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## Listening For A Life

Patricia Sawin

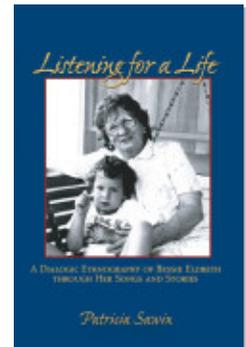
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*“That was before I ever left home”*

### Complex Accounts of a Simple Childhood

*In a quiet country village stood a maple on the hill.*

—Gussie L. Davis

*Six o'clock. It's quitting time.*

—Bessie Eldreth, “first song,” composed at age 3 or 4

Bessie Eldreth loves to talk about her childhood. Whatever the ostensible topic or purpose of a conversation, we seem always to come around to discussion of her early memories and of her interactions with parents, grandparents, siblings, and teachers. My account of her will begin, then, at this beginning to which Eldreth so insistently directed my attention, the foundation of what I as a new listener evidently needed to know in order to understand her as she wished to be understood. Still, it is wise not to be too comfortable with this apparently obvious narrative ordering. Strict chronology was not a major concern of Eldreth's, and though, when pressed, she could usually tell me her age during the events recounted, most often my attempts to put things in temporal order would evoke her label for the first sixteen years of her life: “Oh, yes, that was before I left home” or “That was before I ever got married.” More importantly, although Eldreth tends to portray these years as a joyful and carefree time, her accounts of them are far from simple rhetorically. Her pressing desire to establish a sense of herself as an inherently good person as attested to by authoritative witnesses from her earliest years bespeaks an unexpected anxiety about challenges to her moral standing. Her narrative focus on the years prior to her marriage also serves crucially to define her as more than the wife and mother most current acquaintances know her as. Furthermore, I became increasingly aware that she was

telling two kinds of stories that I found difficult to bring into focus together, one of growing up in an established agricultural community, the other of incessant family disruption as her father sought industrial wage labor. On the one hand, attempting to reconcile these disparate images required me to challenge my own vision of “rural Appalachia” in the early twentieth century. On the other, I realized that in constructing her version of her past, Eldreth likewise grapples with romanticized visions of a preindustrial Appalachia, partly rejecting but partly accepting versions of mountain history made by other actors for other purposes. Ultimately, her concern to establish herself as a good and valuable person both in terms set by local discourses and in my eyes is reflected in the themes she emphasizes. This concern also, however, conflicts with and suppresses an incipient critique of the actors and forces that placed her family in a precarious economic position.

## A FOCUS ON CHILDHOOD

The stories from Eldreth’s childhood provide a glimpse of life in the mountain south in the 1910s and 20s as experienced by a young, but by no means sheltered, person. Work and making a living, relationships with family and neighbors, religion, the supernatural, play and joking, and the place of music in people’s lives figure prominently in these earliest accounts as they will throughout her life. It is hardly surprising that an older person should enjoy reminiscing about her childhood, but it is all the more valuable, consequently, to interrogate this obviousness, asking what purpose these accounts fulfill for her.

Admittedly, the alacrity with which Eldreth spoke about her childhood in our conversations was partially a result of my collusion. Since I initially conceived of Eldreth as an interesting person to study because she was a bearer of old, “traditional” songs, I constantly asked her when and from whom she had learned the pieces she sang. I, unconsciously (and, as it turned out, erroneously), conceptualized Eldreth’s childhood years as the period in which she must have acquired the bulk of her song repertoire or at least that portion in which I, as a folklorist, was supposed to be interested. I questioned her a number of times about childhood memories and her influences during what I assumed was the most important originary period for her repertoire, and I probably expressed particular interest whenever she indicated that she had learned a song from her grandmother or another relative older than herself. Thus in talking frequently about her early experiences and taking me on trips to visit places she had lived as a child, Eldreth was in part responding to guidance and privileging on my part.

