handlers or attempting to stop revivals from taking place.³⁹ Believers within the Church of God faced these threats with faith and vigor, and despite some successful interruptions, revivals often took place without any confrontation. This religious devotion, combined with the social and spiritual power allocated by handling rituals, succeeded in transforming the Church of God's revivals into popular public mediums that won the church converts and regional praise.⁴⁰

As with numerous other religious revivals, those who clung to the ideals of snake-handling within the Church of God formulated their personal and spiritual perceptions around the ideal of salvation. The various rituals that emerged within the denomination after Tomlinson's official endorsement of snake-handling all functioned in some way to usher the "unsaved" towards the supposed Gospel truths declared by the denomination. Church of God leaders, including Tomlinson, J.B. Ellis, and George Hensley among others, positioned the handling revivals as achieving the goals of rescuing and converting lost souls. This concept was quickly accepted throughout the denomination and took root

³⁹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 42-45; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-86.

⁴⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 86-87; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 44-47. Both Hood and Crews assert that while the regional attention gathered by George Hensley and other snake-handlers within the Church of God during these early years was impressive, it was rather small compared to the popularity garnished by the movement after the mid-1920s and 1930s.

within the religious ethos of lay members and practitioners during the snake-handling revivals.

During the inception of the handling revivals in 1914, the goals of salvation and conversion commanded the primary attention of handlers within the church. Throughout the regional network of Church of God congregations, members within the denomination quickly integrated handling rituals into the contours of their worship structure as a way to guide non-believers towards the denomination and its promises of heavenly rewards. This certainly was the case during a month long revival that occurred in September 1914 along the outskirts of East Cleveland, Tennessee. Invigorated by the appearance of miracles and divine happenings during the previous months, revival goers within the revival began testing the parameters of the faith by handling snakes and hot coals of fire. According to A.J. Tomlinson and others surrounding the General Supervisor, these rituals soon attracted the attention of various “outsiders,” from around the community who became “enthused” by the wonders “and wanted to test the matter further.” In the midst of a Thursday night revival on September 10, a large gathering of non-believers made their way to the revival site with a box of snakes in an attempt to test the faith and doctrine of the Church of God handlers. According to Tomlinson, the snakes “were believed to be very poison, so much so that those that took them in were exceedingly careful and fearful lest they should be bitten.” As the worship service progressed, “the power came on the saints” and “both snakes were taken up” with vigor and faith. Tomlinson went on to relay the effect of these rituals upon the souls of those present. “At the close of the demonstration with the snakes,” asserted Tomlinson, “several came forward with tears in their eyes begging for prayer.” He went on, claiming that “when the alter call was given

other came forward pleading for salvation.”⁴¹

As the influence of these revivals continued, the use of salvation as a core aspect of snake-handling ritualism took on a more mystical context. Church of God ministers and lay handlers alike interpreted handling rituals as a spiritual tool used to win souls from the literal clutches of Satan and his minions. At one Church of God revival headed by George Hensley and his wife in 1914, snake-handlers were described by the editor of the *Church of God Evangel* as holy soldiers “waging a relentless war against sin and the devil.” During the revival “two large rattlesnakes [were] taken up under the power of God” and “fire [was] handled twice during the meeting.” To the believers present these rituals were understood as heavenly weapons, given to the faithful as implements to slay the power of evil spirits and ensure the salvation of non-believers. After the meeting occurred, the fabric of this divine allegory was built up and perpetuated throughout the religious network of the organization. Writing to the editor of the *Church of God Evangel*, one believer attested to the spiritual battle that ensued during the revival and asserted to the publication that because snakes and fire were handled, “people [were] seeing the truth.”⁴²

In essence, the prospect of linking snake-handling around the ideals of salvation and conversion assisted the overall vitality and strength of the Church of God and its membership. From the inception of the snake-handling revivals in 1914 to the end of 1915, the denomination saw a jump in membership from 4339 believers to 6159 believers

⁴¹ A. J. Tomlinson, *Church of God Evangel*, September 19, 1914, 3.

⁴² *Church of God Evangel*, October 4, 1914, 6.

respectively. Moreover, the organization also saw the creation of 39 additional churches within Appalachia and the areas directly bordering the region.⁴³ As seen in examples above, the handling of snakes and fire succeeded in drawing large crowds to local Church of God revivals--providing fiery ministers and believers with the opportunity to spread their Gospel and bolster religious support. The manifestation of these rituals during tent meetings provided unbelievers with tangible and physical displays of power. Power that could be personally obtained by joining the Church of God and identifying with its cultural and religious perceptions.

The link between snake-handling rituals and salvation also imparted Church of God handlers with an active identifying force that afforded power and religious agency. By taking part in snake-handling rituals, participants were able to shake off social and economic inferiority and identify themselves as members of God's holy army. Armed with snakes, fire, and faith these believers held within their grasp the tools necessary to foil the advances of Satan and establish the spiritual environment necessary for salvation and repentance to take place. While the theological foundations of this mindset were often mocked and refuted by other denominations and religious leaders within Appalachia, the personal impact of this self-professed spiritual role empowered snake-handlers within the Church of God to showcase their rituals with more boldness.⁴⁴ This conviction established a degree of confidence within the minds of handlers that strengthened their individual zeal and their commitment to their denomination's revivalist

⁴³ *Minutes of the Tenth General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1914), 23; *Minutes of the Eleventh General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1915), 32.

⁴⁴ Ralph W. Hood, Jr., *Them That Believe*, 67-71.

goals of spiritually saving their region and their nation.

Alongside the ideals of salvation and conversion, snake-handlers within the Church of God also formulated their revivals around an open rejection of secularism. During revivals, church leaders flooded members with pages of published material that lashed out at the provocative theories of liberal theologians and scholars. Local Church of God ministers throughout the central and southern Appalachia coupled this revival message with measures of their own, crafting messages and sermons to combat the ideas of more secularized doctrines.⁴⁵ When looked at individually, these attacks seem trivial; however, when coupled with the various ideological and social changes that impacted Appalachian handlers during the early twentieth-century, the rationale behind the denomination's anti-secular stance fall into place.

On a theological level, the ideals of secularism conflicted with the Church of God's literal understanding of Scripture. Between 1900 and the late 1920's, numerous professional theologians and scholars began the process of interpreting the Bible in a way that contested the inerrancy and legitimacy of the Holy Scriptures. New theological methods like Higher Criticism emerged as an accepted tool of study with university students and professors subjecting portions of the Gospels and Epistles to simple literary analysis. This critical approach succeeded in eroding many of the "truths" once professed by many mainline denominations and created a secular shift in many Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches.⁴⁶ Ideals like miracles and spiritual revelation were

⁴⁵ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 87.

⁴⁶ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 214-215; L.W. Batten, "The Attitude of the Christian towards the Higher Criticism of the Bible," *The Biblical World* 3, no. 4 (April, 1894): 275-280.

criticized as archaic beliefs of the past that had no room in modern Christianity. Moreover, notions like revivalism and spiritual enthusiasm were placed under scrutiny and promptly downgraded as accepted forms of religious response.

While achieving popularity throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the growth of secular and liberal theology within the United States succeeded in developing opposition and condemnation among many of the nation's more conservative believers. Fundamentalist Pentecostal ministers like W.T. Gaston, Alfred Garr openly challenged the theological liberties adopted by secular theologians. These ministers petitioned their followers to look past the temptation of limiting the Gospels to a mere work of literature, and stressed believers to approach the Bible as the true and infallible work of God.⁴⁷ Ministers like Stanley H. Frodsham, built upon these claims and pushed Christians, especially Pentecostals, to uphold a personal belief in the spiritual power of God and the reality of miracles. Addressing readers of the periodical *The Pentecostal Evangel*, Frodsham expressed the importance of a more fundamentalist understanding of the Bible:

“I praise God that I am a Fundamentalist, and that I am a Pentecostal Fundamentalist. That is what we all are. I do not know of a Pentecostal persona anywhere who question the inerrancy of the Scriptures, or one who doubts the virgin birth, the miracle, the physical resurrection, the Deity, or the efficacy of the blood atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor one who has the slightest sympathy for the unapproved these is of the evolutionists... We go further and affirm that the signs and wonders that our Lord Jesus Christ said should follow ‘them that believe’ will assuredly follow as a result of faith in Christ today. We also stand for that Fundamental of Service, the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, as that experience was originally received on the day of Pentecost.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 146-149.

⁴⁸ *The Pentecostal Evangel*, April 5, 1925, 15.

Proclamations like this assisting in creating a unified fundamentalist reaction to the encroaching pressures of liberal and secular theology. It crafted a doctrinal system where a literal understanding of the Bible could exist, and the belief in miracles and supernatural blessing could thrive.

The theological ideals of fundamentalism meshed well with snake-handlers within the Church of God who avidly embraced the ideals of Biblical literalism and miracles. The threats of liberal theology within the borders of Appalachia prompted snake-handlers in the Church of God to attack the foundations of secularism and affirm the power and presence of God during revival meetings. During the first three years of the revivals, Church of God ministers publicly addressed the liberal interpretations of the more progressive theologians, denouncing their break from Biblical literalism as a sign of their waywardness. These leaders urged handlers within their churches to stay clear from these “false” prophets, and highlighted the growth and popularity of snake-handling rituals as a tangible and Biblical counter to their supposed lies.

This attitude was firmly expressed by snake-handlers like George Hensley and Tom McLain between 1914 and 1917. In these revivals, both preachers used their platforms to undermine secular critics and challenge the notions of Higher Criticism. Hensley made a point to harass non-believers who challenged the literal truth of the Bible during tent meetings, and often quoted Bible passages as he handled serpents before more skeptical and liberal-minded audiences. At one meeting Hensley was reported to have been denouncing the secular opinions of a group of non-believers when he took up a presumed bottle of poison and consumed it in faith. The substance was later reported to

be a simple concoction of Coke and water; however, the performance of the ritual and Hensley's literal belief in the Biblical promises of Mark 16: 15-18 convinced many in the audience to forgo their previous understandings of Christianity and convert to the Church of God.⁴⁹

This literal trust in the Bible was further perpetuated by Tom McLain and his local band of Church of God followers. McLain and his group made it a point to handle serpents and fire as an active counter to the theories of secular scholars. When asked by a group of non-believers why he handled serpents, McLain simply recited the Church of God's official belief that he was doing "what the Bible says."⁵⁰ To McLain and his followers, the prospect of handling snakes and tossing fire were not abstract ideas or irrational provocations. He was simply functioning within a religious belief system that privileged the power and promises of the literal Bible over the assertions of Higher Critics and other scholars.

As the influence of the Church of God and its snake-handling revivals expanded throughout the geographical reaches of central and southern Appalachia, the power of this anti-secularism continued to evolve. Between 1917 and the late 1920s the doctrine continued to function as a tool of religious identification that separated the denomination from the advances of more empirical-minded theological ideals. However, in light of the numerical and geographical growth of the organization during this period, the role of anti-secularism witnessed a drastic transformation. Church leaders began using the tenet

⁴⁹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 45. Information given to Kimbrough through an oral account by James R. Hensley in 1988.

⁵⁰ *Chattanooga Daily Times*, "Proselyting with Snakes," September 16, 1914, 3.

as a litmus test of devotion during revival meetings. Believers were pressured to conform to the ideals of Biblical literalism upon the threat of excommunication from the church, and were even pressured to affirm extra-biblical teachings that supported handling rituals.⁵¹

This was the case during one specific sermon presented by A. J. Tomlinson in 1922. As his message hit its climax, Tomlinson astonished many in his audience when he asserted that the Twelve Disciples themselves had handled snakes as signs against a fallen and deceived world. “In the face of this plain analogy,” he asserted to his audience, “I would certainly hate to be in the shoes of some who are so bitter against taking up serpents.”⁵² While church leaders like F.J. Lee quickly denounced the validity of Tomlinson’s statement, the core intent of the overseer’s message did not receive any condemnation or disapproval from the crowd. The minister’s proclamation, unscriptural at most, was specifically aimed at believers within the church who sought to undermine the church’s religious identity and Scriptural foundation with more liberal theological interpretations. His spiritual threat, acted as a warning to church members to be on guard against the encroachment of adverse doctrines and the temptations of secularist theories within the church itself.

To church leaders and lay members within the Church of God, anti-secularism provided the denomination with a common ideological enemy. The supposed rationalism of secular approaches like Higher Criticism conflicted with the denomination’s core

⁵¹ Donald N. Bowdle, “Holiness in the Highlands,” 247-249.

⁵² A. J. Tomlinson, “Manifestations of the Spirit,” *Faithful Standard*, September, 1922, 12.

belief structure, and challenged the basic foundations of the church's radical revivalism. By centering their attacks on secular thoughts and opinions, ministers and snake-handlers alike depicted secularists and religious progressives as spiritual "others" who diverged from true teachings and intensions of the Scriptures. The existence of this "other" provided room for the development and distribution of a common church theology that promoted snake-handling rituals throughout the denominational expanse of the Church of God.⁵³ As the popularity of snake-handling increased within the organization during the early 1920s, anti-secularism continued to dominate the ideological direction of handling services, and quickly solidified itself as a core component of the Church of God's religious identity.⁵⁴

Apart from stressing new theological and ideological understandings, the Church of God's attack on secularism also assisted believers in combating social pressures of industrialization and "modernization" that had overtaken Appalachia during the 1910s and 1920s.⁵⁵ During the early decades of twentieth-century, Appalachian mountain folk

⁵³ The essence of this "otherness" in connection comes from Dwight Billings discussion of Appalachian stereotypes and the exclusion of Appalachian's from mainstream society. See Dwight B. Billings, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from and American Region* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 3-16; Also see Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 59-112.

⁵⁴ This anti-secularism gained more influence in the Church of God during the 1920s in relation to the Scopes Trial that impacted the direction of American religion during the decade.

⁵⁵ This idea of modernization comes from Ronald D. Eller's definition. Eller describes modernization as "a specific set of changes that have accompanied that transition in America since the late nineteenth century: the growth of urbanization and industrialization, the rise of corporate capitalism and the bureaucratic state, the development of a national market economy...and a weakening of cooperative life and work in local communities and family life." Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian south, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1982), xxiv-xxv.

found themselves entangled within the parameters of these new industrialized economic and social structures--enmeshed in a world that seemed almost to surreal be true. The subsistence culture that thrived in the region throughout the mid to late nineteenth-century slowly found itself eroding to the industrialized reality of wage labor, migration, and corporate power. Pressed off their land by rising land prices due to industrialization and the threats of displacement by archaic imminent domain laws, many Appalachian families moved from individual farms to the promise of a stable wage within the region's growing mill, lumber, and coal towns.⁵⁶ The promises of these towns often proved too good to be true. Work related death, poor housing and sanitation, and corrupt company leadership often plagued the lives of Appalachian workers within the region's coal camps and coal towns.⁵⁷ These poor living conditions were equally experience by mountain folk who migrated to the region's timber and mill towns. Environmental destruction and the perpetual fear of being fired and displaced, molded these towns into areas of hardship where only the rules of money and corporate power thrived.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 47-80; Ronald L. Lewis, "Industrialization," *High Mountain Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 59-73.

⁵⁷ Crandall A. Shifflett, *Coal Towns: Life, Work, and Culture in Company Towns of Southern Appalachia, 1880-1960* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 33-66; David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880-1922* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 106-145; Student Task Force for the Appalachian Research and Defense Fund, "Coal Government of Appalachia," *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, ed. Helen Matthews Lewis (Boone: The Appalachian Consortium Press, 1978), 276-282. This latter source is uses information gained in the 1960s and 1970s; however, the STFARDF succeed in highlighting the poverty and poor conditions of Appalachian coal life that have existed since the 1910s.

⁵⁸ Richard A. Bartlett, *Troubled Waters: Champion International and the Pigeon River Controversy* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 56-75; Jack Weller, "Appalachia: America's Mineral Colony," *Colonialism in Modern America: The Appalachian Case*, 47-55.

While these poor conditions effected the direction of industrialization within the region during the early twentieth-century, corporate leaders attempted to alter the perception of the region's industrial town by bringing in new "modern" connivances aimed at enriching the lives of mountain folk and their families. Corporate leaders of coal towns and mill villages introduced company baseball teams and sporting events for their workers with the hope of increasing morale among workers.⁵⁹ These efforts were aided by the construction of public gardens, company churches, and other communal events that sought to bring about "progress" among mountain folk.⁶⁰

However, the most influential tool used by corporate leaders to "modernize" the region's working population was the incorporation of new medical practices and paid company doctors. Prior to the introduction of these medical experts in the 1880s and 1890s, the region's coal and mill towns functioned within the bounds of traditionalized Appalachian medical practices. Historian Anthony Cavender asserts that focus on the four humors was common place, and the use of poultices and natural remedies operated as only mediums between health and death.⁶¹ The introduction of newer medical practices and professional doctors within these towns during the 1910s and 1920s, led to the breakdown of these traditional practices and the incorporation of new medical ideas bent around the ideas of "modern" scientific advancement. The implementation of these new medical ideas succeeded in benefiting the lives of some of the region's workers, and

⁵⁹ Crandall A. Shiflett, *Coal Towns*, 162-164; Paul J. Nyden, "Coal Town Baseball," *Goldenseal* 6, no.4 (Oct-Dec, 1980), 31-39.

⁶⁰ David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 131-137.

⁶¹ Anthony Cavender, *Folk Medicine in Southern Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 38-44; 124-126.

generated a substantial rise in living conditions in some coal and mill towns.⁶² Yet like the encroachment of modernized industrialism itself, the creation and perpetuation of these new medical ideals introduced a degree of contempt and disdain among some mountain folk. For these individuals, the use of science equated to a systematic breakdown of traditional Appalachian approaches to health and livelihood. Moreover, the simple dependency upon doctors and their medicines correlated to a lack of reliance upon God and his healing power.⁶³

The biblical literalism stressed by Church of God snake-handlers echoed these concerns, and moved believers within the denomination to look past the new pressures of industrialization and medical science. The main way this achieved was through the instigation of divine healing during snake-handling revivals. Divine healing pressured Appalachian snake-handlers to take a firm stand in the healing power of Christ, relying on scriptures like Isaiah 53:5 that asserted “and with his [Christ’s] stripes we are healed.” Rejecting the scientific knowledge and medical expertise of doctors, snake-handlers within the Church of God placed the well-being of their bodies in the hands of God, and depended on Christ and the supernatural for their health.⁶⁴

This religious understanding influenced the mixture of divine healing and handling rituals within Church of God revivals. Members and church leaders alike refuted the benefits of medicine and doctors. God would sustain the health of His saints and His Church as he

⁶² David Alan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields*, 134-136.

⁶³ Mary Lee Daugherty, “Serpent Handlers,” 144-145.

⁶⁴ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 69-83; Mrs. F. J. Lee, *Life Sketches and Sermons of F. J. Lee* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1929), 16-18.

did with those generations before them. Church ministers rebuked members who used doctors asserting that “Jesus has never intended that the members of the Church of God should use them [medicines] as remedies, but tells us just what to do if any among you are sick. He does not say call for the doctors or apply any remedy.”⁶⁵ A literal faith in Scripture was the cure for true believers, not drugs or the medical advancements of modern society. It was this mindset that drove the actions of snake-handling believers like Mrs. J. A. Franklin, who lived along the outskirts of southern Appalachia. During a series of local revivals in 1917, Franklin attested to the poor health of her family--linking the sicknesses to the work of Satan. “We have had sickness in the family this fall,” claimed the woman. “The most serious case was a little baby who had whooping-cough and was threatened with pneumonia.” She asserted that the condition of the infant was so bad that “a gentleman who was boarding” with the family, “said that if she were his child he would get a physician.” Rather than forego her faith and proscribe her young child to the whims or a secular authority, Mrs. Franklin chose to align herself with the ideals of the Church of God and the handling identity that she held so dear. Surrounded by fellow believers, the emboldened woman “sent for a bottle of olive oil,” and went about the process of anointed her sick infant. The power of this handling ritual quickly took effect on the child, and she claimed the “baby was healed without any remedy.”⁶⁶

When looking at the faith displayed by Mrs. Franklin, it is important to note that the believers surrounding the woman did not look upon her religious dealings with

⁶⁵ Mrs. F. J. Lee, *Sketches and Sermons of F.J. Lee*, 16.

⁶⁶ *Church of God Evangel*, December 8, 1917, 4

disgust or awe. The integration of divine healing and handling rituals were accepted by Church of God members as congruent actions that worked together to bring about workings of the Lord. By opting to anoint her child with oil over visiting a physician, Mrs. Franklin was functioning within a religious identity that accepted the dictates of the Bible over the assumed promises secular authorities and industrialized ideals. The popularity of handling rituals like oil anointing provided a platform for handlers like Mrs. Franklin to participate in matters that were spiritually and physically important. To a majority of snake-handlers within the Church of God this platform afforded degree of personal and social power that could not be attained by any other regional institution.

As the Church of God snake-handling revivals made headway throughout Appalachia, the denominations criticism of industrialism and “progress” gradually branched off from its association with divine healing and evolved into a force of its own. During revival meetings members were encouraged by ministers to perpetuate “traditional” subsistence practices that revolved around the aspects of communalism and a cyclical approach to time. Sermons and revival messages within these settings periodically centered on the evils of greed and the temptations prompted by material wealth.⁶⁷ The content of this economic mindset received praise and popular support from snake-handling believers within the church who were angered by the change brought about by industrial capitalism. Historian Mickey Crews makes note that “most Church of God members were rural people who came from the lower social stratum” of

⁶⁷ David Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents*, 82.