Still, Eldreth’s interest in talking about her childhood was not simply an artifact of interviewer pressure. Nor am I the only interviewer to note an emphasis on the subject’s early years in an older woman’s life account. These stories provide Eldreth with two crucial and connected rhetorical moves. They enable her,

relying primarily on the remembered testimony of her parents, to define character traits she claims as inherent, portraying herself as an exceptionally and uniquely good child, cooperative, obedient, and strongly oriented to the needs of others. As a result, they lay strong claim to an identity that preceded and to some extent transcends the identity as wife and mother most salient to her family and community.

As in accounts throughout her life, Eldreth relies as much as possible on the evaluation of her behavior and character by situationally authoritative speakers and tends to use the behavior of other characters, in these instances often her siblings, as foils to highlight her exemplary nature (see Sawin 1992).

BE: Usually when Momma'd go visiting sick people, usually she'd take me with her. I was the only one that ever got scared; I was the only one that got to see. It was nerve racking. I'd go along, she'd lead my hand.

PS: Why would she take you rather than the other ones?

BE: Well, I think I was always pretty well behaved. Clyde and Maud was rough, she couldn't take them anywhere.

Lots of times when she'd go off she'd tell me to watch after Clyde and Maude—and they was older than I was—and if they got into anything to tell her. They'd get plumb mad because I'd tell her, but Momma would tell me to watch them. I thought I had to, which I guess I did. I'd sit in my little chair with feet up on the rungs. When she came in she'd ask me, and they'd get a whipping.

And she said she used to tie me in a chair, I must have been awful little, cause I know I couldn't walk. She'd put me in a chair and tie me in with Dad's shirt and go hoe corn for half a day and she'd come back and I'd be asleep in the chair. With the others she couldn't do that, she'd have to take a quilt and put them in the field right where she could watch them. I remember Uncle Payton a-telling her one time when he come in. Said, "I'd never leave this young'un alone like this. Someone could come and take her," but Momma could leave me alone.

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[Dad] made his banjo heads out of groundhog hides. It almost turned me against meat. I had to hold the groundhog while [my father] skinned it. He could ask some of the rest of the children. "No" or "I don't want to, Poppa." Well, anything my dad'd say do or my momma either, I'd do.

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And Momma told me the last time that she was up in my house, she said that I she said, "Honey, you're different from any young'un I raised." So, I asked her, I said, "Momma, in what way?" She said, "I don't know, but, Honey, you're different."

It is worth noting that, in these stories, Eldreth's investment in a discourse that endows her with an essential and unchanging nature is significantly at odds with my effort to analyze her ongoing self-enactment. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, however, she is at other times quite willing to depict herself as

changing and developing in response to social interaction. This is only one of the rhetorical options she employs. The claim to an inherent nature is useful to her in several respects, however. First, it allows her to depict herself as unique, quite different from her naughty older sisters or, by extension, from any other apparently insignificant woman who lived in the same circumstances. Hearing these stories over and over again, I got a strong feeling that Eldreth had felt perpetually unvalued and taken for granted throughout much of her life, that she often struggled for attention, and that she had to make the strongest and most unambiguous claim for her worth when she got a chance. Only later did it occur to me that she may have felt insecure in current audiences' evaluation of her as well. Having been singled out as a singer and storyteller for unexplained and possibly arbitrary reasons, she had good cause to want to justify the exceptional attention she was receiving. Second, these foundational stories establish an interpretive frame, encouraging listeners to recognize accounts of later deeds as further manifestations of her exemplary, generous, and moral nature.

The third purpose of Eldreth's emphasis on her childhood is implicit but powerfully contestive. In insisting that her character was established in childhood, either through inherent traits or (as we shall see in further stories) through the example of family members she admired, Eldreth effectively rejects the definition of herself as simply "Mrs. Eldreth," Ed Eldreth's wife, a woman formed primarily by her contact with her husband. Indeed, it is highly significant that she describes this period not as her "childhood," but as the time "before I left home" or "before I ever got married." Recall, similarly, that Eldreth only delimits the years of her marriage as a perceptual unit in negative terms: "The happiest days of my life was before I ever got married and since I've been a widow." In attempting to construct a chronology of her life, I realized that Eldreth had told me more stories about her sixteen years "at home" and the years since her husband's death than about the nearly five decades of her marriage and that many of the stories from the period when she was married focus on interactions with neighbors, sisters, her mother, and some of her children and surprisingly few on interactions with her husband. Oral historian Rosemary Joyce observed a similar gap in the talk of an Ohio woman with whom she worked—"most of her married life remained vague and even obscure after many interviews" (1983:24)—a lacuna she could not get the woman to fill, despite her persistence. Joyce argues that Sarah Penfield's reluctance to talk about her married life "could have been caused by the aging factor, by an unconscious sublimation of a difficult life stage, by a conscious direction toward happier, less traumatic times, or, more probably, by all three" (1983:24–25). I would suggest, rather, that Eldreth (and perhaps Penfield as well) privileges the years before she married in order to excise her husband from the story or at least diminish his perceived influence on her identity. She was required for many years to make her husband the center of her life: she worked for him, waited upon him, and tailored much of her behavior to suit his standards and desires as master of the household. The *story* of her life is her

own, however, and she elects not to make that man the center of her story, indeed, to relegate him to the margins.<sup>1</sup> To insist that she is still the person she had become “before she ever got married” is to deny the destructive power of her husband’s neglect. Carolyn Heilbrun, analyzing literary accounts of women’s lives, notes that biographers of women have had to “reinvent the lives their subjects led” because “the choices and pain of the women who did not make a man the center of their lives seemed unique, because there were no models of the lives they wanted to live, no exemplars, no stories” (1988:31). Eldreth, who tells her life in fragments, leaving listeners to assemble the whole, subtly but effectively decenters her husband without having to confront the generic expectations of biography head on.

### ONE CHILDHOOD OR TWO?

But even if childhood stories are comparatively easy for Eldreth to tell, they are not equally easy for listeners to make sense of. Indeed, she seems to be telling two distinct stories of two very different childhoods. On the one hand, she describes growing up in a close-knit rural community—“We lived real close to Grandma Milam”—and on the other, she relates that her parents had constantly to uproot the family as her father sought wage labor—“We moved thirty-three times in the sixteen year before I left home.” For Eldreth all the disparate episodes are evidently parts of a single tale, but I long had trouble keeping what seemed like two incompatible images in focus at the same time. In order to hold onto one, I had to let the other one fade or squint to push it out of my field of vision. Was her childhood a rural idyll or an experience of disruption and exploitation? What do we need to learn in order to be comfortable, as Eldreth manifestly is, with the coexistence of these two apparently contradictory versions of her early life?

The first prominent strand in Eldreth’s growing-up stories depicts a life of hard but rewarding work, self-sufficiency, and interdependence among neighbors in a stable, multigenerational community. This was the version that I was initially most attuned to hear because it corresponded with my preconception of her participation in a “traditional Appalachian culture.”

Dad raised his turkeys. We did; we all did. And our chickens. And we had our beef; we raised our beef and our hogs. Momma done a lot of canning. We made our corn crops and we cleared our new grounds. We had a little farm of our own. And we done all that work. Well, I guess we had to to survive.

Back years ago, if they had sickness in families, why, Momma would cook stuff and take, and Dad and us young’uns’d all get out and we’d get their wood and take it in, put it on their porch, and do their feeding and everything, what had to be done, till they got back able to do their work.

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I learnt the songs that [. . .] I heard [Grandma Milam] sing when I was about, I guess eight or nine, somewhere along there. And we lived real close. Momma, sometime she'd send me down there, and she'd say, "Now, you go down there and back." And she[Grandma]d be a-baking biscuits or something. And I'd say, "Grandma, I've just got to have a biscuit and blackberry jelly before I leave." [Laughs.] I'd always get me a biscuit and blackberry jelly. She could make the best blackberry jelly I believe I ever ate in my life and the best biscuits. [. . .] She was a real good cook. And then I used to go with her to the Methodist church. She always led me.

Growing up in this context Eldreth learns the core values of hard work, honesty, and neighborliness, both by example and participation and through the explicit inculcation of maxims she still repeats.

And he'd put two of us little young'uns in a row of corn, you know, when he'd be a-hoeing, in front of us. Two of us little young'uns, we wasn't either one as big as Drew [her grandson, then seven years old] and we had to pull weeds through them rows.