Appalachia.⁶⁸ These believers experienced the brunt force of industrialized “progress”, and more often than not suffered physical, psychological, and emotional loss from the hand of capital wealth. While snake-handling ministers and members both understood new role industrialism played within their region’s existence, they devoted their denomination and their identity to the reduction of its social influence within the mountains.

The intensity of this social and economic push against industrialization was so strong during the snake-handling revivals that the Church of God’s hierarchy constructed regulations against the encroachment of industrial institutions within the denomination. At the Eighth General Council in 1914, the church’s chief council displayed their resistance to industrial organization by officially barring union members from church membership. Utilizing Biblical passages from Revelation 13:16, the church leaders equated union membership to the mark of the beast, and warned union sympathizers that the denomination would “not dare to compromise and be bound by a [secular] order.”⁶⁹ This denouncement was furthered by the church’s belief that union membership effectively forced one to actively break the Second Commandment, in that it prompted the worker to place his allegiance in the dictation of his union above the will of God and the Bible.⁷⁰ By 1917, the church’s fight against industrialization had grown to such a

⁶⁸ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 78.

⁶⁹ *Minutes of the Eighth General Assembly of the Church of God*, 27.

⁷⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 66-68. The early leaders of the Church of God also had reservations about their members being politically active and even voting in elections. To these individuals, involvement in the political process equated to a devotion to an institution outside of God’s church and opened the believer to the temptations of the “material” world.

degree that Church of God leaders extended the threat of excommunication to members of middle-class fraternities and business groups. Writing in the *Church of God Evangel*, A. J. Tomlinson publicly denounced these secular organizations--calling them "dangerous places" where no believer needed to venture. "Business men's clubs, and societies, and secret orders and lodges of all kinds and names," he asserted to his readers, "are in the hands of the beast to rapidly place the mark in the hand or in the forehead."⁷¹

These top-down calls against the potential evils of unfettered industrialism made their way through the denominational network of the Church of God between 1917 and 1924. Like secularism, local revival ministers saw industrialism as a monolithic enemy whose influence was detested by both believers and non-believers alike. Handling rituals were sometimes carried out in the midst of long economic diatribes where handlers and fiery ministers would fight against the spiritual force of poverty with snakes and fire. During these proceedings, objects like money and wealth were personified as demonic entities that were used by the devil to dull the spiritual eyes of the faithful and usurp the effectiveness of the Church of God. This attitude was projected by Sam O. Perry, a modest Church of God member, in his address to handling believers in 1918. Angered by the depravity of the region's coal and mill towns, and the presumed ideological threats introduced by "modernity", Perry made claim to his audience that the devil was using aspects of industrialism to push members away from the church and its religious identity. "If possible," he asserted with confidence, Satan "will get your eyes off the Lord and on the world, yourself, [and] money." Following with a spiritual threat, Perry continued

⁷¹ *Church of God Evangel*, "The Church of God and Its Relation to Other Organizations and Orders," July 7, 1917, 1.

stating that “many do not realize that in reaching for the things of earth...that they are in danger of losing the heavenly treasure.”⁷²

Throughout the duration of the Church of God’s snake-handling revivals warnings and regulations put out by believers like Tomlinson and Perry dominated the economic outlook of a majority of the denomination’s followers. Disillusioned and disenfranchised by the advances of new industrialism, handlers demonized the processes of industrial progress and the supposed vices of the wealthy. In place of financial wealth, these believers erected a spiritual economy that praised the ideals of spiritual devotion, outright faith, and participation in handling rituals. By establishing these ideas around the preexisting cultural and theological perspectives of the Church of God, snake-handling believers were able to spiritually justify and rejoice in their material poverty. They were able to forgo the social pressures put upon them by industrialization and celebrate a mindset that afforded them a degree of freedom and power. As one believer asserted to the *Church of God Evangel*, “The poorer class is being almost starved by the rich, but we know Jesus loves us.”⁷³

Apart from theology and economics, snake-handlers within the Church of God also fashioned their religious identity to include issues concerning morality. During the revivals, the Church of God renounced social practices like the consumption of alcohol, coffee, and tobacco, marking their prohibition as official tenets for church members.⁷⁴

⁷² Sam C. Perry, “Many are Hindered Look at Outward, Material Things,” *Church of God Evangel*, June, 29, 1918, 2.

⁷³ Eva Williams, *Church of God Evangel*, May 12, 1917, 2.

⁷⁴ *Minutes of the Twelfth General Annual Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1916), 46.

Leaders prompted local pastors to excommunicate those who could not let go of tobacco products, asserting that the denomination did not “want any that use tobacco in any form to present themselves for membership.”⁷⁵ Pastors informed converts “to be sure they are through with it before they become members.”⁷⁶ This push for moral purity within the church provided the groundwork for other prohibitions and restrictions for Church of God members. The Church of God hierarchy prompted the laity to refrain from drinking “dope” drinks like Coca-Cola and fountain beverages because they tarnished the body. These leaders also regulated the use of soft drinks among revival ministers, emphasizing that true preachers of the Gospel “are to shun the appearance of evil... Every minister who wants to especially guard his influence will not be found at these cold drink stands drinking.”⁷⁷ To these leaders and the church’s lesser members, the Church of God was the true Church set apart by God to be a beacon of truth to both Appalachia and America. It had no room for halfhearted believers who were tied down to earthy strongholds like tobacco, alcohol, and Coke. If these individuals could not let go of these moral ills, thought church leaders, what made them think they could foster the faith to handle snakes before a fallen region and a fallen nation.

While instances of snake-handling and fire-handling often accompanied revivalist sermons focusing on public and private morality, the manifestation of other handling rituals also presented themselves on many occasions. This was the case at the West Virginian State Assembly during the latter stages of the denomination’s snake-handling

⁷⁵ *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1917), 27-28.

⁷⁶ *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual General Assembly of the Church of God*, 27-28.

⁷⁷ Mrs. F.J. Lee, *Life Sketches and Sermons of F.J. Lee*, 191.

revivals. Enthused by messages of sanctification, holiness, and moralism, numerous believers were overtaken by power of the Holy Spirit. One woman who received healing from a debilitating ailment during one sermon focusing on personal morality was so taken by the Father's presence that "she shouted, danced, and talked in tongues." Instances like this continued on throughout the night and into the morning when a group of recent converts "met at the river and [were] baptized in the presence of several hundred people."⁷⁸ The event stirred the hearts of the believers present and in a matter of minutes handling rituals were being performed. Among those participating was Sister Lee, a local female believer, who preached a short message and went about participating in the ritual of washing the feet of those present. Like the ritual of laying of hands, the purpose of this ritual was dualistic in nature and functioned as a tool of spiritual and material purification. Washing the feet of those present the Assembly operated as a physical ritual, that in the minds of those present, spiritually cleansed the souls and minds of its recipients. By intertwining this specific handling ritual with the subsequent sermons on holiness, Sister Lee was setting in place a spiritual environment where this cleansing could take place, and the notions of moralism could be readily received and experienced by those present. She was softening the hearts of the audience--priming their minds to embrace the moral life mandated by God.⁷⁹ As the power of snake-handling and handling rituals continued to dominate the revivalist undertakings of the Church of God, instances like this were commonly reproduced and enacted to infuse the notion of morality within

⁷⁸ W. M. Rutuler, *Church of God Evangel*, July 7, 1917, 4.

⁷⁹ For more information about the ritual of the laying on of hands see Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 92-97.

the denomination's religious identity.

On another level, this internal struggle for morality pushed snake-handlers in the church to look past their own organization and challenge the moral direction of other denominations inside and outside of Appalachia. Revival ministers often mocked Episcopalian and Catholic priests who “smoke and in some instances...drink as they see fit.”⁸⁰ Snake-handlers saw these actions as moral concessions that clearly marked spiritual whoredom and wickedness. They rationalized the moral extension of these practices in their heads claiming if ministers could freely smoke and drink, then they could easily compromise on more important issues like sexual relations and divorce. This was a message often expressed during tent meetings and church services. The Church of God was called from the hills of Appalachia to save American Christianity from the perils to depravity and modernity cried revival ministers. Christ had preordained the institution to reestablish the knowledge of divine interaction and spiritualism into the American psyche. The church, on a regional and national level, could not compromise with trivial entertainments and libations offered by the world. Its members could not risk being held down by such mundane sins at this critical juncture in history. “Show me a people anywhere that God is honoring more by granting unto them more of the miraculous to confirm the Word,” wrote member Lee McGill, “than He is the Church of God people.”⁸¹ This favor came from moral righteousness and holiness. Thus, at the same moment snakes were being thrown about by tongue-speaking believers throughout

⁸⁰ “Puffing Preachers,” *Church of God Evangel*, April 13, 1935, 3.

⁸¹ “Another Good Opportunity,” *Church of God Evangel*, August, 26, 1916, 1.

Appalachia, a conscious moral code was also being circulated. A moral code built within a regional and religious identity that prompted true believers to be on guard against physical temptations and useless distractions.

Apart from a distinct moralism, the Church of God snake-handling revivals also perpetuated a spiritual identity that included the contributions of women. While official church positions in the General Assembly were restricted to men, women had the ability to testify during tent revivals and actively participate within the sacrament of snake-handling.⁸² During a meeting in South Cleveland, Tennessee in 1914, the pulpit was given to a young woman after a series of worship songs. Holding a baby on her side, she “related the plight of a neighbor, a woman with consumption.”⁸³ This ailing woman, cried the Spirit-filled mother, was deathly ill; however, “one days praying had made this woman strong enough to walk to the dinner table.”⁸⁴ This testimony brought about a spiritual frenzy where “for five minutes everybody prayed. The prayers grew to shouts pitch in almost every key.”⁸⁵ Throughout that week, services occurred where snakes were handled and instances of divine healing were observed. The role of women extended beyond testimonies. On many occasions, these sisters of faith were the main participants in the signs and wonders that occurred during revivals. At one revival in Tennessee, an

⁸² Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 92-107.

⁸³ “Proselytizing with Snakes: Holy Rollers of Cleveland Scorn Bites of Reptiles,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 16, 1914, 3.

⁸⁴ “Proselytizing with Snakes: Holy Rollers of Cleveland Scorn Bites of Reptiles,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 16, 1914, 3.

⁸⁵ “Proselytizing with Snakes: Holy Rollers of Cleveland Scorn Bites of Reptiles,” *Chattanooga Daily Times*, September 16, 1914, 3.

enthused woman who received the baptism of the Holy Spirit “took a coal in her hands, and broke it in pieces, and handed it out to the rest of the saints.”⁸⁶ At a similar meeting “one brother took a hot lamp globe and...poured it all over him,” while “two or three sisters handled fire.”⁸⁷

This active display of public power molded the religious identity of Appalachian snake-handling in a way that accepted the contributions of women within denominational matters. A. J. Tomlinson projected his outright support for women ministers and missionaries throughout his duration as General Overseer of the Church of God, and created opportunities for adventurous females who felt the call to preach. Writing to these women in 1917, he made a petition for their use during revival services, claiming that “it seems to me that more of our young women ought to prepare themselves for the ministry and mission work.” Tomlinson continued his statement, pushing Church of God members throughout the region to give financial offerings and tithes to the formal education of these female workers. “With a little more means and plenty of room,” he stated, “I believe I could have five hundred students in the [denomination’s] Bible school within a year, and two-thirds of them would be young women, in training.” To Tomlinson, the notions of gender and sex held no bearing on a believer’s spiritual effectiveness and their relation to the expansion of the Church of God revivals. If snakes and other rituals could be performed by women, so could the acts of preaching and spiritual training. Thus within the more egalitarian confines of the denomination’s religious identity, women

⁸⁶ “Handling Fire,” *Church of God Evangel*, January 31, 1914, 8.

⁸⁷ “Handling Fire,” *Church of God Evangel*, January 31, 1914, 8.

operated within a similar religious framework as men, and were justly allocated a degree of power that manifested into public influence and respect.⁸⁸

This degree of public power challenged the gender constructs championed by fellow denominations within mountains. Appalachian denominations like the Regular and Union Baptist often encouraged the emotional “hollers” and physical convulsions of women within their congregations; however, these women were never allowed to testify or preach sermon, and were only allowed to minister directly to other women.⁸⁹ These gender constraints were even heavier in denominations outside the region that functioned within the parameters of what Appalachian historian Richard Drake terms “Europe’s paternalistic family norm.”⁹⁰ This family structure stressed the domestic functions of women in society and tightly regulated the power women held upon the public administration of the church. The Church of God presented a theological ideology that softened religious patriarchy to an extent that offered women a spiritual platform. The same Holiness-Pentecostal roots that permitted snake-handling, provided women a range of religious “liberties” that in historian Deborah McCauley words “ranged from a freedom to voice their own spontaneous, ecstatic expressions: to praying loud and testifying...to preaching in many independent Holiness churches, or on the local radio or at revivals.”⁹¹ The heightened role of women strengthened the religious identity of snake-

⁸⁸ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 97-100.

⁸⁹ Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 61-62.

⁹⁰ Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, 188.

⁹¹ Deborah McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History*, 221.

handlers in Appalachia. It separated snake-handlers from the gender constructs that dominated American culture during the 1910s and 1920s, and forged a mindset that acknowledged the religious value of both sexes.

By the late 1920s, the ideal of handling snakes and fire began to lose theological support among the higher echelons of the Church of God hierarchy. The pages of denominational publications like the *Church of God Evangel* spoke less of snake-handling revivals and chaotic miracles, and focused more on a rational driven theology that was less fundamentalist in nature. These periodicals kept their thunderous tone concerning the direction of American Christianity; however, stories of snake-handlers and fire-walkers were either pushed to the back pages or excluded from mention all together. During the Twenty-third General Assembly in 1928, church leaders prompted local congregations to weaken their stance on snake-handling, declaring in an official statement that the Church of God does not “make handling snakes a test of fellowship.”⁹² While this official statement did not condemn the practice of snake-handling, it enacted a shift in the social and theological direction of the church. No longer was snake-handling a sign to be openly praised and glorified. Nor was it a test of true discipleship. The act was now seen as something extraneous and extra that could be utilized if the member saw fit. While specific tenets like divine healing and tongues were still upheld as foundational doctrines, snake-handlers and their spiritual art were slowly being forced to the edges of accepted practice.

⁹² *Minutes of the Twenty-third Annual General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland, 1928), 42.

The Church of God's shift away from snake-handling correlates specifically with the growth of the denomination during the 1920s and its movement out of the confines of the Appalachian Mountains. By 1928, the denomination held covering over 786 churches from North Carolina and Georgia to California and Arizona. The church's push on foreign missions prompted the establishment of congregations in Jamaica and the Bahamas.⁹³ This geographical growth prompted a financial boom within the denomination that materialized in an influx of land and cash wealth. The church laid claim to over half a million dollars in property value in 1928, and even funded a publication house that brought in thousands of dollars per year.⁹⁴ The overall expansion of the denomination outside the regional and financial bounds of the Appalachian Mountains forced the leaders of the Church of God to reform some of their regionalized doctrines to cater to the needs and wants of potential Christians throughout the nation. Doctrines like snake-handling and fire walking, which were accepted within Appalachia, pushed the denomination into a fringe category outside of the region and encouraged sectarian radicalism rather than national growth. In the minds of the denominations leaders, if the Church of God wished to grow into an influential institution, radical practices had to be marginalized and discouraged.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, church leaders moved from discouraging participation in snake handling to promoting a complete ban on the act during services and revivals. Church of God minister R.W Harris proposed a challenge to "any snake

⁹³ *Minutes of the Twenty-third Annual General Assembly of the Church of God*, 12-17.

⁹⁴ *Minutes of the Twenty-third Annual General Assembly of the Church of God*, 33-41.

handling preacher or any of his followers to show me or tell me of one Bible instance of Jesus carrying a bunch of serpents with Him to prove His deity.”⁹⁵ He continued to rebuke snake-handlers throughout the Appalachian region claiming that their practice was simply “their hobbyhorse and they ride it seven days a week. They like snake-handling so well that they eat that for breakfast, dinner and supper.”⁹⁶ This attack was strengthened by theological teachings that broke down snake-handling Biblical passages like Mark 16 with interpretations that were less literal and more allegorical. These attacks resembled the religious compromises that Church of God snake-handlers battled during the 1910s. Biblical laxity, spiritual slumber, religious inclusiveness—these same attributes that were used to harbor disdain for mainline denominations decade before began to surface within leadership of the Church of God itself. In an attempt to grow and expand their influence, the denomination threw off the cultural basis of its Appalachian identity and entered into a national religious arena that prompted compromise and laxity.

Yet while the Church of God turned its back on the snake-handling religious identity that it created, the denomination never destroyed the beliefs of Appalachian snake-handlers. The snake-handling identity simply disconnected from the Church of God and grasped on to the numerous independent Pentecostal congregations that were conceived during the 1910s and 1920s. Offshoot groups like the Church of God with Signs Following and the Church of God of Prophecy emerged, promoting a distinct Appalachian snake-handling identity throughout the twentieth century. George Hensley,

⁹⁵ R. W. Harris, “Snake-Handling,” *Church of God Evangel*, February 5, 1949, 8.

⁹⁶ R. W. Harris, “Snake-Handling,” *Church of God Evangel*, February 5, 1949, 9.

one of the former leaders of the Church of God, broke with the Church of God as it moved into the mainstream. When he died in 1955 from a snake bite dealt by a diamond back rattler, Hensley commanded a congregation with a weekly attendance of over 100 people.⁹⁷ Churches like Hensley's thrived within a religious identity that embraced the Pentecostal message within a distinct Appalachian worldview. As the twentieth-century progressed it would be off-shoot congregations like Hensley's where the cultural essence of Appalachian dualism and handling ritualism manifested and transpired.

⁹⁷ "Snake Kills Cultist," *New York Times*, July 26, 1955, 12; "Cultist Dies of Snake Bite, Believed Dolley Pond Leader," *Chattanooga Times*, July 25, 1955, 3.

CHAPTER THREE: “GO FORTH AND MULTIPLY”: THE EVOLUTION AND
EXPANSION OF APPALACHIAN SNAKE-HANDLING DURING THE GREAT
DEPRESSION

*Here we have a time of sorrow,
Pain and anguish day by day;
Be there'll come a time of gladness,
“God shall wipe all tears away.”*

*Praise the Lord, how sweet the promise,
As we pass along life's way;
That in heaven there'll be no sorrow,
“God shall wipe all tears away.”¹*

“Jesus told me to do it,” proclaimed Albert Teester as he addressed his independent flock of snake-handlers during a revival meeting on the night of August 12, 1934. Nestled securely in the woods of western North Carolina near the small town of Sylva, the 39-year-old man held up his swollen right arm with pride--rolling back his sleeve in an effort to show those around him the deep fang marks. “God will not let me die,” he continued with zeal and fire, “I’ll take the Word of God today and speak on it.”²

Teester’s intensity seemed reassuring for those present. During the previous Sunday’s sermon the minister was struck twice as he was handling a snake before a crowd of onlookers. In the midst of his heated sermon, Teester admitted to the congregation that he felt the calling of the Holy Spirit and was moved to handle a poisonous snake. “I didn’t ask them to,” he asserted to reporters after the bite, “but I told them if they wanted it, I would handle the snake to disprove their doubts of the power of

¹ “God Shall Wipe All Tears Away,” *Holiness Hymns* (Lenoir City: B. O. Rosenbaum), 4.

² “Teester Had ‘Call’ to Let Snake Bite,” *New York Times*, August 13 1934, 30.

faith.” The minister was quickly handed an adult rattlesnake, and after receiving a series of taunts the angered snake latched onto Teester’s arm--releasing its venom into his veins.³

The bite did not sit well with Teester, and in a dash “he ran from the church screaming in pain.” Making his way back to the pulpit, he attempted to finish preaching but was stopped by onlookers as “his arm burst from swelling” and “his tongue became so thick he could not swallow.”⁴ A handful of the congregation beckoned the near dead minister to travel down the mountain and find a physician, while others pressured him to drink a shot of corn whiskey to combat the bite. Teester refused both, almost mocking the fear displayed by these non-believers. “Whisky only makes the snake madder and the poison will go deeper,” he cried with faith. “I am a disciple of God; he will take care of it.”⁵

Teester’s faith proved strong, and during the subsequent week he regained the ability to speak and eat. As he stood before his congregation during the August 12th revival service, he relished the respect earned from his spiritual devotion. His arm still had considerable swelling yet “there was no sign of pain on the preacher’s face,” and no weakness in his posture and stance. “In the name of Jesus Christ, I took up the rattlesnake,” he said clutching his arm, “I have one of the best physicians in all the world. I’ll tell who he is. He is Jesus Christ. Hallelujah.”⁶

³ “Rattler’s Victim Will Preach Today,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1934, Section II, 3.

⁴ “Teester Had ‘Call’ to Let Snake Bite,” 30.

⁵ “Holiness Preacher’s Boast Faith With Rattlesnake,” *New York Times*, August 10, 1934, 3.

⁶ “Teester Had ‘Call’ to Let Snake Bite,” 30.