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And one time Grandma Milam's churning and I told her, I said, "Let me churn, Grandma." And she said, "Well." And I went to set down. She said, "No, don't set down. You're supposed to stand up to churn." She said, "Lazy peoples sets down to churn."

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My daddy used to say, "If you tell anybody the truth, they can believe you," and you'd know. But he'd say that you could lock against a rogue, but you couldn't lock against a liar. So, it works like that a lot, you know it? So, that's two things I'm real strict about is truth and honest. And if we stick to that, I think we'll be able to make it, don't you?

Intertwined with the story of a stable community reproducing a moral and well-socialized member is another—darker and more desperate, although not entirely devoid of good memories or humor. For Eldreth did not simply grow up on a little farm her parents owned. Rather, the family was repeatedly dislocated as her father moved them around from land they owned to rented land to places where he could temporarily get wage labor. As my insistent questions reveal, I had a hard time connecting this strand with the other stories I had heard or otherwise making sense of the whole.

PS: Did you grow up | did you stay in Ashe County most of your life?

BE: Well, we moved to Pennsylvania; we lived up there for a while. And, uh, we lived in Damascus, Virginia, for a good while and done farming. And then we lived in

Glade Springs, Virginia. I believe the best I remember Momma said in the years that I was at home we moved, we moved thirty-three times in sixteen year, I mean the years that, now, that I from the time that Dad and Mom was married. And she said she kept 'em counting and it was thirty-three times.

PS: Were you usually moving to a different farm or did your father do different jobs?

BE: Yeah, he done different jobs. And back years ago when we first moved to Pennsylvania, well, you know, they's so many people told us, "Oh, it's just like heaven in Pennsylvania." And all the jobs you could find and everything. That was years and years ago. And went up there and he couldn't find a job nowhere, only grubbing.

PS: What's . . . ?

BE: That's getting out and using the mattock and doing ditching and all things like that. We didn't stay there too long because he didn't like that kind of work. But now when we lived in Glade Springs, Virginia, we farmed. And when we lived in Damascus, Virginia, he worked at a dye plant. It was the stinkiest place I've ever been in my life. I stayed sick the whole time. I couldn't even stand for Momma to put butter in the bread pan, set it on the stove, I was so sick. Well, we had to move from Damascus because I couldn't stand it. It was terrible. And now I couldn't even go anywhere and I My son-in-law told me one time, he said I I said, "I smell a dye plant." And he said, "A dye plant? It's four miles to a dye plant from here." And I said [laughing], "I don't care. I smell it." I never forgot that smell. It was just a terrible odor.

PS: Amazing. But people were willing to work there?

BE: Oh, yeah. My daddy worked there. I don't think it bothered him. It didn't bother none of the rest of 'em. I was the only one that I couldn't stand the smell of that, used to get so deathly sick. But now when we lived in Creston, North Carolina (that's where I's born), he done a lot of farming there.

PS: Did he own a farm or did you kind of rent land or . . . ?

BE: Well, when we lived in Creston we lived on a neighbor's farm and did farming there. But, now, when we lived over on Buffalo, next to West Jefferson, he had his own farm. He had a farm and he had I we al— I I always called it the little white house on the mountain. It's a pretty little house, but we done a lot of farming there. And, so, we raised our hogs. We had our hogs. We had our beef. We raised our own beef. We had our chickens.

PS: How many brothers and sisters did you have by that point when you were living up there [Damascus, Virginia]?

BE: Let's see, uh, Louise was the baby one. Let's see, there was Clyde, Maud, myself, Joe, Rose, Grace, and Louise. Yeah, because when we went to get on the train the conductor's a-helping each one get on? And he was excited to death. He said, "The mother of seven children." [Both laugh.] I guess that's the most that ever rode that train one family. And it took us a long time to get there, you know. We'd have to stop and stay overnight. We didn't go straight through.

PS: Is that for getting to Glade Springs or //for . . . when you were going to Pennsylvania?//

BE: //That's to Pennsylvania.// That was a-going to Pennsylvania, I mean, when we had to ride the train. I know Grandma Milam, she had | she come over there and stayed three or four days with us before we left? And she baked and she boiled a whole ham. And made the suitcase full of biscuits, homemade biscuits, and then she sliced the ham and fixed it in the way that we had plenty of food to go on; we didn't have to stop any place, I mean, you know, to eat out.