The minister's devotion to his handling ritualism did not falter after his initial recovery. Following his return to the pulpit that August night, Teester reaffirmed his personal faith. He "packed his scanty wardrobe," dressed his five motherless children in their best attire, and began a long and laborious religious migration to the hills of Akron, Ohio with the goal of expanding the influence of his personal ministry. "I have felt for some time," he related to his congregation prior to his departure, "that God would call me and give me the opportunity to put His words to the people of the world." With that he set about on his way "to a faraway land where there are many souls that need to be saved."⁷

Though some would consider it peculiar and somewhat overzealous, the ministry of Rev. Albert Teester provides a clear example of the religious pluralism that overtook Appalachian snake-handling between the late 1920s and 1930s. Throughout these tumultuous decades, vast numbers of believers followed in the footsteps of ministers like Teester, and crafted numerous independent congregations that ascribed to their own interpretation of handling rituals.⁸ Driving this growing pluralism rested a series of theological and social conflicts that would transform the fabric of snake-handling religiosity. Issues like the theological makeup of the Godhead, the necessity of religious evangelism, and the practical application of handling rituals, gradually emerged during the late 1920s and 1930s as serious points of contention between snake-handling believers. Intensified by the onset of the Great Depression and the expansion of poverty

⁷ "Snake-Bite Preacher Gets a Call to Akron; Says Serpent Was Sent to Open World to Him," *New York Times*, August 19, 1934, 9.

⁸ For an interesting look into the plurality of Christian denominations in Appalachia and the role of religious migration see Melvin E. Dieter, "Wesleyan/Holiness Churches," *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Religious Pluralism*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 235-239.

within the region, these conflicts would act as the impetus for the breakdown of many snake-handling congregations, and the subsequent creation of many new fellowships.

Acting as a primer to these new conflicts was the rise of a religious void created in the aftermath of the Church of God snake-handling revivals in the mid-1920s. Pressured by the effects of geographical expansion and the desire to appeal to a broader middle-class base, the hierarchy of the Church of God entered the late 1920s and 1930s with a strong distaste for snake-handling rituals and the culture that perpetuated its existence. Speaking in the words of historian Mickey Crews, these leaders formed the conclusion that “snake handling was wreaking havoc” within the hills of Appalachia, and that “the reputation of the organization had become tainted as a result” of handling enthusiasm.⁹ As these pressures intensified 1928 and 1939, snake-handlers found themselves systematically pushed from the ranks of the denomination that once embraced their religious outlook. Chastised as heterodox Christians, these believers found it necessary to look introspectively—crafting independent congregations that met their spiritual needs and desires.

At the base of these new independent congregations rested a notion of religious pluralism that completely separated Appalachian snake-handling from its cultural and religious ties to the Church of God. Whereas the snake-handling revivals that took place within the Church of God between 1914 and 1928 pressed snake-handlers to subscribe to the organization’s doctrinal goals, the independence set about a religious plurality that took on many different shades of thought and conviction. Unrestrained by official

⁹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 89.

doctrine, independent snake-handlers like Albert Teester discovered that they had the freedom to express snake-handling ritualism in any way that they saw fit. They could mold snake-handling into a Gospel that catered to their specific needs, and even move and migrate their ministry in an effort to spread their particular doctrines. Moreover, autonomy from the dictates of the Church of God's hierarchy also released aspiring snake-handling ministers from the pressures of denominational regulation and proper ordination. The ability to simply start up a snake-handling congregation without any hierarchical oversight invigorated many snake-handling believers in a way that led to an exponential growth in snake-handling religiosity within Appalachia. As the late 1920s and 1930s progressed, this new pluralism and independence would succeed in bolstering the regional power of snake-handling. It would set in motion a religious atmosphere where snake-handling and the cultural ideals of Appalachian dualism could fully thrive.

When looking at the independent expansion of Appalachian snake-handling during the late 1920s and 1930s, initial focus must be given to the religious conflicts that enveloped the movement prior to this period. Following the great outflow of denominational support and regional popularity created by the Church of God snake-handling revivals, Appalachian snake-handlers entered the latter half of the 1920s with a degree of vigor and optimism. Corresponding with the organizational growth of the Church of God as a whole, the cultural and religious influence of snake-handling had successfully expanded from its humble roots within the eastern mountains of Tennessee--widening its grasp from the coal mines of West Virginia to the gentle hills of northern

Georgia and northern Alabama.¹⁰

The basis of this growth corresponded with the denominational pushes put in place by the early Church of God hierarchy and its faithful members. Revival meetings, brush arbor, and public handling events were all used by the denomination to further the popularity of snake-handling the establishment of pro-handling churches throughout the region.¹¹ Coupled with this was the work of numerous traveling snake-handling ministers who were either active ministers of the Church of God or closely tied to the denomination. Snake-handling minister Jimmy Morrow asserts that these itinerant ministers greatly expanded the reach of handling culture throughout the region during the 1910s and 1920s--successfully introducing the religious practice to remote areas of Appalachia that could not be initially accessed by the Church of God.¹² By the end of the 1920s the efforts of these regional missionaries and the evangelical pushes by the Church of God functioned to such a degree that new churches were founded in isolated towns like Del Rio, Tennessee, St. Charles, Virginia, and Pineville, Kentucky. As the decade progressed, these new congregations--and others like them--would find themselves actively affirming the cultural ideology proscribed by handling ritualism and sending out regional evangelists sympathetic to the religious doctrines of snake-handling religiosity.¹³

¹⁰ *Minutes of the 23rd General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1928), 63-89; *Minutes of the 24th General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1929), 59-86.

¹¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 69-91.

¹² Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 16-20.

¹³ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 19-20; David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake-Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 50-51. The 23rd General Assembly of the

The result of these denominational and missionary efforts presented a two-fold effect on the religious direction of the Church of God and its treatment of snake-handling ritualism. On one hand these efforts opened the theological premise of snake-handling to thousands of believers who had previous been unaware of the act and its cultural and religious significance. The missionary emphasis put forth by the Church of God in the mid to late-1920s extended the reach of the organization to over one-third of the nation--establishing over 780 churches with a recorded membership of 24,332 believers.¹⁴ This monumental growth is extraordinarily when compared to the membership statistics of the denomination only a decade prior listing only 425 churches and a little over 12,000 active members.¹⁵ The extent of this growth does not imply that snake-handling ritualism was practiced in every one of these newly formed churches. Nor does it assert that each member embraced snake-handling within their personal religious life. However, the theological affirmation of handling ritualism by the denominational leadership and other church evangelists demonstrates that the practice, or the knowledge of the practice, did grow and expand during the period.

Another example of this growth is seen in the geographical expansion of snake-handling events during the latter years of the 1920s. While a majority of snake-handling and fire-handling events remained within the regional borders of Appalachia itself, the growth of the denomination and the workings of handling ministers succeeded in

Church of God (1928) accounts for over 650 active evangelists recognized by the Church of God. While many of these individuals simply held the title of 'Evangelist', the sheer number of missionaries showcases their influence on the direction of the denomination and the spread of handling theology.

¹⁴ *Minutes of the 23rd General Assembly of the Church of God*, 33.

¹⁵ *Minutes of the 14th Annual General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland: 1919), 59.

propagating handling ritualism to Church of God congregations along the outskirts of the mountains.¹⁶ Handling services became common occurrences in the mid to late 1920s within the textile hubs of the North Carolina and Georgia Piedmont.¹⁷ The establishment of a strong Appalachian migrant work base in these regions in the wake of the textile boom after World War I worked in tandem with Church of God evangelists who orchestrated a long series of snake-handling revivals within textile towns.¹⁸

The intensity of this effort by Church of God snake-handling evangelists in the North Carolinian Piedmont is attested to in an oral account given by native resident Denny Williams. As a child living in the textile town of Belmont during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Williams asserted that snake-handling revivals and brush arbors were a common occurrence during late summer months in the town. During one revival, Williams and a handful of friends walked into the back of a handling service against the wishes of his Methodist father and witnessed the intensity of the practice first-hand. With a sense of shock and amazement, he stated that dozens of the town's residents had taken to the makeshift altar crafted by the Church of God preacher and were actively taking up serpents and fire, seemingly with no fear. "People were dancing and speaking in babble,"

¹⁶ The Great Migration of the 1920s witnessed the monumental migration of Appalachian workers from the mountains and into the industrial hubs of northern cities and the southern Piedmont. For the social and economic impact of this migration see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987), 44-113; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, 11-43.

¹⁷ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-89. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 126-129; 179-180; 220-221.

¹⁸ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Like A Family*, 280-288; Chad Berry, "Southern White Migration to the Midwest, an Overview," *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*, ed. Phillip J. Obermiller (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 1-9.

claimed Williams, “I just stood there in amazement.” The revival went on for another hour until it was finally brought to a close by the town’s small police force due to noise complaints.¹⁹

Accounts of snake-handling and handling ritualism by the Church of God were not limited to the textile regions of the southern Piedmont, but also thrived within other areas bordering Appalachia. Following the exile of Appalachian migrant workers during the late 1920s, snake-handling revivals became common place in parts of northern Florida and southern Ohio.²⁰ In the midst of one such revival service outside of Akron, Ohio, a local handling believer, D.G Phillips, remarked upon the religious and spiritual impact the practice was having on the local community. He claimed that during the numerous handling events that took place during the spring and summer of 1927, handfuls of believers had participated in handling rituals, resulting in new conversions and rededications to the church. Phillips continued on with his praise of the events, stating that the positive reactions by the surrounding community proved that handling rituals demonstrated the true “stamp of Christian Perfection.”²¹

Throughout the late 1920s, accounts like those given by Williams and Phillips would continue to emerge from Church of God congregations within Appalachia and along the outskirts of the region. The growth of the denomination’s membership equated

¹⁹ Oral Interview of Denny Williams, Author’s Collection, May 21, 2012.

²⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-87.

²¹ D.G Phillips, “Christian Perfection,” *Church of God Evangel*, July 16, 1927, 4. Phillips’ reference to Christian Perfection in this context corresponds with the growing belief in the Church of God during the 1920s that snake-handling displayed true salvation. In the minds of those who believed in this concept, only a true Christian could handle snakes and not be bit or poisoned.

to a strengthening of snake-handling religiosity among Church of God adherents-- especially native Appalachian Church of God members who migrated out of the region looking for better paying jobs and employment opportunities²². While the fruits of these revivals never reached the religious growth experienced during the 1910s and early 1920s, the official backing and propagation of snake-handling ritualism by the Church of God hierarchy moved the practice in a positive direction.

The exponential growth of the Church of God during this decade, while it seemed beneficial, instead introduced some monumental hurdles that negatively impacted the movement in coming years. The most significant of these hurdles was the inclusion of new believers and congregations who actively opposed snake-handling within the denomination. Whereas most of the influence of the Church of God during the late 1920s existed inside or along the geographical borders of Appalachia, the growth of the denomination also saw the formation of congregations in peripheral areas ranging from California, Michigan, New Mexico, Jamaica, and other Caribbean islands.²³ For many congregations in these areas, the religious basis of snake-handling proved foreign and abstract. The cultural ideals that crafted and drove snake-handling and Appalachian dualism simply did not operate within the cultural framework of these emerging churches. Added to this was the fact that these newer congregations were not apart of the initial founding of snake-handling within the Church of God; nor were they involved in the snake-handling revivals that overtook the denomination in the 1910s and early 1920s.

²² Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 119-121.

²³ *Minutes of the 23rd General Assembly of the Church of God*, 17-21.

The effects of these cultural and historical differences equated to a religious disconnect that led to the rejection of snake-handling practices within these churches.

In a article in the *Church of God Evangel*, church elder Myrtle Whitehead displayed the hesitation expressed by some of these new churches. Speaking primarily upon the effectiveness of snake-handling and the motives of handling believers within the church, he petitioned mountain members to reevaluate the role of the practice in worship. “I have seen several serpents taken up in Jesus’ name,” he attested to his audience, “and unbelievers, who were present, seeing the power of God manifested in this manner, were made to believe.” However, he also asked readers to take a step back and consider the perception of snake-handling by the nation as a whole. To Elder Whitehead and other Church of God members outside of Appalachia, the “radicalism” and enthusiasm represented by the practice shifted focus away from the primary goals of the denomination--salvation and church growth. “I do not say we seek for signs...I do not believe in making a hobby of preaching signs,” Whitehead emphasized, “only the salvation of souls.”²⁴

The concerns of these new “non-Appalachian” congregations were compounded by the emergence of new progressive church leaders who entered the denomination during the late 1920s and early 1930s. College-educated and, as historian Mickey Crews emphasizes, bound to the economic and social confines of the middle-class ideals of materialism, progress, and rationalism, the organizational power of this sect of the

²⁴ *Church of God Evangel*, December 11, 1943, 7.

denomination experienced a great deal of growth during the latter Progressive era.²⁵

The ideological expansion of this group occurred in some respects because of the geographical expansion of the Church of God; however, more importantly, its rise in influence came about in relation to the financial boom experienced by the Church of God during the late 1920s. Between 1920 and 1929 the annual income of the Church of God increased tenfold from \$2,553.24 in 1920 to over \$26,019.02 in 1929.²⁶ Along with this, the denomination took in nearly \$11,000 in Sunday School material profits in 1929 and even opened up a General Home Supply Store in Cleveland, Tennessee that netted \$17,765.84 in church income.²⁷ The most fascinating example of the denomination's new financial focus though was the dispersal of a promissory note during the 1929 General Assembly meeting, aimed at pushing members and church leaders to give more of their income to the organization. Issued as a faux-bond that could be redeemed at a later date, this promissory note asked members to "promise to pay to the General Secretary and Treasurers of the Churches of God...the sum of \$10.00 on or before December 15, 1929." Marked "NON NEGOTIOABLE" this promissory note became a popular fundraising venture for the denomination and contributed to the expansion of new churches and the training of new ministers throughout the western half of the United States and the Caribbean Islands.²⁸

²⁵ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 91.

²⁶ *Minutes of the 15th Annual Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1920), 43; *Minutes of the 24th Annual Assembly of the Church of God*, 30.

²⁷ *Minutes of the 24th Annual Assembly of the Church of God*, 28-29.

²⁸ *Minutes of the 24th Annual Assembly of the Church of God*, 21.

This economic growth energized many of the Church of God's new progressive-minded leadership and contributed to a shift in the social attitudes of the denomination. Eager to raise awareness of the church and increase its financial influence throughout the nation, progressive leaders like S. W. Latimer, the Church of God's General Overseer during the late 1920s and early 1930s, encouraged a new religious direction that sought to integrate the domination into the social and cultural ethos of the middle class.²⁹ The church now emphasized frugality, hard-work, and capital investment as opposed to the older ideals of long-suffering, subsistence living, and a blind dependence on God. This shift succeeded in creating a rift within the denomination, most importantly the organization's more rural churches whose congregations remained fixed along the borders of poverty.³⁰

This appeal to the nation's middle class succeeded quite well. By the beginning of the 1930s, the influx of middle class congregants and the financial capital acquired from their inclusion in the church pushed the Church of God into new realm of social prominence. During this period, progressive church leaders were able to construct massive building funds that oversaw the construction of various religious libraries and new church buildings throughout the nation. These building drives were coupled with the construction of new Church of God seminaries and Bible schools that appealed to middle-class students and their families. The Northwest Bible College, founded in 1934 in Minot, North Dakota emerged as one of the most prominent of these new Bible

²⁹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 32-37; Robert Anderson Mapes, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 199.

³⁰ Donald N. Bowdle, "Holiness in the Highlands," *Christianity in Appalachia*, 252.

schools, amassing over six hundred full-time students by the end of the Great Depression alone.³¹

Backed by the ideological and economic rise of the denomination's emerging progressive leadership, these new intellectual hubs quickly became the epicenter of theological and religious revision for the Church of God. Hoping to gain national acceptance and financial prestige of middle-class patrons, ideals like rationalism and empiricism were integrated into the methodology of Church of God religious scholarship. Conforming, although marginally, to some of the precepts of Higher Criticism, many church leaders began petitioning their congregations to take a less literal approach to the Bible and its spiritual dictates.³² This is not to say that the essence of Biblical literalism was stripped from the Church of God and its religious message. In fact, as Mickey Crews asserts, many of these progressive pushes were attacked by more "traditional" ministers and leaders who "associated higher learning [and middle-class ideology] with spiritual compromise."³³ However while this religious battle continued within the Church of God during the late 1920s and 1930s with some vigor, the power of progressive theology and middle-class values continued to grow and propagate.

The influence of this emerging religious and theological direction within the Church of God provided new ideological barriers for snake-handling believers in and around Appalachia. Looked upon as backwards and reckless, snake-handlers became targets for progressive church leaders looking to gain respectability for the Church of

³¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 140.

³² Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 138-142.

³³ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 141.

God on a national level. Rev. B.L Hicks projected this stance in the *Church of God Evangel* following a series of snake-handling services conducted by members of the Church of God. Centering his argument on a more mainstream interpretation of Mark 16-17, he challenged handling believers to stop testing God with their practices, stating that many practitioners “have made serpent handling a hobby, gone into fanaticism and brought rapprochement on the precious gospel of Christ.” He continued, emphasizing the “some have been so fanatical as to say we shall take up every serpent that we find.”³⁴ Hicks went on to push these believers to be logical in how they approached handling rituals, and even questioned the overall usefulness of handling in promoting denominational goals. “If you are a believer, as you claim, and have already handled serpents,” he stated with curiosity and a degree of anger, “and you were going down the road alone and were to find a poisonous serpent and take it up, what good would that do? To whom would it be a sign?... Those who do such things are tempting God.”³⁵

This call to moderation was perpetuated by numerous other progressive leaders who saw snake-handling ritualism and its cultural identity as a reproach to decent Christianity. Snake handling had become, in the words of one progressive minister, “a disgust to intelligent people,” and a stumbling block to the success and growth of Church of God outside of Appalachia.³⁶ These negative stereotypes only grew more vicious and more intense as the influence of the Church of God continued to expand throughout the nation. E. C. Clark, editor in chief of the *Church of God Evangel* during the 1930s and

³⁴ “And They Shall Take Up Serpents,” *Church of God Evangel*, October 3, 1931, 1.

³⁵ “And They Shall Take Up Serpents,” *Church of God Evangel*, October 3, 1931, 4.

³⁶ Nettie M. Hanvy, “Signs Following Believers,” *Church of God Evangel*, July 28, 1928.

early 1940s, described snake-handlers as foolish and ignorant entertainers, who challenged God with their religious rituals. He attacked the spiritual core of these Appalachian believers, asserting that while miracles could in fact occur under the power of the Holy Spirit, the fanaticism displayed by snake-handlers left no real room for the hand of God to work.³⁷

Outside of these negative stereotypes, the Church of God's new leadership also sought to limit the power of snake-handling through the process of censorship and public denouncement. The most prominent display of this tactic came about in 1928 during the 23rd General Assembly of the Church of God. Between 1914 and 1927, the General Assembly had made it a point during their annual meetings to affirm the validity of snake-handling, fire-handling, and other associated handling rituals. These key theological points were often discussed by Assembly leaders during the organization's annual meetings, and were even approved as official doctrines of belief of the Church of God after 1914. However pressured by financial growth, middle-class appeasement, and a more mainstream ideology, these handling doctrines quickly became points of contention for the Assembly's leadership.³⁸ Taking heed to the council of progressive church leaders, the General Assembly used its voice during its 1928 annual meeting to publicly refute the practice of snake-handling and its official integration within church worship services. The Assembly went even further, rejecting the claim of the church's more rural snake-handling ministers who asserted that "if a minister does not handle a snake he is

³⁷ E. C. Clark, "An Exposition of Mark 16:18," *Church of God Evangel*, June 1, 1940, 5.

³⁸ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 89.

not a full Gospel minister.”³⁹

The repercussions of this public denouncement greatly affected the religious position of snake-handling believers within the Church of God. Without the official support of the General Assembly, snake-handlers quickly found themselves on the fringe of the organization, and void of any official voice or form of protest. The official exclusion of snake-handling and other handling rituals from the doctrine of the Church of God only exasperated this loss of power. It placed snake-handlers within the bounds of heterodoxy, and stripped them of the religious and cultural expressions that pulled them into the Church of God to begin with.

The General Assembly open disapproval with snake-handling ritualism was soon followed by other means of public censorship that greatly hindered the popularity and spread of snake-handling throughout the organization. E. C. Clark, one of the church’s most outspoken critics of snake-handling, used his position as the editor of the *Church of God Evangel* to limit the number of snake-handling reports published within the denomination’s weekly magazine.⁴⁰ As the 1930s progressed, Clark even went about the process of actively publishing anti snake-handling pieces within the *Evangel* that sought to challenge the necessity of handling rituals from a hermeneutical and theological perspective. The most destructive of these pieces emerged during the end of the 1930s during a series of court-cases between Appalachian handlers and the state of Kentucky. Ignoring all knowledge of the organization’s snake-handling past, the *Evangel* publicly

³⁹ *Minutes of the 23rd Annual General Assembly of the Church of God* (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1928), 42.

⁴⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 89.

denounced the religious suppositions held by snake-handlers, demeaning them as a sect “that has no recognition from [the Church of God].”⁴¹

This censorship came as a shock to Church of God snake-handlers who previously saw the *Evangel* as their greatest ideological and evangelical tool. During the denomination’s snake-handling revivals throughout the 1910s and 1920s, the periodical functioned as a powerful medium for handling believers--linking their revivals and happenings with similar congregants throughout the Church of God network. Popular Church of God snake-handling ministers like George Hensley and his followers found particular use for the broad reach of the *Evangel*, and successfully used the magazine to win personal support from the organization’s upper leadership.⁴² The censorship of snake-handling and handling revivals from the pages of the *Evangel* represented a break in this relationship and a subsequent weakening of snake-handling ideology from the religious discourse of the Church of God. Without the notoriety and support of the magazine, handlers could no longer share their experiences and stories with the greater Church of God body. Nor could these believers gather up the popularity and support needed to regain their prominence in the organization.

The impact of this religious rift within the Church of God left many Appalachian snake-handlers in a spiritual and social daze. For nearly two decades, the denomination had promoted itself as the institutional stronghold for the region’s handlers, and supplied these mountain believers with a powerful support that helped them overcome the social

⁴¹ E. L. Simmons, “Religion and Snakes,” *Church of God Evangel*, June 1, 1940, 4.

⁴² Dozens of revival narratives written by George Hensley or about his preaching/snake-handling are documented within the pages of the *Church of God Evangel* between 1914 and his official exodus from the church in 1918.

and economic battles that enveloped their lives. Without the support of the Church of God, many handlers simply did not know how to handle the intimidation that threatened their religious rituals and their cultural identity. In this, believers were forced, almost immediately, to reinvent the basis of their religious outlook to meet the threat.⁴³ As the mid-twentieth century progressed, this process of reinvention varied in style and approach.⁴⁴ However, working within this heterogeneity, one theme arose that linked the religious identity of all snake-handlers in the region--this being the notion of active rebellion.

During the initial years following the separation of snake-handling from the Church of God, many snake-handling believers attempted to restructure their religious identity by directly rebelling against the new theological dictates of their previous denomination. Shaken by the threats of heterodoxy and religious reprimands from above, many snake-handlers members simply continued to practice their rituals within their regular Church of God buildings.⁴⁵ This was the case along the outskirts of the Appalachia in 1935 at the Church of God in Odum, Georgia. During a small revival service “some boys...brought in a huge rattlesnake on the outside which had eight rattles

⁴³ For insight into this social/religious theory see John B. Holt, “Holiness Religion: Cultural Shock and Social Reorganization,” *American Sociological Review* 5, (October 1940), 740-747. Unlike Holt, however, I also assert that snake-handling religion was not only defensive minded, but also secured order by means of supplying offensive power to Appalachian’s via religious agency and religious identity.

⁴⁴ Marsha Maguire, “Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia,” *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 38, (Summer 1981), 168; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 73-74.

⁴⁵ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 89-91.

and a button.”⁴⁶ Members of the congregation who were present noted the anger of the snake, stating that when the boys “came to the door, you could hear those rattlers all over the church which was packed and people in the aisles and windows.” In a matter of minutes, members of the congregation rushed out the door toward the home of Brother Sanders, an elderly member from the countryside. Upon arriving at the service, the invigorated believer wasted no time and “pulled the screen [carrying the snake] back” and picked up the rattler with faith and power. Sanders handled the snake for a number of minutes, all the time rubbing the reptile “like a little kitten” and placing “him about his neck.” This act shocked all who were present, even the presiding minister. According to witnesses, “sinners screamed, cried and...hard-hearted men who fought holiness for years said ‘I’ll never doubt it any more’.”⁴⁷

Throughout the 1930s, instances like this occurred frequently throughout the denominational network of the Church of God--often in churches in and around central and southern Appalachia.⁴⁸ Most of the congregations in these areas were either founded before or during the Church of God’s handling revivals, and resolutely professed a degree of sympathy for handling culture and its adherence. For many members of these older

⁴⁶ “Snake Handled at Odum, Ga.,” *Church of God Evangel*, August 31, 1935, 9. Though this report found its way in the *Church of God Evangel* during the organization’s separation from snake-handling, the account presented is given in a somewhat positive tone. This is due mainly to the fact that the person reporting the event was from a rural Church of God congregation that still clung to snake-handling traditions more ardently. It is important to note, however, that narratives like these were hardly printed during the mid to late 1930s.

⁴⁷ “Snake Handled at Odum, Ga.,” *Church of God Evangel*, August 31, 1935, 15.

⁴⁸ Ralph Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 74; The handling of serpents within the Church of God during the 1930s and 1940s can also be seen through the various judicial injunctions against the denomination for snake-handling during the period. For this see Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 35, 80-81.

congregations, snake-handling functioned as a way of life and expression. Its active implementation represented the foundational culture of the denomination and trumped the “modern” theological dictates of church leaders. Following the footsteps of like-minded individuals like Brother Sanders, a number of these dissatisfied Church of God believers embraced this rebellious mindset. Using their position as denominational members, they constructed a new religious identity that utilized handling rituals as a tool to counter the apostasy and apathy that they saw within the church’s new hierarchy. Many of these believers interpreted their actions in Biblical terms. Likening themselves to the prophets of the Old Testament, they pictured their rebellion as a beacon against waywardness of the church and a light toward “traditional” truths.⁴⁹

In some instances these self-ascribed snake-handling prophets enacted their rebellion with a degree of restraint and seclusion. Care was given to respect the order of worship and some of the rudimentary guidelines of the Church of God. However, in large part, these formalities were often neglected by angry snake-handlers and pushed aside by their self-appointed goal of purifying their denomination. This latter attitude was expressed by Mrs. Frank Dasher and other believers during a Church of God handling revival in Valdosta, Georgia in the early 1930s. Following the handling of two snakes, Mrs. Dasher scolded the theological direction of Church of God leaders and petitioned followers to respect the various signs and wonders given by the Father to the faithful. “If we wish to grow in wisdom and knowledge of God,” she asserted, “we should never resist his power but give ourselves completely over into His hands that He might be able

⁴⁹ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 92-93.

to use us for His glory.”⁵⁰

Overall, the acts of rebellion performed by snake-handling members like Dasher and Sanders brought about a series of responses that varied in effectiveness. In the short term, the vigor wrought by these so-called “prophets” succeeded in extending the life of handling rituals within Appalachian Church of God congregations well into the middle and late 1930s. These churches, while regulated and pressured by church officials, continued to provide a religious and cultural outlet for numerous snake-handling believers in need of support and social acceptance.⁵¹ Yet, to many practicing believers these short term benefits were overshadowed by the growing intolerance of the Church of God and its movement away from snake-handling culture. As the mid-twentieth century progressed, the same mountain churches that periodically permitted handling revivals completely shifted away from the practice as more “orthodox” ministers replaced their handling predecessors. Members sympathetic to snake-handling rituals found themselves in the spiritual crosshairs of these new pastors, and little by little they were gradually pushed out from their old congregations. This systematic process marked the final separation of the Church of God from snake-handling doctrine. By the early 1950s the practice ceased to function within the denomination.⁵²

While some snake-handlers attempted to maintain their beliefs and practices within the confines of the Church of God, a vast number of snake-handlers saw the evolving attitude of the denomination as an excuse to break off from the church and

⁵⁰ Mrs. Frank Dasher, “Serpents Handled,” *Church of God Evangel*, October, 18, 1930, 4.

⁵¹ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 87-89.

⁵² Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 90-91.

create their own independent congregations. On the surface, many of these new denominations mimicked the approaches and cultural perspectives of the early Church of God. They denoted a similar individualist mindset that integrated the concepts of revivalism and Appalachian dualism into their worship structure and theological make-up. However, in reaction to the direction of the organization during the late 1920s and 1930s, many of these splinter groups refused to accept prospects of theological appeasement and social respectability that plagued their former denomination. Infused with a degree of anger and rebellion, a large number of these new snake-handling churches instituted a more rigorous doctrine in an effort to solidify the purity of their movement.⁵³

One of the most influential Church of God ministers to formally break away from the denomination in an act of rebellion was former General Overseer and snake-handling proponent A. J. Tomlinson. As mentioned earlier, Tomlinson functioned as the chief proponent of snake-handling during the height of the Church of God snake-handling revivals between 1914 and 1928. During his tenure as the Church of God's General Overseer, he moved the denomination into alignment with the ideals of snake-handling and motivated those under his leadership to actively embrace handling rituals as tools for worship and evangelism.⁵⁴

In business-like fashion Tomlinson organized the Church of God around his

⁵³ Mary Lee Daugherty, "Serpent Handlers," *Christianity in Appalachia*, 148-150.

⁵⁴ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 40-43; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 86-87; Weston LaBarre, *They Shall Take Up Serpents: Psychology of the Southern Snake-Handling Cult* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 11-23; Randall Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 252-253.

ideology, taking care to use church organs like the *Church of God Evangel* and other smaller publications to project his sympathies for snake-handling and revivalism.⁵⁵ This methodology proved successful for a short time. As the denomination's snake-handling revivals hit their high mark, the General Overseer's popularity continued to rise as seen in his continual election to church office.⁵⁶ However as the revivals began to wane during the 1920s, and the gospel of snake-handling confronted dissent, the power of A. J. Tomlinson steadily decreased.

It is safe to assert that Tomlinson's devotion to handling ritualism contributed to his gradual fall from grace in the Church of God. While some church leaders like Charles Conn and F. J. Lee condoned handling rituals during the 1910s and 1920s, they developed a discomfort for its regular practice and implementation. Charles Conn would come to regret his support of snake-handling altogether during the latter years of his life, and even omitted his contributions to the Church of God's snake-handling revivals in his personal memoirs.⁵⁷ To these leaders, Tomlinson's religious devotion to handling ritualism proved disconcerting and dangerous for the organization. He had to be removed if the denomination was to thrive.

Throughout 1922, anti-Tomlinson church leaders attempted multiple times to bring discredit the General Overseer through attempted denominational coups, and every time their efforts were met with failure. Yet by the summer of 1923, the endeavors of these dissidents finally succeeded in finding solid traction. Charges of financial

⁵⁵ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 22-23.

⁵⁶ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 22.

⁵⁷ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 90-91.

misconduct were filed against Tomlinson and an investigative committee was organized to look into his personal accounts. With two-thirds of the committee actively against him politically and theologically, the minister did not stand a chance and was aptly removed leadership and regular fellowship.⁵⁸ This dismissal did not stop Tomlinson and those within the Church of God who remained loyal to his leadership. Aided by a newfound boldness and feeling of justification, the ousted minister started his own splinter denomination, derided by his enemies as the “Tomlinson Church of God”, but formally named the Church of God of Prophecy. Like the original Church of God, this new organization centered in the mountain town of Cleveland, Tennessee and drew its membership from surrounding Appalachian communities and population hubs.⁵⁹

As Tomlinson’s church slowly expanded throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the minister and his followers used their disdain for the original Church of God to fuel the religious and cultural identity of the new denomination. The main way that this was accomplished was through an adamant rejection of the Church of God’s more mainstream ideals, a sound belief in the precepts of Biblical literalism, and a strict adherence to supernatural rituals like snake-handling and fire-tossing.⁶⁰ In an church-wide message in the *White Wing Messenger*, the official periodical of the Church of God of Prophecy, Tomlinson laid out his devotion to handling ritualism and its centrality within the new

⁵⁸ Charles W. Conn, *Like a Mighty Army: A History of the Church of God, 1886-1995* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 1996), 197-220; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 23-29; Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 205-206.

⁵⁹ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 52-57; Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 27-31; Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 116.

⁶⁰ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 53-56.

denomination:

“The Church of God [of Prophecy] stands for the whole Bible rightly divided. We accept it all just as it reads. We don’t leave out anything in the blessed Book. Then we take the New Testament as our only rule of faith and practice, government and discipline. In the New Testament are the signs that follow believers. They are one of our teachings made prominent and I believe they are an important part. Of course all the Bible is important, but when we think what the signs meant to the early Church, then I fell they are of vast importance in these last days.”⁶¹

Tomlinson continued on, denouncing the less fundamentalist direction of the original Church of God while pressing his followers to continue on in their mission of spreading the Gospel of snake-handling and Biblical literalism:

“Some people will accept the new tongues, casting out devils and...laying hands on the sick, but they want to make the clause that refers to the serpent read like the one about the deadly things, but the Scripture still reads “they shall take up serpents.” It doesn’t say if we pick up a serpent accidentally, it won’t hurt us. God has been glorified and people blessed more times than one in these last days by the handling of serpents. When the enemy has been raging against us and snakes have been brought out to services, God has manifested his power through His children and the serpents were taken up and many times they were as gentle as a pet. Even when they have injected their venom into the flesh of God’s children, no ill effects were suffered. We do not make a show of taking up serpents, but if they are brought to us and God’s power is present to manifest this sign that follows believers, then we give God the Glory for it.”⁶²

To Tomlinson and his followers, the Church of God of Prophecy represented the true voice of snake-handling culture and religiosity for Appalachian folk. Unhindered by the ideological and theological compromises that hampered the original Church of God, this new denomination pictured itself as a restoration of the belief system proscribed by

⁶¹ A. J. Tomlinson, “Signs Following Believers,” *White Wing Messenger*, 1. Accessed in box entitled “Serpent Handling” at the Dixon Pentecostal Research Library, Cleveland, TN.

⁶² A. J. Tomlinson, “Signs Following Believers,” *White Wing Messenger*, 2; 4.

the founders of mountain snake-handling during the turn of the twentieth-century. The denomination's rebellious and separatist attitude strengthened the core of the organization around the precepts of snake-handling and handling rituals. By actively removing themselves from the original Church of God, these members, and Tomlinson himself, were able to vilify the Church of God as surrendering to progressive ideology and a watered-down religious message. Thus, Tomlinson and the Church of God of Prophecy's leadership succeeded in promoting their denomination as the true religious medium for the region's dispossessed and exploited. As these church leaders saw it, the Church of God of Prophecy was the new voice of Appalachian snake-handling, and the new cultural outlet for the implementation of Appalachian dualism.

Progressing throughout the 1930s, this religious and cultural message worked quite well for Tomlinson and his snake-handling congregation. While revival reports in the *White Wing Messenger* saw a reduction in the number of stories printed about snake-handling rituals throughout the Great Depression, numerous expository pieces supporting the use of snakes during worship continued to appear. Anthropologist Ralph Hood Jr., writing in his book *Them That Believe*, attributes this reduction in some degree to new doctrinal issues that gripped the denomination during the 1930s; however, he asserts that the practice remained strong within the organization throughout the mid-twentieth century, commanding the regular support of church leaders and lay members alike.⁶³ Robert Mapes Anderson supports this assertion in his observation of the 1936 Religious Census, which placed the membership of the Church of God of Prophecy at nearly

⁶³ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 55-56.

19,000. This number, while small compared to the total membership of more mainline denominations, emphasizes that the Church of God of Prophecy functioned as a vibrant outlet for snake-handling and handling ritualism within the more isolated and less densely populated areas in and around southern Appalachia.⁶⁴ As the century waned on, the Church of God of Prophecy would remain strong and steadfast in its devotion to snake-handling ritualism, and more importantly to the cultural and religious precepts of Appalachian dualism.

While the rebellious attitude of A. J. Tomlinson succeeded in forging a new path for Appalachian snake-handling, it was the ministry of another break-away Church of God minister, George Hensley that contributed most to the fragmentation of mountain snake-handling. During the Church of God snake-handling revivals of the 1910s and 1920s, Hensley played a monumental role in propagating handling rituals within the organization's small denominational network. His revivals in Cleveland, Tennessee and Northern Alabama succeeded in bringing snake-handling to the attention of A. J. Tomlinson and F. J. Lee. Moreover, the narration of his faith and spiritual works within the *Church of God Evangel* assisted in introducing handling rituals to secluded churches that did not have direct access to itinerant snake-handling ministers.⁶⁵

These spiritual contributions to the Church of God continued fluidly until 1918 when Hensley abruptly left his post, and his family. Throughout Hensley's life, the

⁶⁴ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 116-117. The table amassed by Anderson places the total membership of Tomlinson's church at just under half of the total membership of the Church of God (Cleveland).

⁶⁵ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 39-48; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 40-47; Mary Lee Daugherty, "Serpent Handlers," 148-150; Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 18-20.

minister struggled with the vices of infidelity and alcoholism. During his four year term with the Church of God, he remained sober and committed to his wife, Amanda, despite his regular traveling. However by the summer of 1918, Hensley's faithfulness wavered and the young preacher began to revisit his old habits and temptations. He began drinking heavily after revival meetings and soon became abusive with his wife and kids.⁶⁶ These actions elicited the anger of many of Hensley's closest supporters and advocates, and soon the preacher carried a loaded pistol for protection. In time though, even the threat of a handgun couldn't protect Hensley from his critics. Leaders within the Church of God began to outwardly protest the minister, and within a matter of weeks Hensley found himself excluded from church meetings. These denominational woes were followed by other threats, and following a scuffle with a jealous neighbor who wished to run off with Hensley's wife, the beaten minister resigned from his post--stating on his Revocation of Ministry form that the reason stemmed from "much trouble at home."⁶⁷

The minister's waywardness continued into the early 1920s. After being arrested for moonshining and alcohol distribution in Hamilton County, Tennessee, Hensley was sentenced to four months in a county workhouse. This stint on the county chain gang proved transformative for Hensley, and following his crafty escape from prison, he rededicated his life to spreading the Gospel of snake-handling.⁶⁸ Upon leading a series of low key independent handling services in Tennessee, Hensley made his way up to Ohio

⁶⁶ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 46-48.

⁶⁷ Oral account given by George Hensley's granddaughter, La Creta Simmons, July 3, 1988, Cited from David Kimbrough's book *Taking Up Serpents*, 47.

⁶⁸ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 47-48.

and assumed control over a small number of snake-handling congregations near Cleveland.

Hensley quickly found new popularity in the area, mainly among the area's local population of Appalachian migrants who had initially traveled to the state following the industrial boom of the First World War.⁶⁹ While geographically separated from their regional roots, Hensley discovered that many of these Appalachian migrants still remained attached to their mountain heritage. The cultural dualism needed for the perpetuation of snake-handling still resonated; further, a number of the Appalachian migrants who flocked to southern and central Ohio during the industrial push of the early 1920s were themselves Church of God members. Many of these individuals had either witnessed handling rituals firsthand in their former churches, or practiced them on a personal basis.⁷⁰ Being resourceful and rebellious by nature, Hensley utilized this religious base as the foundation for his new ministry. Gradually, he began the process of pushing these believers away from the Church of God, and into his own realm of leadership. This approach proved successful, and by the late 1920s the highlands of southern Ohio laid claim to a strong band of independent snake-handlers who functioned

⁶⁹ For information on the migration of snake-handlers to Ohio see David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 48; Steven M. Kane, "Holy Ghost People: The Snake-Handlers of Southern Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 4 (Spring, 1974), 258; Steven M. Kane, "Ritual Possession in a Southern Appalachian Religious Sect," *The Journal Of American Folklore* 346 (Oct-Dec, 1974), 292-302. For information leading to the migration of Appalachians to Ohio after WWI see James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 12-14, 36, 63-65; Paul Salstrom, "The Great Depression," *High Mountains Rising: Appalachia In Time and Place*, ed. Richard A. Straw and H. Tyler Blethen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 90-91.

⁷⁰ The *Minutes of the 23rd Annual Assembly of the Church of God* places the total number of Church of God congregation in Ohio at 21 churches, with major congregations in Canton, Cleveland, and Cincinnati (80); Ralph W. Hood, Jr., *Them That Believe*, 46-47.

autonomously from the Church of God.⁷¹

While Hensley's religious career in Ohio elevated the minister to a new degree of spiritual fame, he soon found himself on the road in search of new preaching territory. Like many Appalachian preachers of the time, Hensley's vocation as a minister did not provide the material means necessary for survival. Apart from doing odd jobs, he depended on coal mining and manual labor to feed his second wife and her children, and fuel his ministry.⁷² With the onset of the Great Depression during the 1930s Hensley, like countless other common laborers, was forced to move to find work.⁷³ By 1932, this quest for work landed Hensley and his snake-handling belief system in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. Hungry but passionate to grow his name and ministry, the preacher quickly found favor among the leadership at the East Pineville Church of God and was invited to preach by the founder minister, Jim Jackson.⁷⁴

At first, it was clear that Hensley hesitated to realign himself with the official Church of God. These personal introspections quickly subsided, however, when it became evident that Jackson and his followers were in no way sympathetic to the denomination's new direction. As with other small churches along the periphery of the Church of God's denominational influence, the congregation of East Pineville remained

⁷¹ Thomas Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 44. Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 47.

⁷² David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 48; Thomas Burton, *Serpent Handling Believers*, 44.

⁷³ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 36; Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 238-242; Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 165-187; Paul Salstrom, "The Great Depression," 88-100.