PS: How did your Momma manage if you were moving so often, like if you | you had to be some place to get the crop in that you planted there? Did he just kinda move in between seasons?

BE: Yeah, he'd always get his crop gathered in and then most of the time he'd just barely get it in in the fall and then he'd sell out, and here we'd move.

PS: Mostly did you buy pieces of land and go live there //or rent?//

BE: //No, we'd just// | When we'd go other places we just rented. But now when we lived over on Buffalo, next to West Jefferson (that's in Ashe County) we owned our own home and our farming land, too, that we had. So we done a lot of farming. We didn't make our living just with whiskey, bootlegging, because, I'll tell you, we done a lot of work, everything that was coming and going and working for neighbors and working out jobs. Course, now, I never did no public work, but I made up for it when we was at home.

BE: But I always liked to drag out extract and pulp wood, after I got it down to the level, you know, where I could use our team? Me and Clyde had a team apiece, a team of horses. And we had to saw this extract. [. . .] Chestnut, they took it and they made extract out of it, like, now, flavoring and things like that?

PS: When you cut that timber, was that on land that your family owned or your father owned?

BE: Yeah, we'd cut extract and pull it out. And then we lived on a doctor's place after we left | after we sold out ours where we lived, we lived on a doctor's place for a long time. And they got out "curly timber," they called it, and hauled it and make lumber out of it? And then we done a lot of farming on Dr. Graham's place.

We moved so much, 'n here and yonder, so many times my daddy just. . . . He moved so much that Grandpa Milam told us one time, said, "Your Daddy moves so much that the chickens has got till they lay down and cross their legs to be tied."

For years I made some sense of these two conflicting strands by imagining that Eldreth's family returned periodically to their own farm, perhaps holding onto an agricultural rhythm by making a crop in the summer and working elsewhere in the winter, but I was wrong. Only much later, in response to pointed questions I finally asked while putting finishing touches on this book, did Eldreth actually

explain that her parents had purchased the farm she fondly calls “the little white house on the mountain” when she was four or five years old and sold it only a few years later in preparation for the ill-fated move to Pennsylvania to join some neighbors who had fared well there. After that, they periodically rented land in the same neighborhood in which they previously lived but owned their own place again only well after Eldreth and her older sisters had married and left home. Without intending either to mislead or misunderstand, Eldreth and I inadvertently colluded, it seems, on an image of residential stability that gave that little white house much greater longevity and prominence than it had really held in the Killens’s lives. It is worth remembering, too, that had Romey Killens hit the Pennsylvania job market at a slightly better time, the family might well have joined the stream of permanent out-migrants, and Eldreth’s Ashe County childhood might have been the beginning of a very different story.

## TWO INTERPRETATIONS

It is certainly possible—as a first approximation—to read Eldreth’s accounts of the variety of activities in which her family engaged during her childhood as a single, straightforward account with no particular moral valence. At times she seems to juxtapose accounts of wage work and agricultural labor matter-of-factly, in keeping with historians’ recent confirmation that the pattern of combining basically subsistence agriculture with various cash-earning strategies—occasional wage labor, selling timber, collecting herbs, and moonshining—was already quite common in Appalachia in the nineteenth century and extended into the early years of the twentieth (Reeves and Kenkel 1988:199). Still, Eldreth was born in 1913, the year before the Norfolk and Western Railroad extended a line into Ashe County from Abingdon, Virginia (Fletcher 1963:210, 236). Her growing up thus coincided with a period of economic change in that specific locality occasioned by intense local resource extraction and increased access for local people to commodities from and travel to other parts of the country. Eldreth’s parents led a life quite different from the settled security of her Milam grandparents, who owned a substantial tract of good bottom land. When Eldreth was a young child, she recalls that they lived close to Creston and her father worked for “a Knox man” who was very wealthy, though she remembers nothing of his specific business. Likewise, she says, her parents “worked out” the cost of the little farm they briefly owned and apparently could not raise sufficient cash to own land again for at least a decade after the move to Pennsylvania failed to fulfill their hopes. Supplementing subsistence farming with various means of raising cash may have been a well-established economic strategy, but uprooting a growing family twice a year every year and traveling to distant locales without good assurance of finding tolerable work was not. Grandpa Milam may have made a joke about the chickens so used to moving that they “lay down and cross their legs to

be tied” when a person approaches them, but he was pointing out a difference between his life and his son-in-law’s. And was he merely laughing, or was this a matter so serious that it could be broached only in a joking manner?

Certainly, whenever Eldreth describes her father working in the dye plant or finding the job “grubbing” in Pennsylvania or the family cutting trees for “extract” and timber, she manages to slip a reference to the farming they did into the account as well. She seems to be nervous about leaving listeners with the image of her father as a landless wage slave or her family as lacking the means to raise their own food, that is, about letting listeners define the family as other than self-sufficient agriculturalists. Interestingly, also, she seems not to recognize a pattern or a logical strategy in her parents’ decisions. Even if my image of periodic return to their own farm was inaccurate, it seems likely that her father must at times have made a crop on rented land during the summer and then moved the family to a place where he could get other employment during the winter. I broached that idea to Eldreth but could not get her to confirm it. Evidently she experienced the moves as much less strategic and more chaotic.

It is also worth noting, especially for the contrast it will establish with developments later in her life, that Eldreth as a child recognizes differences of wealth within the mountain community but not differences in class interests. She does not perceive those who have money and property as taking advantage of those who do not. Indeed, social intercourse is frequent, comfortable, and supportive. Those with more seem to operate with a sort of *noblesse oblige* toward their less well-to-do neighbors. Eldreth’s Milam grandparents live nearby and are actively involved both in making their own living and in modeling hard and virtuous work to their grandchildren. At various points when she is a little older, Eldreth lives with her grandparents and with an aunt and uncle and works for them, receiving room and board in return. The Knox man’s wealth explains his position as her father’s employer but occasions no further comment. A wealthy cousin owns an early phonograph, and Eldreth describes learning certain prized old songs and “how to speak proper” from her, without any touch of jealousy or reproach. Dr. Graham, from whom they rented the last family home in which Eldreth lived with her parents, visited them familiarly, told Eldreth stories, and even, she once mentioned, lent her his fancy saddle horse to ride when the girls would race horses in the lane after church on Sundays. Elsewhere the family might suffer from the indifference of strangers, but at home in the mountains those who had more took care of those who had less.

Eldreth’s handling of the fragmentary accounts of her childhood thus suggests two contrasting but not entirely incompatible interpretations. On the one hand, the two strands of her report are probably not as contradictory in her mind as they initially seemed to me. On the other, I believe that her need to foreground an image of her family’s agricultural self-sufficiency makes her complicit in downplaying ways in which her family actually was exploited by capitalist intensification during the early decades of the twentieth century. I now certainly

recognize that I was confused by adherence to a romanticized view of the Appalachian past, promulgated, at the time I began working with Eldreth, both by folklorists and by social historians influential in the Appalachian studies movement of the 1980s. Her complex version of rural life is actually consistent with historians' current understanding of the region's economic development, the longtime mixture of land uses, land ownership patterns, and classes that characterize what John Alexander Williams calls Appalachia's distinctive "farm and forest economy" (2002:124ff). On the other hand, Eldreth has her own reasons for investing in a romanticized vision of the past (congruent with my original image) that links morality with agricultural self-sufficiency. Her need to give that rhetorical spin to her accounts deflects her from articulating a critique (for which she certainly has evidence) of the ways her family was exploited in precarious economic circumstances.