⁷⁴ Jimmy Morrow, *Taking Up Serpents*, 20; David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 50-51.

relatively autonomous and independent.⁷⁵ With this weight lifted, Hensley soon used his influence to climb the leadership ranks within the small church. He amazed local onlookers and congregants with his handling skills, and used his time at the pulpit to structure the church around the concepts of faith-healing and snake-handling. Historian David Kimbrough notes one amazing revival service in 1932 where Hensley shocked the surrounding crowd by handling a series of snakes before a crowd of dissenters. Standing on the steps of the Pineville courthouse, the minister and a group of believers assailed onlookers and local officials with Biblical passages, urging them to confess their sins and take up serpents. After listening for a number of minutes, a small group of hecklers from among the crowd took up a copperhead and ran a copper wire through its body in protest to Hensley's words. Following this, the group rushed up to the creek behind East Pineville and dumped the dead serpent in water. Hensley was furious. In a spiritual rage, he planned a series of handling revivals during the subsequent months aimed at countering the attacks of these dissenters and other like them. The effect of these revivals quickly took hold of the local population, and those who had once viewed Hensley as a fanatic soon saw themselves handling serpents, tossing fiery coals, and anointing their neighbors with oil.⁷⁶

Hensley's independent minded and religious approach to snake-handling did not remain secluded in East Pineville, but spread throughout Kentucky and northern Tennessee by means of convicted converts. Being unemployed and looking for work,

⁷⁵ For the insight into the tensions between modernized Church of God congregations and more traditional congregations see Donald N. Bowdle, "Holiness in the Highlands," *Christianity in Appalachia*, 247-252.

⁷⁶ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 49-57.

many of these converts took embraced the handling rituals that they experienced and disseminated the practice along their migrant travels. Park Saylor, one of Hensley's closest allies in Kentucky, introduced snake-handling to hundreds of fellow coal miners during his search for mining work during the mid-1930s.⁷⁷ While it is apparent that Saylor and other migrant handlers from East Pineville continued to hold some ties to the Church of God during their initial conversion to snake-handling, these traveling ministers often formed independent churches that met their specific doctrinal ideals.⁷⁸ In this way, the mountains of central and southern soon became the home to a countless assortment of small snake-handling denominations that were, in their own individual way, autonomous and spiritually unique.

Many of these new independent snake-handling congregations perpetuated the theological and ideological of Hensley, Tomlinson, and other former Church of God adherents. Taking up the title of "Trinitarian" snake-handlers, these believers conformed to many of the doctrines set out by the early Church of God during its initial creation-- most specifically the belief in a triune Godhead, a literal interpretation of Scripture, and a fierce devotion to divine healing and speaking in tongues. In line with these theological similarities many of these Trinitarian snake-handlers upheld the holiness attitudes of emotionalism, pietism, and moralism projected by the early Church of God adherents.

Women were expected to dress modestly and act respectfully, while men were

⁷⁷ For information on the migration of handling ministers see Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them that Believe*, 37-51; For information on the migrant ministry of Park Saylor see David Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents*, 56-57.

⁷⁸ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 89-91.

encouraged not to consume tobacco or alcohol.⁷⁹

Following the paths laid out by Hensley and other ex-Church of God ministers, many of these independent Trinitarian congregations relied heavily upon the passion of their converts to spread the message of snake-handling throughout the interior of the Appalachian region. As with Hensley during the late 1920s, a number of these itinerant ministers battled with the Church of God and other Holiness denominations for local power and religious prestige. However, unlike these rival denominations, Trinitarian snake-handlers were able to utilize the unique and spiritual aspects of their religious ritualism to quickly draw crowds and amass substantial mountain followings.⁸⁰

One Trinitarian handler who quickly established strong independent snake-handling fellowships was one of George Hensley's closest religious friends, Sill Eads. Throughout his religious career, Eads established himself as a staunch religious fundamentalist who not only possessed a sharp tongue but also a quick-wit and adaptive mind. Assisting Hensley and Park Saylor as a leader of the East Pineville Church of God during the late 1920s and early 1930s, Eads molded himself into one of the most energetic independent snake-handling evangelists in Kentucky and eastern Tennessee. Evidence of this religious activeness is seen through the numerous missionary endeavors undertaken by Eads throughout the region prior to his death in 1946. During one twenty-six day tour throughout the rural hills of eastern Kentucky in 1934, Eads and two other

⁷⁹ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 230-232; Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 9-13.

⁸⁰ The basis of this assertion rests primarily upon the ministries of George Hensley, the Saylor, and some of Hensley's Trinitarian followers whose ministries were recorded orally and through written documentation. See Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 21-42; David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 59-93.

itinerant handling preachers showcased their religious faith before a crowd of onlookers and skeptics outside of a Works Progress Administration (WPA) camp near Hyden, Kentucky. Pressured by two workers to handle a large rattlesnake, Eads eagerly placed his hand into a box of angry serpents and was brutally bitten on the hand by an eastern diamond back. With blood pouring down his hand and onto his shirt, the preacher simply dismissed the bite and went about his business of preparing for that night's revival service.

Those who witnessed the event that afternoon quickly spread the news of the attack throughout the mountainside, and that evening a large crowd amassed around Eads' make-shift tent to see the minister's religious rituals in person. The onlookers were not disappointed. At the height of the service Eads and a handful of convicted believers took hold of a large number of poisonous snakes--passing them about with passion. The effect of this faith proved advantageous for the minister and those present. By the end of the night souls were saved, bodies were physically healed, and in an odd turn of events dozens of moonshining stills were destroyed.⁸¹

As the direction of snake-handling moved further and further away from its ties to the Church of God, the religious workings of independent Trinitarian ministers like Eads and Hensley became more pronounced and influential for the movement. Throughout the geographical interior of Appalachia, these itinerant ministers used their rituals and words to establish strong and insulated religious networks that met the cultural and spiritual

⁸¹ History into the life of Sill Eads and this religious account is discussed heavily by David Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents*, 98-100.

needs of the region's old and new snake-handling believers.⁸² As stated before, the workings of Park Saylor and other handling converts succeeded in transforming portions of eastern Kentucky and West Virginia into epicenters of snake-handling ritualism. The congregations in these areas were only rivaled by the wide assortment of independent Trinitarian congregations in eastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, and western North Carolina.⁸³

Apart from Trinitarian sects, the independent splintering of snake-handling also set about the creation of other handling congregations that varied theologically from the ideals of the Church of God. The most pronounced group within this sub-sect came to be known during the Great Depression as "Jesus Only" or "Jesus' Name" believers. Like their Trinitarian counterparts, these snake-handlers linked their religious and cultural roots to the initial handling ritualism instituted and practiced by the Church of God during the 1910s and 1920s. They believed fervently in the importance of revivalism and personal emotionalism within their religious structure, and even went as far as to welcome Trinitarian ministers and itinerant evangelists into their fold as guest preachers on occasion.⁸⁴ However with these similarities, Jesus' Name snake-handlers appropriated a different theological perspective than their Trinitarian counterparts--magnifying, in essence, their religious individuality and their own form of religious power. The main

⁸² Marsha Maguire, "Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia," 170-171.

⁸³ Marsha Maguire, "Confirming the Word: Snake-Handling Sects in Southern Appalachia." 174; Steven Kane, "Holy Ghost People: The Snake-Handlers of Southern Appalachia," 258.

⁸⁴ Jimmy Morrow makes note in numerous oral accounts given to Ralph. W. Hood Jr. that George Hensley and the Saylor--prominent Trinitarians--often made appearances at Jesus' Only revivals and even contributed to some of this congregation's formation. See Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 21-28.

point of disconnect between these two groups was the issue of the Trinity and the functionality of the Godhead. While Trinitarians believed fully in a three-person Godhead consisting of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Jesus' Name snake-handlers rested their faith solely in the spiritual power of Christ. Members were baptized in the only in the name of Jesus, and handling rituals were practiced with the faith and grace given by the Son.⁸⁵

Though this theological difference proved insignificant to some independent snake-handling believers, it accounted for some indifference and tension in some Appalachian communities. According to an oral account given by Jimmy Morrow, Trinitarian snake-handlers often treated their Jesus' Name contemporaries with disrespect and disdain, especially during the initial growth of independent handling congregations in the 1930s and early 1940s. He asserts that during one specific interaction in eastern Tennessee a group of Trinitarian believers became irate at the proposal of their pastor to donate a set of pews to a Jesus' Name congregation across the valley. Angered at the thought of allying themselves with religious deviants, the group began spreading rumors throughout the community about members of the Jesus' Name church until the Trinitarian minister finally broke down and retracted his kind offer. Morrow states that controversies like these regularly occurred throughout the mid-twentieth century; however, more often than not, both groups remained cordial with each other--desiring a peaceful coexistence rather than open confrontation.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 9-13

⁸⁶ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 10-12.

As with Trinitarian snake-handlers, independent Jesus' Name believers went about the 1930s with a desire to spread their gospel and cultural identity throughout the Appalachian mountainside. While functioning from a smaller and less connected religious base than their Trinitarian counterparts, they still remained active in their pursuit to evangelize via revivals and itinerancy. One of the fastest growing settings for Jesus' Name snake-handling during the height of the Depression were the hills of southern Virginia. Torn apart by the economic pressures of the 1930s and the effects of out-migration, cities like Richmond and St. Charles became popular preaching hubs for itinerant snake-handling ministers looking for downtrodden and restless congregants.⁸⁷ These religious measures netted some success for handling preachers during the early half of the decade; however, it wasn't until 1935 that the vivacity of snake-handling exploded with the direct missionary support of George Hensley and some of his closest followers. Throughout the spring and summer of that year, Hensley and a number of his converts had been invited to lead a number of Jesus' Name revivals which aimed at strengthening the popularity of snake-handling within migrant communities in the state. The services strengthened the numbers of movement directly, and succeeded in elevating the notoriety of snake-handling within the local public discourse.⁸⁸

This notoriety, however, quickly collided with Hensley's rebellious attitude, and quickly lead to the creation of a small religious riot within the area. Psychologically and economically torn apart by the stresses of migration and unemployment nearly "500

⁸⁷ Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 32; Phillip J. Obermiller, "Migration," *High Mountains Rising*, 90-94.

⁸⁸ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 102-103.

followers of George Hensley” asserted their growing angst by staging “a near riot on the highway” near Ramsey, Virginia during the summer of 1935. Harboring the rebellious notions coveted by their fiery leaders, these Jesus’ Name believers stood along the roadway “passing a three-foot mountain rattler from hand to hand.” These signs escalated in intensity until “Clifford Greear, [a] 12-year-old mountain boy” made his way towards the snake under the influence of the Holy Spirit. “Seizing the squirming snake in one hand” the young boy “tore the head from its body with the other.” Seeing the event transpire, a handful of “the faithful pressed close around him,” and praised the youth for his unresolved faith.⁸⁹

Outside of southern Virginia, the intensity of Jesus’ Name snake-handling took root within the confines of other Appalachian communities. Congregations developed throughout the interior of the region in places like southern Kentucky, West Virginia, and northern Georgia.⁹⁰ However, like Trinitarian snake-handling, the epicenter of the Jesus’ Name tradition centered on the geographical heart of snake-handling--eastern Tennessee. Throughout the 1930s, Jesus’ Name congregations rivaled Trinitarian congregations throughout the rural outskirts of eastern Tennessee and along the border of western North Carolina. Large independent fellowships formed in cities like Newport, Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Del Rio, drawing an assortment of old and new snake-handling practitioners to their pews. As the twentieth-century progressed, these new congregations would continue to grow and thrive within the state, aiding, in essence, the heterogeneity

⁸⁹ “Wave Rattler in Frenzy,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1935.

⁹⁰ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 7-10.

of the snake-handling movement within the region.⁹¹

While the expansion of independent snake-handling made valuable inroads within the geographical borders of Appalachia during the Depression, its religious influence was also felt throughout the outskirts of major industrial hubs along the exterior of the Appalachian region. Manufacturing hubs in Michigan, Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania reemerged as gathering points for snake-handling believers looking for work and religious expression.⁹² In many of these areas, the success of independent snake-handling rested in its cultural pull with migrant Appalachian workers, and the subsequent popularity of snake-handling revivals within neighborhoods and boroughs overtaken by traveling mountain families looking for steady work. The mass concentration of mountain families within these neighborhoods prompted the creation of an environment where unifying Appalachian cultural ideals, like Appalachian dualism, could take root and spread with particular ease. All in all, this process eased the dissemination of snake-handling by traveling handling ministers, and in turn strengthened the influence of independent congregations as mediums for believers to showcase their “Appalachianness.”⁹³

This understanding proved to be the case for Robert Reed, an Appalachian Trinitarian working at the government Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp near Mount Union Pennsylvania. Using what *The New York Times* described as series of

⁹¹ Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 30-44; To understand the strength of snake-handling in Tennessee during after 1960 see Fred Brown, *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and their Faith* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), 3-127.

⁹² Phillip J. Obermiller, “Migration,” 90-94; James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 28-32.

⁹³ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 171-174.

“hillbilly tunes from a mouth organ,” Reed orchestrated a series of snake-handling services at the local CCC camp with the intent recreating the cultural atmosphere of his Appalachian homeland.⁹⁴ Showcasing a specific zeal for his spiritual faith, Reed’s actions baffled the supervisors of the CCC camp who had neither witnessed the handling of snakes nor understood its religious and cultural significance. In utter disbelief these non-Appalachian overseers equated the snake-handling actions to fanaticism and regional ignorance.

However, to Reed and those who participated within the camp’s snake-handling revival, these handling rituals functioned as a tool of comfort and regional memory. It created a cultural and religious platform that linked these migrant workers back to their Appalachian roots, and provided a method for these individuals to showcase their non-conformity and mountain pride. Though not reported, the popularity proscribed by Reed’s introduction of snake-handling in the camp reinforced the religious identity proscribed by Appalachian snake-handling, and, in effect, its cultural solidity to those living and working outside the mountains.

As the Great Depression came to an end the religious and cultural popularity of snake-handling continued to expand fluidly within Appalachia and within migrant Appalachian communities. The separation of the movement from the denominational confines of the Church of God set in motion a monumental shift in the direction of snake-handling that equated not only to numerical growth, but also theological and religious ingenuity.

⁹⁴ “CCC Man Charms Snakes with Mouth-Organ Tunes,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1935.

While the Church of God succeeded in providing a strong and stable medium for snake-handling during the 1910s and 1920s, it was not able to fully handle the theological extremes associated with its distinct ritualism. By rebelling and moving from the denomination, snake-handlers were able to properly transform snake-handling into a religious outlet that properly displayed the cultural ideals and regional perspectives proscribed by Appalachian dualism.

For many Appalachian snake-handlers, this new spiritual direction opened the movement up to the freedoms allowed by theological subjectivity and religious pluralism. As with the Primitive Baptist and Cumberland Presbyterians before them, religious independence allowed these individuals to transform religion in a way that met their specific economic, social, and cultural needs.⁹⁵ Having a choice between Trinitarian and Jesus' Name worship provided these believers with a heightened notion of power that equated to more agency and personal choice. Moreover, the power to migrate with these new independent ideologies worked in a way to broaden the appeal of snake-handling culture and offered a sense of regional solidity to Appalachians torn asunder by unemployment and economic diaspora. With this then, snake-handling truly took the form as an outlet of "Appalachianess"--a distinct regional outlook that encapsulated the cultural uniqueness of the Appalachian perspective from the rest of the nation.

⁹⁵ For information pertaining to the independent nature of Appalachia's Primitive Baptists see Melanie L. Slovine, "Traditionalism, Antimission, and the Primitive Baptist Religion," *Reshaping the Image of Appalachia*, ed. Loyal Jones (Berea: The Berea College Appalachia Center, 1986), 32-45; Howard Dorgan, *Giving Glory to God in Appalachia: Worship Practices of Six Baptist Subdenominations* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press 1987), 8-20. For information on the independent nature of the Cumberland Presbyterians see Loyal Jones, "Mountain Religion," *Christianity in Appalachia*, 92-95; Deborah Vansau McCauley, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 386-387.

As the 1940s and 1950s came into motion, the fabric of this uniqueness, and the distinct rebelliousness that overtook the movement during the Great Depression, would function to mold the religious identity of snake-handling in a new direction. The rise of social and economic change within Appalachia, the growth of out-migration, and the encroachment of external pressure from state and federal agencies would transform mountain snake-handling into a vehicle of public conflict and controversy.⁹⁶

Like the snake-handling revivals during the 1910s and 1920s, these conflicts would not revolve around social elites or political leaders, but the lives of ordinary Appalachians who were simply wishing to live their lives and worship their God with some power and respect. Ordinary mountain men like W. T. Lipham whose handling faith would place him at odds with country leaders and earned him a stint in jail, and Ed Allison whose leadership at an independent snake-handling church would equate to a sound beating by the Ku Klux Klan--these were the believers who would emerge during the 1940s and 1950s and harbingers of snake-handling religiosity and Appalachian dualism.⁹⁷ As seen in the hardship partaken by these two men, the mid twentieth-century was to be a time of turmoil for these mountain folk. It would be, most defiantly, a time of trail and pain.

⁹⁶ The pressures of out-migration and state regulation on snake-handling is discussed intently by David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 103-116. For more information concerning Appalachian out migration during the 1940s and 1950s see Phillip J. Obermiller, *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*, 3-66; Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland*, 305-324.

⁹⁷ "Snake Defilers Jailed," *New York Times*, August 18, 1940; "Dolly Pond Snake Handlers Beaten in KKK Church Raid: Probe Begun," *Chattanooga Daily-Banner*, May 12, 1949.

CHAPTER FOUR: “IN THIS WORLD THERE WILL BE TROUBLE, BUT BE YE NOT AFRAID”: CONFLICT, VIOLENCE, AND APPALACHIA SNAKE-HANDLING IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

*My warfare will soon be ended,
My race is almost run,
My warfare will soon be ended,
Then I am going home.*

*You can rebuke me all you want too,
I am traveling home to God,
I am well acquainted with the crosses,
And all my ways are very hard.*

*No difference where I travel,
It matters not where I be,
There's always somebody ready,
To point a finger of scorn at me.*

God bless them holiness people.¹

Over five thousands onlookers flocked to the church grounds of the Holiness Faith Healers on the morning of July 29, 1945. Nestled in the mountains of southwest Virginia, near the outskirts of St. Charles, the small congregation had recently stumbled into notoriety for its snake-handling practices and revival services. For a good part of the year the Reverend William Parson, the leader of the group, and twenty other snake-handling ministers had flocked to St. Charles and other Appalachian communities in the region with the goal of spreading their Gospel message among the masses. Instances of divine healing, tongues, and the consumption of fire and poison marked the path of these

¹ “My Warfare Will Soon Be Ended,” *Holiness Hymns* (Lenoir City: B.O. Rosenbaum), 21.

charismatic services during the previous months-contributing to a degree in strengthening the local support and popularity of the movement. As the surrounding countryside began to gather around Rev. Parson and followers that July morning, the vivacity of this popularity only increased in its effect and intensity.²

Signs and wonders quickly manifested during the early hours of the revival. Limping and wailing in pain, two infirm women broke through the crowd of onlookers and slowly made their way to the altar in an effort to be among the first healed by the Holy Spirit. Seeing the women and their pain, Rev. Parson approached the women and began applying “olive oil on their faces” and showering them with prayers and spiritual petitions. The ritual sparked the enthusiasm of other believers in the crowd, and in a matter of minutes “the women left--healed.”³

The apparent miracle set off frenzy among the believers present. Paul Dotson, a prominent member of the Holiness Faith Healers, saw the healing as a sign from God and “went to his automobile and pulled out a large box” from the trunk. As he set the container near the altar, “eight big reptiles” were pulled out of the box and “twirl[ed] about the head of the...worshippers.” The snake-handling ritual continued for a number of seconds without interruption; however, in a mad rush “the police went into the...scramble of worshipers and snakes, waving nightsticks and shouting.”⁴

The intensity of the raid sent the crowd into panic, and many of the handlers

² “Police Raid Virginia Snake Sect and Kill 4 of Their 8 Rattlers,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1945, 21.

³ “Police Raid Virginia Snake Sect and Kill 4 of Their 8 Rattlers,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1945, 21.

⁴ “Police Raid Virginia Snake Sect and Kill 4 of Their 8 Rattlers,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1945, 21.

rushed out of the field in utter confusion. Yet for a number of believers present, this confrontation with the law seemed advantageous and spiritually beneficial. Threatened with a baton, one handler mocked the officers by touching “his lips to the forked tongue of a big snake.” Another man attempted to fool his captors by slipping “a big rattler under his shirt, hiding it close to his chest.” The snake was only discovered when “an officer, in escorting the prisoner to a far side of the patrol car, felt the cold coils” and clubbed the serpent to death. These acts of defiance were supplemented by the taunts of other snake-handlers along the outskirts of the field. When threatened with arrest, many of these believers simply ran past their captors with jibes to ‘Come and get me’ and ‘Praise the Lord’.⁵

As the afternoon progressed, the local police raid succeeded in catching four snake-handlers. Along with the arrests, three snakes were exterminated and other serpents were apprehended by officers as evidence against the accused. The intensity of these arrests were strengthened by a series of threats issued the next day by the state’s Governor, Colgate Darden. Seeing the snake-handling group as a menace to safety of Virginia, Darden asserted, “that he would break up any further handling of poisonous snakes by ‘faith healers’ in the southwest Virginia mountains.” He followed this warning with a strong emphasis “that sufficient law existed,” and pledged to use police force to put a stop to any further handling revivals.⁶

These threats fell on deaf ears. Parson lashed out at the governor’s declaration,

⁵ “Police Raid Virginia Snake Sect and Kill 4 of Their 8 Rattlers,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1945, 21.