My difficulty in reconciling the two strands of Eldreth's childhood story was certainly in part the result of a preconceived image of what life in the mountains in those days was supposed to have been like. From shortly after the turn of the century, folklorists—both scholarly, like Cecil Sharp (1932), and applied, like settlement school workers (Whisnant 1983)—regarded "Appalachia" as a source of traditional cultural practices as yet untainted (or only recently displaced) by mass-market products. The people's characteristic individualism and egalitarianism had likewise been traced by sympathetic observers, beginning with John C. Campbell, to descent from frontier settlers who survived by means of each family's own labor and the resources it controlled (Campbell 1921, chap. 6).<sup>2</sup> Folklorist collector/popularizers, like the musical Lomaxes and Seegers, further promoted a consistent image of Appalachian resourcefulness and traditional artistry precisely to counter powerful negative images of depraved and shiftless hillbillies (J. A. Williams 2002:304). Cultural critics like David Whisnant (1983) and Henry Shapiro (1978) had begun to expose this view of a pure folk culture in the mountains as romanticized and in fact calculated to serve the interests not of local people but of new capitalist enterprises that were transforming the region. In this analysis, an area marginalized after the Civil War had suddenly been rediscovered in the 1890s as a source both of material resources (coal and timber) and workers for the industrialization of other parts of the United States and of pure Anglo-Saxon cultural and genetic stock to dilute the effects of immigration from eastern and southern Europe (Whisnant 1983). Still, in exposing the cultural and economic exploitation of the region during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these accounts tended to bolster an image of the region as a rough utopia of self-sufficient yeoman farmers up until the arrival of the extractive industries (Caudill 1971; Eller 1982; Gaventa 1980). Only after the turn of the century, in this account, was that economy destroyed, and "Appalachia" came into being as a periphery to be exploited for the benefit of "America." Although Appalachian historians were already aware of disparities in wealth and the influential dealings of local elites, I encountered the egalitarian

yeoman farmer image as almost an article of faith among those committed to a positive interpretation of mountain folk and their cultural activities when I set out to understand Eldreth's stories in the late 1980s.

Specifically, the most influential historical account of the region in which Eldreth lived documented that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the mountain counties of western North Carolina were drawn into the timber boom that was already consuming adjacent parts of Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. Companies and their wealthy owners bought up huge tracts of land, much of which was denuded without care for local needs or sustainability (Eller 1982:99–112). The federal government acquired additional acreage, balancing conservation, water control, and multiple use but managing the land primarily as a timber reserve (1982:112–121). Workers were both pushed and pulled off their farms by, respectively, changing land ownership patterns and the opportunities for employment in logging and the related industries of milling, tanning, and furniture making (1982:121). Ronald Eller's study of the industrialization of the Appalachian South led him to conclude that farms and the collaborative family work discipline of subsistence agriculture deteriorated during these years so that when the timber companies shifted operations to the Pacific Northwest after World War I, people were forced to search for other industrial work (1982:123). In Ashe County specifically, the railroad that was built in 1914 was aimed to get as close as possible to an extant "timber resources depot" at West Jefferson and resulted in the establishment of hundreds of sawmills to process timber to be shipped out (Fletcher 1963:264). I thus imagined that during her childhood Eldreth's family would be experiencing only the very first wave of transformation from a purely self-sufficient agricultural livelihood based on widespread, equal, stable land ownership. As critical historians of the region now agree, however, this image has proved to have been a temporary foil necessary to Appalachian studies activists' campaign to highlight the real depredations of the extractive industries, but it has had to be modified in light of another decade and a half of careful scholarship (J. A. Williams 2002:362).

Since I first started listening to Eldreth's stories, the "new Appalachian historiography" has radically revised understandings of the region's history (for example, Billings and Blee 2000; Billings, Pudup, and Waller 1995; Dunaway 1996; Salstrom 1994; J. A. Williams 2002) in ways that shift our perspective on her self-narration. These authors challenge or at least complicate both the earlier claim of Appalachian "exceptionalism" (that Appalachia prior to the late nineteenth century was a purely egalitarian folk society in contrast to other regions of the country) and the idea that Appalachia was suddenly transformed at the end of the nineteenth century into an "internal colony" (Eller 1982) (that is, that, as happened in European and North American overseas colonies in Asia, Africa, and South America, a society of self-sufficient farmers living in harmony with their environment were rapidly transformed into a workforce exploited and commodified, like their land and resources, solely for the benefit of outside