⁶ “Faith Healers Defy Governor on Snake Handling,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1945, F8.

and contested to his followers that the bureaucrat could not trample on their religious freedoms. In a spirit of conflict and rebellion, the enraged minister set about the process of orchestrating a series of public handling services throughout the local mountain-side aimed at subverting the dictates of the Governor and state officials.⁷

Over the next week, these revivals progressed with little trouble from dissenters or police officials. Snakes were handled and poison was consumed in ritualistic fashion. This peace did not last long. During Sunday services on August 5th, 1945, Parson and his followers were again confronted by local deputies with the orders to capture any snake handled by the Holiness Faith Healers. The congregation saw the potential confrontation as another opportunity to declare their religious freedom in the midst of “lost” and “wayward” government. Armed with guitars and faith they set about the process of asserting their religious freedom and proclaiming their distinct cultural identity. For nearly two hours the small church house functioned smoothly with the performance of “customary songs and the steady twanging of guitars.” Yet, as the morning drew on, O.V. Shupe, a prominent handler, arose from his seat and addressed both the congregation and policemen. “Now friends,” he thundered with vigor, “the time has come for the snakes.” Just as the believer finished his statement an unknown member of the church “produced the first snake, a big copperhead, which had been hidden among the preachers.” The “copperhead was fondled by...fifteen faithful” before the police jumped in to intervene.⁸

After a number of minutes the snake was apprehended and the handlers

⁷ “Faith Healers Defy Governor on Snake Handling,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1945, F8.

⁸ “Take Sect’s Snake Alive,” *New York Times*, August 6, 1945, 17.

themselves were arrested on the charge of disturbing the peace. Captain Lawrence and his fellow officers received praise from the Governor for their swift justice and bravery. However in the minds of the Holiness Faith Healers and their mountain sympathizers, this supposed victory by state officials was fruitless. The threat of imprisonment, fines, and social ridicule did not faze these believers, but instead aided their religious mission and added fuel to their spiritual faith. As the summer of 1945 progressed, Parson, Shupe, and the Holiness Faith Healer continued on with their rituals--unaffected and unfazed.⁹ Like countless other snake-handlers throughout southern and central Appalachia, these believers began to girdle their religion and their distinct cultural outlook against the attacks of dissenters and non-believers. Like their religious predecessors, these mountain folk readied themselves against the assaults of the outside world. Most assuredly, conflict was at hand.

As the mid-twentieth century came into motion along the hills of Appalachia, this religious and cultural conflict became ever more present in the actual lives of snake-handling believers and their families. New threats of physical violence, imprisonment, and public humiliation quickly emerged as common impediments for handling congregations looking to spread their Gospel of faith and zeal.

For many of these believers, this conflict came about suddenly, with a tenacity that seemed almost too fierce to be true. Handling revivals that had once been a haven for

⁹ Note of the success of Parson and his church is attested to by oral accounts given by Jimmy Morrow in his oral history *Handling Serpents: Pastor Jimmy Morrow's Narrative History of His Appalachian Jesus' Name Tradition* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 88.

spiritual enlightenment, divine intervention, and, in some cases, fruitful entertainment evolved into discontent of discontent and brutality. The gentle hisses of rattlers and the echoes of heavenly tongues were abruptly replaced with sounds of gunshots, bloodshed, and police sirens. In essence, the religious appeal that successfully transformed snake-handling into a regional cultural outlet during the first thirty years of the twentieth century was quickly eroding, and in its place was new external perception of the movement--a perception rooted in fear and distrust.

The perception of mountain snake-handling as a depiction of regional “otherness” or social disdain did not suddenly emerge out of thin air during the 1940s and 1950s. For nearly three decades, the movement functioned along the fringe of Appalachian society in a manner that offered cultural, religious, and economic refuge for only a slight percentage of the population. During the 1910s and 1920s, snake-handlers within the Church of God were constantly attacked by non-believers inside and outside of the region for their beliefs and strict ritualism. Most of the time these reproaches were ideological and verbal with local ministers of mainline denominations refuting snake-handling for its professed radicalism and literalism.¹⁰ Stereotypical attacks also came from various newspapers and journalists who interpreted snake-handling as a regional defect that catered to the stupidity of ignorant “hillbillies” and “lint-heads.”¹¹

However along with these ideological attacks, the presumed “otherness” that

¹⁰ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God: A Social History* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 86.

¹¹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002), 43. The rural nature of the early Church of God and its association with lower-class mountain and mill families is also discussed by Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 119-121.

encompassed mountain snake-handling intuited a degree of fear and distrust that resulted in early acts of physical conflict. Periodically, snake-handling revivals would be the sites of violent outburst by dissenters angry at the spiritual and cultural message of the Church of God.¹² One such outburst occurred during a ten day revival outside of Sunburst, North Carolina in 1917. During a night time handling service members and onlookers were forced to the ground as “several shots were fired” outside of the meeting house. Arising from the ground dazed and confused, the congregation soon found themselves hovering on the floor a second time as dissidents circled their building after a “volley was fired through the window shattering the glass into small bits.”¹³

Along with bloodshed, early snake-handlers often found themselves in conflict with local authorities. While no official laws restricted believers from performing handling rituals during the first two decades of the twentieth-century, many Church of God members were subjected to police harassment and unjustified arrests.¹⁴ This was the case of V. A. Bishop and Clarence Guire, two handling ministers who were apprehended for their beliefs during handling services near Charlotte, Tennessee in 1917. As the two Church of God men handled serpents before a large crowd of onlookers, they were quickly taken away by local deputies on charges of disturbing the peace. The charges were quickly dropped during trial, but not before the men were subjected to a degree of

¹² Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 16-17.

¹³ *Church of God Evangel*, December 8, 1917, 4.

¹⁴ Randall J. Stephens, *The Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 253. Also see Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 150.

public ridicule and shame.¹⁵

Instances of conflict like these marked the religious atmosphere of early snake-handling, and worked to mold handlers into social “others” and cultural outcasts. The danger of being attacked and imprisoned constantly plagued the minds of believers during their daily routine, and succeeded in setting some members on edge. As the Church of God handling revivals progressed during the 1920s, church leaders quickly caught on to the effects of this intimidation and set about the process of constructing effective coping mechanisms for their members. Acknowledging the fact that state and local protection was not forthcoming, these leaders pushed handling believers to rejoice in their persecution. Bloodshed, imprisonment, and violence were thus interpreted as signs of living in God’s perfect will. Members were conditioned to see their suffering and pain as conditions of their righteous living and perseverance.¹⁶ Bit by bit, in systematic fashion, this mindset intertwined itself within the religious identity of snake-handling doctrine, and worked at strengthening the overall resolve of handling believers within the Church of God.

As the Great Depression came to Appalachia, the essence of this religious mindset became more pronounced and influential on a more localized level. The official separation of snake-handling ritualism from the Church of God during the 1930s set in motion a dramatic shift in the direction of mountain snake-handling that left many handling believers without a way to combat the threats of persecution and violence. The

¹⁵ *Church of God Evangel*, May 12, 1917, 2.

¹⁶ Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 15-17; For insight into the notion of religion as a defensive cultural tool see Melanie Sovine Reid, “On the Study of Religion in Appalachia: A Review/Essay,” *Appalachian Journal* 6 (Spring, 1979), 242.

small independent snake-handling churches that formed along the outskirts of Appalachian towns and industrial hubs--while culturally and spiritually strong--simply did not have the religious infrastructure or resources allotted by the Church of God to defend all handling believers from “external” threats. They were simply too local and too religiously independent to provide an effective cohesive defensive front.

In response to this localized shift, the precepts of religious persecution and public conflict were adapted by independent handling believers to handle confrontation on a personal and congregational level. Rather than depending on the support of a regional denomination--like the Church of God--these independent believers actively responded to violence and police persecution on their own or with the help of their own small congregation. They took upon the threats of bloodshed and imprisonment locally--in an effort to promote their specific religious goals and publicly display their spiritual truth.¹⁷

Evidence of this localized approach to persecution was displayed by the independent snake-handling minister Rev. Dewey Dodson in September of 1934. Orchestrating a series of handling revivals around the outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee, Rev. Dodson quickly found himself in the crosshairs of local authorities and state officials. The zealous minister made ample use of the city’s local newspaper, claiming to reporters that he would “handle all the rattlesnakes anybody [brought] to [the] revival

¹⁷ The fabric of this theory stems from the ideals projected by John B. Holt in his essay “Holiness Religion: Cultural Shock and Social Reorganization,” *American Sociological Review* 5 (October 1940), 740-47. Holt asserts that while fundamentalist religion has the ability to inspire hope, but in most cases it simply provides an attempt for individuals to maintain some sort of cultural cohesion after times of change. The separation of the snake-handling from the Church of God and the dissemination of the movement into small independent churches provided the necessary change needed for Holt’s thesis to become evident. I simply contend that this defensive process took place on a heterogeneous and microscopic level with individual snake-handling congregation moving on a smaller basis to supply the cultural defense proscribed by Holt and his followers.

meeting on the night of Sunday, Sept. 9.” State and local officials went along with Dodson’s plans, labeling the minister simply as a crazy fanatic who sought fame and nothing more; however, this simple denouncement was reversed when the minister highlighted the potential participation of his 10 year-old son to county officers. Standing before a crowd of astonished newsmen, the minister’s boy--Dewey Jr.--reaffirmed the assertions of his father, stating boldly that he “would handle the snakes too...if the spirit moves him.”¹⁸

The claim brought about a series of public denouncements and threats. Apart from various promises of violence if the boy was present during the revival, Rev. Dodson was openly challenged by George W. Brown, the head of the Humane and Juvenile Court Commission of Tennessee. Brown warned Dodson of his recklessness, declaring the minister “can let a rattlesnake bite him all he wants to...but if he just dares put that boy in a cage or near a box where there is a snake, he will be arrested.” Although Dodson took the secretaries threat seriously, he ignored Brown’s statement. Seeing the confrontation with state authorities as a way to display his family’s religious faith and spiritual power he rebutted the threat with a simple petition for the faithful to “bring their own rattlesnakes.” Inevitably the promise of conflict, violence, and imprisonment only bolstered the minister’s desire to spread his handling Gospel and affirm his quest for religious martyrdom.¹⁹

As the 1930s progressed the ideological relationship between public conflict and

¹⁸ “Snake Testers Barred to Preacher’s Son,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1934, Section II.

¹⁹ “Snake Testers Barred to Preacher’s Son,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1934, Section II.

religious perseverance continued to grow within independent snake-handling churches. Snake-handlers marveled at the promise of being persecuted for their faith, and delved deeper into the notion that public conflict with dissenters represented the true validity of their ritualism. However, this tenacity only angered the opponents of snake-handling, and strengthened their desire to silence the voices of handling believers. Armed with threats of violence and bloodshed, these religious opponents saw it to themselves to take up cause against the Gospel of snake-handling and its unique ritualism. These dissidents set in motion a legitimate attempt to handicap the progress of the movement and permanently dissolve its spiritual ideology from minds and hearts of Appalachian Christians.²⁰

The strongest evidence of this tension took place in the western hills of Kentucky.²¹ Since the inception of snake-handling in the area through the efforts of George Hensley and the Saylor family at the onset of the Great Depression, state and local officials vied at every opportunity to destroy the movement and its regional popularity. Between 1935 and 1939, local bureaucrats issued numerous injunctions against snake-handling congregations, and used political and judicial force to push mountain folk from what they perceived as backwards and vile religious acts.²² One

²⁰ The extent of this tension is depicted by David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 49-57; 95-111. While much of this information focuses on the conflict that occurred in Kentucky during the 1930's, Kimbrough makes note to touch on conflicts in other states that involved George Hensley and his immediate followers.

²¹ Insight in to the persecution of snake-handlers in Kentucky during the 1930s and 1940s is seen in David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 95-116.

²² David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 106-110; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe: The Power and Meaning of the Christian Serpent-Handling Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 210-212.

example of this reactionary agenda took place in Perry County in 1938. Angered that snake-handlers had taken up worship services in the local courthouse, Judge Billy Jones decided to take quick action to quell the popularity of the services. In an act of rage, Jones gathered up a group of followers and locked his Court House against the “snake religion cultists,” claiming that the group violated the public order by leaving “a box of rattlers in the courtroom where they had been holding a meeting.”²³

This state wide attack on snake-handling continued into 1939 and escalated into further conflict during the spring and summer of 1940. During this two year span, Kentucky had experienced a dramatic expansion of snake-handling activity, garnered specifically by an influx of itinerant ministers seeking to spread their Trinitarian and Jesus-Name faith.²⁴ Like many Appalachians looking for work and economic stability during this period, the hills of Kentucky proved to be popular stopping point for traveling workers looking to make their way to industrial hubs in Ohio, Michigan, and Illinois.²⁵ Beat down and disenfranchised, the spiritual power and cultural solidity professed by traveling snake-handling ministers provided the tinder necessary for snake-handling ritualism to ignite and explode. In essence, it offered many of these mountain workers a degree of agency that was unavailable through other available social outlets.

For state and local officials in Kentucky, this growth only reiterated the dangers

²³ “Snake Cult Facing Legislative Prohibition in State,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 5, 1940, 1.

²⁴ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 106-111.

²⁵ Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2000), 110-116; Phillip J. Obermiller, *Appalachian Odyssey: Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration* (Westport: Praeger, 2000), 13; John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 312-316.

posed by snake-handling, and, in effect, bolstered the necessity for direct conflict and persecution. The existence of a religious movement that encouraged religious rebellion and theological radicalism not only posed a direct threat to the safety of local communities, but also threatened the prospects of social order and community norms. As a result, a series of collaborated efforts were set in motion to limit the expansion of snake-handling in the state and squash its public popularity throughout the region.²⁶ The apex of this official crackdown took place outside of Louisville during the spring of 1940. During an independent snake-handling revival conducted by Reverends Green and Winston outside the home of J. S. Guess, authorities were quickly called by city officials in an attempt to stop the handling of snakes and the consumption of poisons. Upon breaking up a crowd of over three hundred participants, the police force soon discovered that the religious network created by Rev. Green and Rev. Winston was larger than previously expected, covering an area that stretched throughout the city. City officials quickly considered this an opportunity to disband the snake-handling movement entirely, and instituted a large scale crackdown aimed at controlling “the meetings without subjecting themselves to a charge of religious persecution.”²⁷

The moment of action soon came into motion after Rev. Green and another church member received bites on their arms and hands. Using an assortment of city and state laws, city inspector Fred Erhart and other local leaders lashed out at the revival’s participants, and quickly condemned the church building the revivals were housed in.

²⁶ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 106-107.

²⁷ “Snake Cult Facing Legislative Prohibition in State,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 5, 1940, 1.

Supported by a handful of police officers, the worship services were disbanded and the religious use of snakes and poison was halted.²⁸

This official attack on snake-handling did not stop with this local enforcement. The suppression of Rev. Green and Rev. Winston's revival was used by state officials during the rest of the year as ammunition to enact official legislation against the movement and its followers. Shortly after the crackdown, Senator D.C. Jones proposed a bill before the Kentucky General Assembly that sought to outlaw snake-handling and handling rituals within the state.²⁹ The law declared snake-handling to be a misdemeanor throughout the entirety of Kentucky, and stated that "any person who displays, handles or uses any kind of reptile in connection with any religious services or gathering [to be] fined not less than fifty dollars nor more than one hundred dollars."³⁰ The law garnered large support in the General Assembly and was quickly passed and ratified by the end of 1940.

Throughout the next two months, the law was uplifted and supported by a number of state and regional institutions. Media outlets like the *Louisville Courier-Journal* praised the law and used its pages to display the rational thinking of state legislators and city officials.³¹ Similarly, the Church of God and its leadership expressed support on grounds of social order and theological commonsense. Speaking of the constitutionally of

²⁸ "Snake Cult Facing Legislative Prohibition in State," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 5, 1940, 1.

²⁹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 107.

³⁰ Cited in Steven Kane, "Holy Ghost People: The Snake-Handlers of Southern Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 4 (Spring 1974), 258.

³¹ For the specific article noting praise for the law see "Snake Cult Facing Legislative Prohibition in State," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 5, 1940, 1.

the measure, the *Church of God Evangel* supported the suppression of handling rituals claiming that the U.S. Constitution did not extend religious freedom to spiritual acts that threatened the lives and bodies of its participants. Continuing with its attacks, the editor of the *Church of God Evangel* distanced itself from the movement emphasizing that the “True Church of God people will not be disturbed nor carried away with any such fanatical display as these people put on for showmanship.”³²

These public statements, combined with the disdain projected by state and local media outlets, succeeded in perpetuating the “otherness” associated with mountain snake-handling and extended its perception as a fringe element of Appalachian culture. Coupled with threats of arrest, fines, and public humiliation, these publications found the ammunition necessary to stop the religious progress instituted by independent handling believers. They substituted the supposed social and cultural power affirmed by snake-handling ritualism with notions of backwardness.

Apart from officially supporting the ban on snake-handling practices the primary way by which these claims of ignorance were constructed was through the creation of stereotypes and derogatory statements about handlers and their belief system. The editor of the *Church of God Evangel* projected this use of stereotypes during a diatribe against Kentucky snake-handlers and their practices. Looking specifically at the independent handling congregation in Pine Mountain, Kentucky, the periodical lambasted the church and its leadership. “Let it be said,” the editor exclaimed with intensity, “that these Pine Mountain people...are not the Church of God and that their leader is a polygamist and a

³² “Religion and Snakes,” *Church of God Evangel*, June 1, 1940, 4.

fugitive from justice.”³³ While the leader *The Church of God Evangel* spoke of was never mentioned, it is evident that the supposed believer was K. D. Browning—a stalwart believer and a friend of George Hensley and Park Salyor.

By defaming Browning as sexually licentious and socially deviant, *The Church of God Evangel* strengthened defamed mountain snake-handling and portrayed its adherents as backwards fanatics. As the 1940s and 1950s progressed, religious publications like the *Evangel* and other Pentecostal periodicals would continue to use their pages to segregate and attack the snake-handling movement. Fearful and angered at the popularity of the movement within Appalachia, the ability to publicly denounce handling believers evolved into an effective way for these Pentecostal groups to distance themselves from the perceived radicalism and, in turn, make their own religious message seem more rational and mainstream.³⁴

Going into the 1940s and 1950s, the religious conflict that pitted state and local officials against snake-handlers in Kentucky slowly expanded throughout Appalachia and into the legislative buildings of other states in the region. Recognizing the potential social and cultural chaos associated with snake-handling, lawmakers throughout the mountains adopted much of the rhetoric used by anti-handling politicians and bureaucrats in Kentucky and proceeded to craft laws banning snake-handling practices in their state. One of the first states to attempt to recreate Kentucky’s ban on snake-handling ritualism was Georgia. By the mid-1940s, the state of Georgia established itself as a haven for

³³ “Religion and Snakes,” *Church of God Evangel*, June 1, 1940, 4.

³⁴ Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited*, 92-93

independent snake-handling congregations and traveling handling ministers.³⁵ The gentle mountains around Rome and Athens, Georgia housed some of the first snake-handling churches associated with the early Church of God, and even operated as a religious outpost for some of the traveling revivals of George Hensley.³⁶ With this history in place, state officials interpreted the regional popularity of snake-handling with a degree of fear. The official attacks on snake-handling in Kentucky thus provided these leaders with the excuse necessary to weaken the movement in their state and institute a new level of public control.³⁷

The foundation of Georgia's crackdown on snake-handling closely resembled the narrative that took place in Kentucky, yet with a few significant differences. Like the bust of Rev. Green and Rev. Winston's congregation in 1940, Georgia officials waited for the organization of a large-scale handling revival where snake-handling leaders could easily be approached and apprehended. This event came about on August 3, 1940 during a brisk but comfortable summer night. During the service, believers and officials watched as the Rev. W. T. Lipman brought out a number of poisonous snakes and passed the reptiles around to faith-filled participants near the front alter. The handling service had been running smoothly when tragedy suddenly struck. Albert Rowan and his six-year-old daughter, Leitha Ann Rowan, were in the process of picking up a copperhead moccasin when the serpent reached out and struck the little girl. As the girl's body began to swell, Rowan's wife quickly picked her up, outran the police and escaped with Leitha to a

³⁵ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 231.

³⁶ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 51.

³⁷ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 215.

secluded home in the valley.³⁸

Albert and Rev. Lipman were immediately arrested by police and threatened with murder charges on account of the girl's disappearance. Mr. Lipman's resolve did not break, however, and over a seventy-two hour standoff the snake-handler refused to send medical help to his daughter, citing religious freedom and a personal disdain for modern treatment. Yet, despite this resistance, little Leitha soon recovered and placed under the watch of Dr. H. W. Clements by the county.³⁹

State and local officials saw this religious event as a window of opportunity and emphasized the Rowans' religious preferences as examples of backwardness, neglect, and potential murder. Sherriff W. Daugherty took up the offense against the two believers, keeping them in jail for over a week without due process or respect to their religious wishes. Jude W. R. Smith compounded this decision by signing "a temporary injunction against such rights [snake-handling] pending a hearing on permanent order."⁴⁰ While Leitha gradually recovered from her bite and regained movement in her hand and arm, the effect of this local injunction proved to be the impetus needed to orchestrate a state-wide attack on snake-handling ritualism. By the end of the 1940s this local movement against snake-handling would be taken up by the Georgia State Assembly and crafted into a law that made the practice punishable by up to twenty years in prison.⁴¹

³⁸ "Snake-Bitten Child Remains Untreated," *New York Times*, August 3, 1940, 28.

³⁹ "Snake-Bitten Child Remains Untreated," *New York Times*, August 3, 1940, 28.

⁴⁰ "Snake-Rite Leaders Fast," *New York Times*, August 4, 1940, 31.

⁴¹ Steven Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 258; "Georgia Bans Snakes in Public," *New York Times*, March 24, 1941, 19.

Georgia and Kentucky were not the only two states to enact legal sanctions against snake-handling and its religious ideology. State legislators in Tennessee, Virginia, and Florida also crafted laws aimed at eradicating snake-handling as a viable religious outlet for Appalachian believers. Within these three states, police officials and local journalists made a point to exclude snake-handling from the normal discourse, and used verbal and physical violence as methods to ostracize snake-handling Christians from the confines of everyday society.⁴² As with Georgia and Kentucky these social and cultural battles began as small scale skirmishes that resulted in little conflict; however, as the 1940s progressed, these local altercations often ended in bloodshed.

The heaviest concentration of conflict took place in the historical epicenter of Appalachian snake-handling, eastern Tennessee. Holding a long religious heritage and a firm spiritual network, eastern Tennessee laid claim to a large number of established independent snake-handling congregations that extended back to the initial Church of God snake-handling revivals of the 1910s and 1920s.⁴³ Snake-handling heroes like George Hensley, A. J. Tomlinson, and Jimmy Morrow began their snake-handling ministries in the hills of the state, and used their power and influence to move the Gospel of snake-handling ritualism throughout the Tennessee mountains.⁴⁴ As the 1940s and 1950s came into motion, this foothold proved to be a sore spot for anti-handling

⁴² David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 117-133; Ralph Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 211-213; Steven M. Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 258-259.

⁴³ For insight into snake-handling in Tennessee in the 1910s and 1920s see Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-91; Mary Lee Daugherty, "Serpent Handlers," *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill Leonard (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999) 148-150.

⁴⁴ For information on George Hensley and A.J. Tomlinson see Mickey Crews, *The Church of God*, 85-91, Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 40-64. For Jimmy Morrow see Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*.

legislatures and local leaders looking to progress their state into a new realm of modernism and social growth.

Following in the footsteps of Georgia and Kentucky, these state leaders crafted their attack on snake-handling with a degree of patience. Holding an understanding of the First Amendment and knowledge of the limits of religious freedoms, these individuals went about the process of mounting a systematic attack on snake-handling practices that was not only effective but also constitutional.⁴⁵ The foundation of this religious assault was local in nature and took place in conjunction with the state conflicts in Kentucky and Georgia. During this process, local handling leaders and congregations were infiltrated by local police during revivals and either prosecuted or deemed insane by judges unsympathetic to the ideological and cultural growth of the movement.

This approach was used in 1940 to incarcerate Jesse Pack, a local snake-handling preacher who ministered around the city of Briceville, Tennessee. Leading a small revival service during a summer day, Pack was apprehended by local sheriff deputies after he was bitten twice on the arm by a copperhead snake. As Pack recovered from his attack in the custody of the authorities, he quickly learned the effect of his sentence. At the order of Judge B. F. Chanaberry, Pack was refused a normal prison sentence and instead committed to the Eastern State Hospital for the Insane “on charges of assault and trespass.”⁴⁶

The implication of insanity did not sit well with Pack or his followers, and cries of

⁴⁵ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 211.

⁴⁶ “Preacher Ruled Insane,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1940.

injustice were soon heard throughout Briceville and surrounding communities.⁴⁷

However for Chanaberry and those who saw snake-handling as a social threat, the ruling seemed suitable and necessary. In their minds, labeling snake-handling ritualism as insanity further solidified the negative connotations of the movement in the state. By making handling practices punishable by a stint in the state insane asylum, these leaders saw an opportunity to make snake-handling more taboo and socially reprehensible. As the 1940s progressed, this practice was utilized among anti-handling advocates within Tennessee and in neighboring mountains states.

Outside of threat of insanity, snake-handling believers in Tennessee were also threatened with acts of violence and bloodshed. At one revival outside on Chattanooga in 1945, two local preachers were arrested and treated by police on charges of “disorderly conduct.” Apart from being tossed around by officers, the two ministers were forced to watch police shoot their prized “four-foot rattlesnake with a shotgun.”⁴⁸ This method was repeated again two months later in the eastern part of Chattanooga by the hand of Officer A.C. Smith and other embittered police officials. Taking part in a sting to bring down a series of revivals spearheaded by George Hensley, Smith and a group of officers rushed into a long handling service with shotguns and revolvers in hand. Seeing Hensley and other believers dancing with serpents, Smith approached the minister, pushed him aside and ordered a congregant to “throw the snake on the ground.” With Hensley and twelve other handlers under arrest, Smith drew his shotgun and “blasted the head from the

⁴⁷ It is not known if Jesse Pack is directly related to the 1970s snake-handling icons Liston Pack and Buford Pack. However, the location of Jesse Pack’s ministry places him in the same general area where the latter Pack brother’s gained religious renown.

⁴⁸ “Tennessee Snake Handlers Seized,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1945.

snake.”⁴⁹ After the ordeal ended, Hensley and the other participants were ordered to several days of intense prison labor by the county judge, and were worked so hard by officers that many of them fell ill to sun exposure.⁵⁰

These acts of violence against snake-handlers did not solely occur at the hands of enraged police officers. Fits of rage and brutality also emanated from private citizens who despised the cultural and religious ideals projected by snake-handling. The most vivid examples of this physical backlash against snake-handling in Tennessee occurred in May of 1949 outside of the Dolly Pond Church in Hamilton County. For nearly two years prior, this independent snake-handling congregation thrived as the beacon of protest against anti-snake-handling legislation and prejudice in the Tennessee. Following the official ban of snake-handling practices in the state in 1947, members of the Dolly Pond Church set about the process of spreading their religious ritualism throughout the community and the local geographical area by means of organized protests.⁵¹ The most prominent of these protests took place shortly after the passage of the 1947 anti-handling law when the church orchestrated a large-scale revival service, and challenged local police officers to attempt break up the worship gathering with force. The challenge was quickly answered, and along with a few broken noses five snake-handlers were apprehended and thrown into jail. Three of the members-Cecil Denkins, Tom Allison, and Eugene Hughes-were fined “\$50 and costs,” with Denkins sent “to the workhouse for

⁴⁹ Alex Corliss, “Two ‘Faith-Healing’ Ministers Held for Handling Snake in City Limits,” *Chattanooga Times*, September 24, 1945, 1.

⁵⁰ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 123-124.

⁵¹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 117-133; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 212-214.

60 days.”⁵² The legal battle between the church and the state soon found its way into the court system, and by 1949 the constitutionality of Tennessee anti-snake-handling law was brought before the State Supreme Court, which subsequently found the law to be constitutional and thus legal.⁵³

This two-year long altercation succeeded in throwing the western half of Tennessee in a state of religious and cultural chaos, and, in turn, crafted the drama that unfolded outside of the Dolly Pond Church that May night in 1949. Angered by the persistence of the congregation, over “20 masked men, armed with pistols and blackjacks, raided the [church] shortly after nightfall” screaming curses and threats of violence. Taking no consideration of who they attacked, the Klansmen “marched around the church, firing their guns” and went about the process of blackjacking all of the men present. Fifty year old Ed Allison, his son L. E. Allison, and a 14 year-old boy were among a few of the believers beaten and bruised by the agitators. Apart from receiving blows on the head and shoulders, these handlers were also shot at multiple times from close range.⁵⁴

Hearing the news of the rampage a few hours later, Sheriff Frank Burns ordered an investigation of the event, and dispatched extra police units to the church for protection and control. However, while some attempt was made at finding the

⁵² “Three Snakehandlers Plead Guilty Today to Local Handling,” *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, September 20, 1948.

⁵³ *Harden v. State*, 216 S.W.2d 708 (December 11, 1948).

⁵⁴ “Dolly Pond Snake Handlers Beaten in KKK Church Raid; Probe Begun.” *Cleveland Daily-Banner*, May 12, 1949.

perpetrators, little effort was expended by the Sherriff and his deputies.⁵⁵ It took nearly four months for the department to arrest any suspects related to the crime, and even after two men were sentenced for the beatings they were only issued a misdemeanor and fined \$100.⁵⁶

This delay proved disheartening for members of the Dolly Pond congregation and other snake-handlers in the area. The Grasshopper community where the church was located was a relatively small and the relationship networks in the area were deep and close-knitted. Given these details the capture of the KKK members associated with the riot should have taken place quicker and more efficiently. Coupled with this lack of judicial attention, the victims at Dolly Pond were also denied any sympathy or compassion from local citizens and local media outlets. The *Chattanooga Daily Banner* used the incident to belittle the members of Dolly Pond church, calling the congregation a “cult” that upheld backwards and illegal ideologies.⁵⁷ These stereotypes and police inconsistencies only succeeded in compounding the physical damage done to the Dolly Pond church by the KKK. Apart from providing no real closure or justice, it reinforced a second-class stigma onto these handling believers that highlighted their position as social and cultural “others” within the community.

⁵⁵ “Dolly Pond Snake Handlers Beaten in KKK Church Raid; Probe Begun.” *Cleveland Daily-Banner*, May 12, 1949.

⁵⁶ “Reputed Member of Snake-Handler Cult Gets Prison Term As Kluxer,” *Cleveland Daily-Banner*, September, 1949.

⁵⁷ “Reputed Member of Snake-Handler Cult Gets Prison Term As Kluxer,” *Cleveland Daily-Banner*, September, 1949.

While the efforts of state and local forces proved powerful and effective in their attacks, snake-handlers within the region often found the courage and vigor to fight back for their religious convictions. Often times, these spiritual counterattacks provided little to no tangible successes. However, as tensions continued to rise, they functioned with some success in reaffirming the social agency of these mountain folk by offering a platform for their voices to be heard and acknowledged.

The most conventional spiritual counterattack utilized by snake-handlers was the concept of martyrdom. Under this method, snake-handlers would public display their revival services throughout the local community and use various media outlets to challenge officials and dissenters. After acquiring the right amount of public press, these handling believers would conduct an open service, perform their rituals, and use the resulting violence and conflict to showcase their religious innocence and the brutality of their aggressors.⁵⁸ This method, while producing short-term losses, succeeded in painting snake-handlers as social underdogs to the surrounding community and often worked in boosting adherents and converts.

The popularity of martyrdom was depicted in a four-page article by *Life* magazine in 1944. While not specifically acknowledging the religious tactic, the periodical attested to the exponential growth of snake-handling groups in Kentucky and Tennessee, and highlighted the fact that the independent congregations observed had, in fact, expanded in response to violent brushes with the law. Looking specifically at the independent handling congregation in Stone Creek, Virginia, the magazine stated that “despite several

⁵⁸ Examples of the use of martyrdom as an offensive tool are seen in David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 135-153. Also See Paul F. Gillespie, *Firefox 7* (New York, Anchor Books, 1973), 483.

brushes with the law, the cult has increased its membership from a handful to several thousand,” across the state.⁵⁹ For this collection of snake-handling believers and others like them around Appalachia, the prospects of martyrdom and persecution from outside factions provided social ammunition that equated to numerical growth and religious popularity. It placed them in the role of the underdog—a role that seamlessly attracted so many disenfranchised mountain folk existing at the bottom of the social ladder.

Closely tied to the tactic of martyrdom was the prospect of outright defiance. Within this forms of protest, snake-handlers simply rejected the existence of anti-handling laws and continued on with their ritualism with no thought to legal repercussions. Sometimes this tactic was utilized in public during large revival services or multi-church gatherings where the sheer size of adherents would outnumber potential law enforcement officers. However, most of the time the practice took place in private settings outside of the watchful eye of the public and dissenters.⁶⁰

Snake-handlers who supported the tactic of defiance resorted to Scripture to justify their ritualism, and laid claim to the fact that God’s laws and commandments trumped the laws of man and state. Rev. Colonel Hartman Bunn asserted this claim to the *Cleveland Daily Banner* in 1948 in response to the anti-handling legislation passed by the

⁵⁹ “Holiness Faith Healers,” *Life*, July 3, 1944, 59-62.

⁶⁰ The practice of privately refuting the legitimization of state laws proved to be a popular talking point among latter snake-handling circles after the late 1940s. Snake-handlers would often highlight the supremacy of God’s law over man’s law during handling feats. This was the driving preaching point for ministers like Punkin Brown, Liston Pack, and Jimmy Ray Williams. For information about these ministers and their understanding of the legal system see Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 137-150; Fred Brown, *The Serpent Handlers: Three Families and Their Faith* (Winston-Salem; John F. Blair, Publisher, 2000), 8-126.

municipality of Durham, North Carolina earlier in the year.⁶¹ Supporting the religious validity of defiance, he stated that snake-handlers had the right to ignore the unjust law set in place by the city. “It’s not a question of law for this court,” he asserted, “it is a part of the order of Jesus Christ and it is something that people following his word would do no matter what the law provides.”⁶²

To Rev. Bunn and other handling believers like him, the tactic of defiance was God ordained and permissible in light of the city’s blatant apostasy and spiritual callousness. Snake-handlers had the divine right to ignore unjust laws, and even held the divine responsibility to go against man-made laws that defied the Scriptural mandates ordained by the Bible. This form of protest was to be championed by true Christians asserted Rev. Bunn, and diligently practiced by every individual calling themselves a true snake-handler.⁶³

Sometimes the act of defiance went outside of the bounds of private religious observance and became a public form of protest. This was the case for snake-handlers who were either incarcerated for their religious beliefs or threatened by officials to cease their actions. Unfazed by the man-made declarations, these believers would perform their religious rituals in public in an effort to rebel against these leaders and reinforce their sole allegiance to God’s mandates.⁶⁴ This was the course of action taken by Rev. Tom Harden

⁶¹ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 214-215.

⁶² “Cultist Defends Church Snake Rites,” *Cleveland Daily Banner*, December, 14, 1948.

⁶³ By the 1950s the prospect of being arrested for defying state laws was seen as a true test of faith and belief in some snake-handling circles. It was seen as a rite of passage in a way that projected true devotion to the religion.

⁶⁴ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 135-153.

and other members of the Dolly Pond Church in 1947 when their church was locked and barred by local officials who disapproved of their religious rituals. Resorting to acts of defiance, Rev. Harden and his followers announced to the local leaders that “we will not give up our serpents,” and declared boldly that they would “obey God’s law not man’s law.” The following month, Harden’s defiance rang true, and the congregation took up their rituals in an alternate location in rebellion to the dictates of the municipality.⁶⁵

The defiance displayed by Rev. Harden resembled that of Rev. Bunn and the countless other snake-handlers to took action against the pressures and limitations of religious prejudice. The choice to rebel against the statutes of man’s law and follow their own religious convictions displayed the inherent faith held by Appalachian snake-handlers and the devotion they had in the promises of Scripture. By opting to “obey God’s law”, these mountain folk used their religion to convey their social and power, and instituted a challenge to dissenters in the region that their cultural and religious ideals mattered and demanded respect. While this approach often resulted in imprisonment and physical threats, it enabled snake-handlers to counter the violence placed upon them. It gave these believers a method to fight for the ideals that they interpreted as truth and fact.

Outside of the tactics of defiance and martyrdom, snake-handlers also turned to various legal resources in an effort to counter the threats of violence and persecution. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the legal statutes of anti-handling laws and regulations in Appalachian states succeeded in limiting the growth and public popularity of handling

⁶⁵ Quoted in J.B. Collins, *Tennessee Snake-Handlers* (Chattanooga: Chattanooga Magazine Company, 1947), 25.

rituals inside and outside of the region.⁶⁶ As mentioned before, the anti-handling laws passed in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia in the 1940s provided precedents for other states in the region who interpreted snake-handling as a menace to public safety and proper decency. Outside of these three states, anti-handling laws were also ratified in Florida, Ohio, Virginia, Alabama, and portions of North Carolina.⁶⁷ In conjunction with Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia, these unified laws instituted a religious atmosphere within Appalachia that discouraged religious separatism and blatant forms of spiritual radicalism.

However rather than give in to the legal system, Appalachian snake-handlers saw the courts as a way to further their cause and regain their religious liberties. Over the course of nearly fifteen years (1942-1957) handling leaders and other champions of religious liberty used the process of judicial appeal in an attempt to counter the effects of anti-handling legislation and reinstate their religion as a viable spiritual outlet.⁶⁸

Following in the heels of the initial attacks on snake-handling in the 1940s, the first attempts to appeal the legality of anti-handling laws took place in Kentucky and Tennessee. These appeals, while almost destined to fail, invigorated the efforts of many handling Appalachians and succeeded in strengthening the popularity of snake-handling

⁶⁶ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 171-186. While Kimbrough highlights the effective out migration of snake-handling religion to northern migration hubs, he also makes note that the numerical strength of the movement decreased in some respects because of migration and anti-handling legislation.

⁶⁷ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 208-229; Stephen Kane, "Holy Ghost People," 258-259.

⁶⁸ This is seen in the official legal cases filled by snake-handlers in state Supreme courts during this period. The last official attempt during this period was *Hill v. State of Alabama* in 1957.

ritualism in these two states.⁶⁹ This rise in religious popularity was seen clearly after initial hearing of *Harden v. State* by the Supreme Court of Tennessee in 1948. Though the decision of the court reaffirmed the original proclamations set in place by the state's anti-handling law, the repercussions of the ruling created a new zeal among snake-handlers in Tennessee that equated to more public handling revivals and worship services. Shortly after the decision by the Supreme Court, snake-handlers in Chattanooga, Tennessee went about the process of attacking the ruling and orchestrated a series of revivals aimed at challenging the state.⁷⁰ These revivals were supplemented by a large scale itinerant movement by George Hensley and other Trinitarian snake-handlers throughout the eastern half of Tennessee and western North Carolina. During the apex of this itinerant tour, Hensley made a point to preach in front of the courthouse in Chattanooga-relating a message that focused on religious liberty.⁷¹

This strategic use of the appellate process to garner religious and social strength continued throughout the 1940s and into the 1950s. The purpose of these latter legislative challenges rested less on an attempt to overturn anti-handling laws and more on invigorating the core of the movement and bolstering religious popularity. The success of this tactic shined forth in Alabama during the 1956 appellate case *Hill v. State*. At the heart of this case rested Mr. Luther Hill, an Appalachian snake-handling minister who

⁶⁹ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 135-153; Evidence of this popularity is also discussed throughout Dennis Covington's book *Salvation on Sane Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1995).

⁷⁰ "Three Snakehandlers Plead Guilty Today to Local Handling," *Chattanooga News-Free Press*, September 20, 1948.

⁷¹ David Kimbrough, *Taking up Serpents*, 129-133.

was arrested by Alabama authorities for orchestrating private snake-handling services in the homes of various believers in the state. Brought before the local district court, Rev. Hill was charged with violating the state's anti-handling law and was fined and temporarily imprisoned for his misconduct.⁷²

Being granted an appeal by the state on religious and constitutional grounds, Hill and other sympathetic snake-handlers in the region saw the case as an opportunity to expose the legal persecution of their movement and arouse local mountaineers around their spiritual and cultural ideology. Like the previous appellate cases filled by snake-handlers in other states, Rev. Hill's attempt to reverse Alabama's anti-handling law produced no immediate victories for handlers in the state. The state simply reasserted the traditional rebuttal, stating that while snake-handlers had the freedom to believe their religious assertions they did not have the legal ability to act upon their specific beliefs. However rather than focus upon this legal set-back, Hill and his followers used the state's decision to bolster their numbers and set in motion a new wave of religious revivals across the northern half of the state.⁷³

Utilizing the same tactics used by George Hensley and other snake-handlers in the 1940s, these believers traversed from the safety of their private congregations and actively protested their persecution in various public arenas. Courthouses and other municipal buildings throughout northern Alabama became popular preaching points for independent handling ministers eager to showcase their faith and outright disapproval of

⁷² Hill v. State of Alabama, 38 Ala.App. 404, 88 So. 2d. 880, 1956.

⁷³ The results of Hill's actions spurned the popularity of snake-handling in the region and increased the numerical strength of the movement in places like Sand Mountain as described by Dennis Covington in *Salvation on Sand Mountain*.

the state's mandate.⁷⁴ In DeKalb County, the home of Rev. Hill and his followers, snake-handling believers took to the streets against the state, and devoted themselves for a number of days to singing and praying outside of the local court building. These efforts were compounded by snake-handling revivals in small mountains towns like Sand Mountain and Fort Payne along the northern border of the state. In Sand Mountain alone, a handful of local snake-handling displays took hold of the mountainside and quickly moved from the small town to larger cities in the area by means of zealous and angry handling preachers.⁷⁵ The success of these explosive demonstrations continued throughout the state until the summer of 1959 when Rev. David Henson and a number of his followers were bitten by an assortment of rattlesnakes and copperheads. Henson's subsequent death introduced a new wave of governmental crackdowns on the region's handling congregations, and, in turn, ended the legislative and social counterattacks undertaken by the state's snake-handling congregations.⁷⁶

As the mid-twentieth century preceded the effect of these anti-legislative movements succeeded to some extent in advancing the message of Appalachian snake-handling and combating some of the persecution pressed upon the movement by dissident forces. The ability to challenge the threats of violence and imprisonment by use of active

⁷⁴ Courthouses often emerged as important spiritual spaces for snake-handlers looking to protest religious prejudice and intolerance. While this tactic was used primarily during the mid-twentieth century cases of snake-handling on courthouse steps were known to occur during the 1930s and in some instances during the 1920s. For more information see David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 117-133.

⁷⁵ The latter effects of these revivals manifested into the deep snake-handling traditions discussed in by Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 148-150.

⁷⁶ Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, 149-151.

force and manipulation provided these believers with an outlet of power and agency. It elevated these mountain folk from simple victims, to viable social participants who played a role in the way their religion was perceived and approached. This process alone, while hindering some of the effects of their exploitation, allowed snake-handlers to counter the charges of social and cultural “otherness” that regulated them to fringes of normalcy. It offered some validity to their particular worldview—a worldview that had been violated for too long by the society around them.

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CONCLUSION

While the end of the 1940s presented Appalachian snake-handlers with a series of religious and cultural victories, the scope of these successes would prove to be short-lived. The pressure of dissent and the never ceasing threats of violence and conflict provided hurdles for mountain snake-handlers that were too high to climb or maneuver. As the 1950s came into full motion, the size of these hurdles became ever clearer. Out-migration and the movement of hundreds of thousands of mountain folk from Appalachia to northern industrial hubs witnessed a dramatic reduction in the popularity of snake-handling and the strength of its cultural ideology among mountain migrants.¹ Though snake-handling congregations had once been aided and strengthened during the migratory pushes between 1920s and the 1940s, this new wave of out-migration after World War coincided with new social and legal crackdowns that limited its popularity and desirability.² In Ohio, for example, the growth of snake-handling in migrant Appalachian neighborhoods in the 1940s brought about legislative restrictions against snake-handling in the state. These new anti-handling laws enacted social, cultural, and legal hindrances against itinerant handling ministers and migrant handling workers looking to establish churches and congregations. In turn, northern cities like Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Dayton quickly evolved from

¹ Mary Lee Daughterly, "Serpent Handlers," 151.

² David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 171-186.

hotbeds of snake-handling into areas hostile and dismissive to the movement.

These anti-handling pushes in the North were strengthened by numerous other conflicts within the South. States like Florida took up action with various other cities and municipalities within the southern Piedmont and went about the process of crafting anti-handling laws that limited the migratory spread of snake-handling within their areas of jurisdiction. Florida's anti-handling law, passed in the 1950s, closely resembled the legislation approved in Kentucky and Georgia. Snake-handlers were given the freedom to "believe" in their specific religious rituals, but were restricted from "acting" upon these rituals or implementing them in public or private.³ The dissemination of these laws in Piedmont towns like Durham, North Carolina brought about series of countermeasures by snake-handling believers.⁴ However, despite these religious efforts, the power of these laws kept snake-handling from spreading into these areas during the 1950s-limiting the popularity and overall strength of movement within the region.

As the 1950s gave way into the 1960s, the impact of out-migration and anti-handling legislation was compounded by other measures aimed at weakening the religious and cultural ideology of snake-handling within Appalachia. The strongest of these new measures revolved around the growing importance of federal aid, and the resulting cultural stereotypes imputed upon Appalachia during the federal "War on Poverty" campaigns under the Johnson and Nixon administrations.⁵ Pushed into action

³ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 212-213.

⁴ Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 214-216; For information into the lineage and history of Jesus-Only snake-handling in Durham, North Carolina also see, Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 9;52;66;90-91.

⁵ Anne Shelby, "The 'R' Word," *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Backtalk From an American*

“by...the community’s leading citizens” and prominent coal mining and mill executives, these antipoverty campaigns sought to reform Appalachian citizens “with a massive dose of education, training, and counseling for the poor.”⁶ Federal regulators and private volunteers flocked to the far reaches of central and southern Appalachia and jumpstarted programs ranging from public preschools and day camps for children to welfare benefits for impoverished parents.

While these programs benefited multiple families within the region, they also created a regional stereotype that depicted Appalachian folk as impoverished and backwards.⁷ “The children to be reached by the pre-school classes are...potential dropouts” exclaimed one reporter who followed the anti-poverty campaign, “efforts will be made to reach the older children, too, with remedial education.” This social judgment persisted. “We’re going to try to teach the poor [in Appalachia] how to dress, how to make over clothes,” asserted a national volunteer. She continued, “you see teen-agers going to school in dresses that were meant for a 45-year-old woman. No wonder they are snickered at.”⁸

Region, ed. Dwight Billings (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 153-155; Ronald D. Eller, “Modernization, 1940-2000,” *High Mountain Rising: Appalachia in Time and Place*, ed. H. Tyler Blethen and Richard A. Straw Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2004), 207-217; Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 128.

⁶ “West Virginians Near Star on Antipoverty Program That Could Become Showcase for the Nation,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1965, 79.

⁷ Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia*, 128; This stereotype was also perpetuated in some popular history works published during the 1960s and 1970s. For the most influential of these texts see Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 325-364.

⁸ “West Virginians Near Star on Antipoverty Program That Could Become Showcase for the Nation,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1965, 79.

As the 1960s progressed, these stereotypes were passed down from government officials into the homes of average Americans through the pages of popular circulations like *Life* magazine. These magazines presented Appalachian citizens as “an impoverished people whose plight has long been ignored by and affluent America.” In their plush couches, millions of middle-class Americans read of “disease-ridden and unschooled” hillbillies, whose “homes are shacks without plumbing or sanitation.”⁹ Pictures of mountain communities focused upon individuals like Willard Bryant and his son Billy who were depicted “tearing with their bare hands at frozen lumps of coal...to hear their home.”¹⁰ These magazines asserted that the region and its culture was so archaic that only President Johnson and his “unconditional war on poverty in America” could “lift the valley people out of their long depression.”¹¹

The effect of these negative stereotypes succeeded in creating a very negative national perception of Appalachia and its people. To mainstream Americans looking at the pages of *Life* and the constructed reports published by War on Poverty programs, the region consisted of hordes of backwards miscreants and ignorant bumpkins who existed within the confines of archaic traditions and faulty ideologies. Working in tandem with these negative stereotypes, the massive influx of federal and non-profit aid molded Appalachia into a proverbial poverty zone, filled with ignorant dependents that had to be cared for and lifted up. To mainstream Americans outside of the region, Appalachia was

⁹ “The Valley of Poverty,” *Life*, January 31, 1964, 54.

¹⁰ “The Valley of Poverty,” *Life*, January 31, 1964, 57.

¹¹ “The Valley of Poverty,” *Life*, January 31, 1964, 55.

a dead zone. It was a place where rational logic and common sense could not thrive.¹²

These attacks on Appalachian culture trickled down into various aspects of mountain life, gradually affecting the religious and cultural roots of Appalachian snake-handling. Primed by the judgments created by the media and the government, religious leaders throughout the nation attacked snake-handlers and their practices.¹³ Billy Graham, the personification of mainline American evangelicalism in the twentieth century, contested snake-handlers asserting that they “were totally misinterpreting the Scriptures.” Affirming the numerous negative stereotypes that surrounded Appalachia and the handling movement he stated to his followers across the nation that “the handling of snakes at worship services... is so unspiritual and has nothing to do with Christianity.”¹⁴

These comments were expanded by various national publications that perpetuated the supposed spiritual and theological ignorance of Appalachian snake-handlers. A 1964 article in *Life* magazine entitled “Solace in Paper Walls and Religion,” made national attention when it showcased the inter-workings of a snake-handling service deep within the mountains of southern Appalachia. Looking at the service though a stereotypical lens, the article highlighted the

¹² Anne Shelby, “The ‘R’ Word,” 154-155.

¹³ While a number of preacher’s from outside of Appalachia attacked the foundations of snake-handling during this period, a vast majority of anti-handling religious sentiment came from preachers inside of the region. The hub of Billy Graham’s ministry resided near Montreat, North Carolina--a small town in the heart of southern Appalachia. For more information about the religious misconceptions and outside prejudices surrounding Appalachian religion and snake-handling see Charles H. Lippy, “Popular Religiosity in Southern Appalachia,” *Christianity in Appalachia*, 40-51.

¹⁴ “Graham Says Snake Handlers Wrong,” *Chattanooga Times*, April 26, 1973, 6.

poverty of the church with its “tar-paper-covered” walls and its lanky, fiery, and rambunctious fundamentalist minister.¹⁵ Other national periodicals went along with these perceptions and compounded the negative press given to mountain handlers in the region. *The Wall Street Journal* equated snake-handling to an expression of hopelessness and fatalism. In an article entitled “At a Church Meeting in Appalachia: Song, Prayer, and Snakes,” columnist David P. Garino expressed the supposed backwardness of snake-handling believers, stressing that “these people [snake-handlers] don’t have hope for much success here on earth, but their religion gives them an assurance that they have the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

The motivation behind images and remarks closely resembled the motivation behind the assertions of Rev. Graham and the countless other dissidents who depicted mountain handlers as ignorant fanatics. As with Appalachian culture in general, the religious direction of Appalachian snake-handling was perceived by greater America as inadequate and archaic. In the minds of mainline religious leaders, snake-handlers and mountain preachers were preaching a Gospel that was stale and false; these backwards fundamentalists were reading ideas and practices into God’s Word that were either never intended to occur or meant for theological allegory. Thus within these bounds, snake-handlers perpetuated the biased and constructed stereotype of the dumb mountaineer to those outside the region.

This imparted judgment only strengthened the push against snake-handling

¹⁵ “Solace in Papered Walls and Religion,” *Life*, January 31, 1964, 58.

¹⁶ David P. Garino, “At a Church Meeting in Appalachia: Song, Prayer, and Snakes,” *The Wall Street Journal*.

ritualism, and weakened its cultural pull and religious popularity. Sensing the growing advancements of dissenters and a lack a cultural relevance, snake-handlers throughout the 1960s and 1970s gradually became more insular and reclusive. The desire to cut religious losses and avoid unnecessary conflicts motivated these believers to hide within the secluded walls of their church, a space where safety was assured and religious acceptance abounded.¹⁷ The effects of this religious seclusion transcended into a number of numerical and cultural setbacks for the movement. A reduction in public revivals translated into more safety for mountain handlers, but it also set in motion a reduction in the number of snake-handling converts. Anthropologist Ralph Hood Jr. asserts that while this particular number will never be empirically know because of the autonomy of local handling congregations, he highlights the movement did suffer a substantial rise in the number of “backsliders” and religious turncoats.¹⁸

Moreover, the reduction of public handling revivals also equated to a dramatic decrease in the popularity of the movement and its religious accessibility. The inability to actively see snake-handlers in action, to hear their testimony and see their faith, moved many potential believers to dismiss the true cultural ideology of the movement, and regulate snake-handling to the negative stereotypes that presided within the region.¹⁹ By becoming insular, snake-handlers thus became passive and unable to properly defend their religion against the negative attacks constructed by its enemies. Within this process

¹⁷ David Kimbrough, *Taking Up Serpents*, 138; Paul F. Gillespie, *Foxfire 7* (New York; Anchor Books, 1980), 482.

¹⁸ Ralph W. Hood, Jr., *Them That Believe*, 292-232.

¹⁹ Ralph W. Hood, Jr., *Them That Believe*, 292-231.

then, snake-handling religiosity was attacked and wounded by the assaults of dissenters and dissidents. However, it was the reclusive reaction of snake-handling that succeeded in permanently weakening the movement and driving it into cultural and religious irrelevancy by the end of the twentieth-century. While the movement received some grassroots support during the late 1970s, these efforts were never enough to propel snake-handling back to the cultural position it held in the region before the 1950s.²⁰

It is with this religious and cultural backdrop that we consider the tragedy of Glenn Summerford and his snake-handling congregation. Summerford was a striking man, known in his hometown of Scottsboro, Alabama for his fiery demeanor and boisterous energy and zeal. Only 46 years of age, he had risen in stature in his community. Taking the role of a minister, he displayed himself as a faithful man who loved his family, cherished his wife, and preached the Gospel with as much tenacity as expected from a man with fundamentalist snake-handling roots.²¹

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Summerford had successfully established his ministry as one of the primary outlets of snake-handling religiosity in the region. With the help of this congregation, he led multiple handling revivals throughout Alabama and the lower South, strengthening the tight but reclusive religious network of snake-handlers in the area. The popularity of Summerford's endeavors grew to legendary proportions in many of these local communities during these years. Often times, news of his appearance would draw large handling crowds with many attendees coming from

²⁰ For information about the growth of snake-handling in the 1970s and the ministry of Liston Pack see Jimmy Morrow, *Handling Serpents*, 105-137; Ralph W. Hood Jr., *Them That Believe*, 213-214.

²¹ Thomas Burton, *The Serpent and the Spirit: Glenn Summerford's Story* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 91-92.

neighboring states with the hope of listening to the words of the zealous minister. At one particular revival service in the early 1990s, Summerford's presence brought in thousands of snake-handlers into northern Alabama over a week period-leading to over 750 baptisms and countless instances of snake-handling, fire-tossing, and poison consumption.

However, as Summerford's popularity in the region progressed among snake-handling circles, so too did the temptations and vices. Apparently, the minister had always struggled with the lure women and sexual vices, and his new prestige provided him with handfuls of new admirers. Over the course of two years he partook in numerous extra-marital affairs that created tension between him and his wife-Darlene.²² The effect of these quick flings was supplemented by Summerford's new infatuation with the bottle, and soon the snake-handling preacher was looking at the prospects of divorce, heartache, and public disgrace.

All of these new stresses came to a head on the night of October 4, 1991. Faced with a distrusting wife who was threatening to take him to court, Summerford felt his back against the wall. In a fit of rage, the minister went into the house where his wife slept and accused her of adultery with a fellow snake-handling believer. As his anger overtook him, Summerford grabbed Darlene and began slapping, hitting, and kicking her until she escaped into the darkness outside.

The turmoil did not cease, though, as Summerford followed his wife outside.

²² Glenn Summerford was known to have several extramarital relationships while he was married to his first and second wives. His marriage to his second wife Darleen occurred while he was still married to his first wife Doris. These affairs continued throughout his second marriage up until his attempted murder charge. Thomas Burton, *The Serpent and the Spirit*, 76.

Seeing her crouched near the outer shed where he kept his snakes, he screamed at Darlene. “I don’t want you no more,” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “I don’t want to live with you no more. But I don’t want nobody else to have you.”²³ With that he led her into the snake-filled shed by the hair and took her bruised arm in his hand. With a gun to her head he commanded her to put her hand into a cage filled with poisonous rattlesnakes. In fear, Darlene placed her hand into the cage and was “bitten twice by a rattler” on the thumb.²⁴

Summerford’s rage did not subside. After an hour of drinking more vodka outside, he ordered his dying wife into the house, kicking her and beating her as she walked. He handed the woman a pen and directed her to write a suicide letter to her young son in case the authorities got involved. “I went out and got snake-bite,” the letter read, “Glenn is asleep and I don’t want no help. You and your daddy live right. I love you.”²⁵ Feeling justified and safe with this, Summerford collapsed on the couch-leaving his wife to die on the ground beside him.

This was not the case though. Seeing Glenn asleep, Darlene called the authorities who quickly sent an ambulance and a squad car to the house. She was taken to the hospital, and after intense care survived. Glenn, on the other hand, met a different fate. Charged with attempted murder, Summerford was arrested and held on a \$20,000 bond. One year later he was sentenced to a 99-year term with no chance for parole.

What is interesting about this case, and Glenn Summerford, is not the violence

²³ Oral account given by Darlene Summerford, Thomas Burton, *The Serpent and the Spirit*, 9.

²⁴ “Snake Handler Charged After Rattle Bites Wife.” *Cleveland Daily Banner*, October 9, 1991, 1.

²⁵ Handwritten letter published in Thomas Burton, *The Snake and the Spirit*, 14.

displayed by the minister. Nor is it the heroic strength displayed by Darlene Summerford and the community that came to her rescue after the attack. What is important about this instance is the stereotypes believed confirmed by Glenn Summerford's outburst that seeped out of the various court-room analysis and various newspaper accounts.

Mimicking the religious and cultural opposition that surrounded snake-handling from its inception, local leaders and reporters used Glenn Summerford's anger to attack the core ideals of snake-handling and paint the movement as an expression of "otherness".

The *Chattanooga News Free Press*, for example, used the situation to highlight the radical nature of snake-handling religiosity taken up by Summerford and his congregation. The paper made issue of the "16 rattlesnakes and copperheads" that the preacher had in his possession, linking the acquisition of the animals to the actions of a violent and disturbed fanatic.²⁶ The paper went on, printing an article two days later that highlighted the supposed fanaticism of Darlene Summerford. Relating some of the trial material used the previous months, the writer of the piece asserted that Mrs. Summerford projected her religious traditions to the extreme, claiming that often times she carried "photos of snakes in [her] purse like you and I would our children."²⁷ These comments were combined with other stereotypical constructs, and succeeded in a way in projecting the Summerfords and their congregants as ignorant and extreme fundamentalists who barely functioned on the edge of normalcy.

Outside of the media, the push to label the Summerfords and their snake-handling

²⁶ "Scottsboro Pastor Says Ready to Handle Snakes in Court," *Chattanooga News Free Press*, February 11, 1992, B-1.

²⁷ "Snake-Handling Preacher Guilty in Try to Kill Wife," *Chattanooga News Free Press*, February 13, 1992, A-3.

friends as social outsiders was also undertaken by the state judicial system. District Attorney Dwight Duke led this cultural and religious assault in his accusations against Darlene Summerford, utilizing several Appalachian stereotypes in an attempt to defame and break down the battered woman's testimony. Taking up the derogatory notion of the stupid and sly hillbilly, Drew placed attention to Mrs. Summerford's lack of education, stating to the jury and public that the woman was limited because she only held a "seventh-grade education." He took this stereotype of hillbilly ignorance further stating that her poor upbringing hampered her reliability and reduced her ability to "tell the truth."²⁸

These stereotypes were similarly employed by the words of defense attorney Gary Lackey and his associates. Drawing on the negative depictions of mountain women being promiscuous and whorish, he brought up Darlene's sexual past and her illegitimate son. He mixed these derogatory statements with the violent nature of the Summerfords' mountain family structure, and related to the jury that attempted murder of Mrs. Summerford was simply an expression of backwards Appalachian familial relations. "I can't think of a better example of a dysfunctional family," stated Lackey with sarcasm. "than the family that's been portrayed in this case."²⁹

With these negative characterizations in place, the Summerfords and their snake-handling religiosity were neatly placed in their "proper" role as outsiders by the state judicial system and the national media. Labeled as law-breakers, religious fanatics, and

²⁸ "Snake-Handling Preacher Guilty in Try to Kill Wife," *Chattanooga News Free Press*, February 13, 1992, A-3.

²⁹ "Snake-Handling Preacher Guilty in Try to Kill Wife," *Chattanooga News Free Press*, February 13, 1992, A-3.

morally backwards hillbillies, these snake-handlers were pushed from the confines of normalcy and situated into the constructed myth of Appalachian otherness. In essence, the Summerfords, and their handling congregation, were molded by these powers into examples what America should not be. They were a fringe element of the nation that should be mocked and ridiculed.

Religious historian Thomas Burton agrees with this assertion. Looking at the national attention of the trial and negative media giving to snake-handling in its wake, he emphasizes that the Summerfords were given national attention because they were snake-handlers, because they portrayed all that was wrong with Appalachia. Referring to an analysis given by reporter Byron Woodfin, Burton notes that the national coverage of the Summerford case was simply a money making exercise. It was a story that titillated the senses of mainstream America in that it poked fun of a region by using negative stereotypes rooting in misinformation and disdain.³⁰ Thus in essence, Summerford trial was simply an attempt to weaken the foundations of Appalachian culture and the religious pride of mountain snake-handlers.

As the twentieth-century merges into the twenty-first the fabric of these cultural and religious assaults continue to thrive within the mainstream American consciousness. Popular documentaries that negatively associate snake-handling with “hillbillyism” and Appalachian backwardness recently have made their way onto media platforms like the *Animal Planet* and *The History Channel*. Mixed with these programs are countless movie and television reenactments of snake-handling that display handling believers in

³⁰ Thomas Burton, *The Serpent and the Spirit*, 1-4.

derogatory ways.³¹ While these current assaults do not contain the violence or bloodshed associated with earlier attacks on snake-handling, these stereotypes succeed in attacking the core cultural ideology of the movement and the genuine faith held by snake-handling believers. They make a mockery of held-fast convictions, and bring shame on a people who have already felt the brunt of disenfranchisement.

Historian Dwight Billings is correct in his observation that while other forms of prejudice have been weakened by America's ideological and cultural evolution, mountain people have become "acceptable targets for hostility, projection, disparagement, scapegoating, and contempt."³² As long as this stereotype persists, so, too, will America's disdain for Appalachian snake-handling. However, like all Appalachians, these stalwart believers will persist. If the history of Appalachian snake-handling shows the historian any one lesson, it is the fact that these individuals display a courage and faith that is unmatched. Snake-handling will survive. It will survive as long as the Appalachian way of life has a heartbeat.

³¹ The network Animal Planet has released a popular documentary on snake-handling called "Snake Man of Appalachia" in 2011, and the History Channel has produced a short documentary known in a series entitled "Pentecostalism" in 2009. Apart from these documentaries, negative representations of snake-handling have been displayed on television shows like *The Simpsons*, *Saturday Night Live*, *The X-file*, and *Justified*.

³² Dwight. B. Billings, *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, 3.

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