capitalist enterprises allied with nationalist forces). It is now clear that Appalachia was involved in the global capitalist economy from the earliest stages of European settlement. Indeed, the goal of the initial contact with the Cherokee was to obtain deer hides and slaves for national and international trade (Dunaway 1996:32ff). Starting in the eighteenth century, the region was developed not as a precapitalist paradise of small family farms but (in the terms of Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory [1974]) as a "semi-periphery," with several definitive characteristics. Small-scale extractive industries like salt making, tanning, milling, and production of iron ore proliferated (Dunaway 1996, chap. 5; J. A. Williams 2002:127–129). Both industrial and agricultural products were produced in quantities exceeding local needs and were transported for trade out of the region, by whatever means were available, well before the construction of railroads (Dunaway 1996, chap. 6). Wage labor, slavery, indentured labor, and various forms of land renting and sharecropping were much more common than envisioned in the earlier idealized model of an egalitarian society of yeoman farmers in the southern mountains (Billings and Blee 2000, chap. 3; Dunaway 1996, chap. 4; Inscoc 1989; J. A. Williams 2002, chap. 2). Large tracts of land were acquired very early by absentee speculators and the "settler elite," who bought and sold the land as a commodity. Poorer settlers and later arrivals consequently found it very difficult to acquire land for farming (Billings and Blee 2000, chap. 2; Dunaway 1996, chap. 3; J. A. Williams 2002:35, 109–118). Furthermore, the image of egalitarian smallholders, however rhetorically attractive for defending the industriousness of mountain whites, made it easy to forget "how much of the wealth and the infrastructure that made possible the industrialization of Appalachia was extracted from the coerced or underpaid labor of African Americans" (J. A. Williams 2002:221).

Sociologist Wilma Dunaway paints the bleakest picture of the economic background to the fortunes of families like Eldreth's, arguing that by 1860 shifts in the global economy had fully peripheralized the region such that its infrastructure and industry were geared completely to extracting resources and producing profit for outsiders rather than providing for the needs of local people for either materials or jobs (1996:320). By this same date, "nearly two-thirds of Southern Appalachia's agricultural households were semiproletarianized into coerced labor arrangements or into unstable wage employment. Such work lives left them impoverished and seasonally unemployed for three to five months per year." These workers could neither gain access to enough land to support their families completely nor, since they did produce some of their own food, command sufficient wages to support themselves completely without farming (1996:90). John Alexander Williams offers a more hopeful image of the chances of the landless, arguing that "the extent of land ownership [in the nineteenth century] is still a matter of debate," that only "the most pessimistic view argues that between one-third and one-half of Appalachian households owned no land and had no hope of inheriting or buying it" (2002:109), and that squatters fre-

quently obtained effective use of plots within the large holdings of absentee landlords (2002:109–112). Still, as he summarizes the current consensus in his recent sweeping synthetic history of the region, “Social historians have pretty much demolished the old belief that mountain society before industrialization was a manifestation of the Jeffersonian smallholder ideal” (2002:136).

Clearly, then, the kind of mixed strategy practiced by Eldreth’s parents (combining industrial wage work, resource extraction, home production for sale, and subsistence farming) was not a new development for their generation. It would have been expected, according to a long-established pattern, that someone like Eldreth’s father, who had moved to Ashe County from neighboring Surrey County as a young man with very little money, would not have been able to purchase enough land to support his family solely by farming. The family’s economic hardships and their need for frequent and disruptive moves may well have been exacerbated by the recent arrival of large-scale corporate extractive industries. The intergenerational economic difference in Eldreth’s family, however, would probably not have been seen as the result of new outside forces blocking a young man from achieving something that was assumed to be his due. Comfortable land owners and marginal wage laborers and renters had coexisted in the same communities for generations. Paul Salstrom further suggests that “the industrialization era [in the early twentieth century] may well have intensified both the practice and the attitude of voluntary reciprocity within ‘their own family groups’” (1994:xvii), so the new development in Eldreth’s self-account might, ironically, have been the evidence of cooperation within the extended family rather than her father’s participation in wage labor. From this revised perspective, then, one might argue that Eldreth’s relatively matter-of-fact juxtaposition of the agrarian and wage-earner images simply reflects the actual, functional coexistence or even interdependence of what I had erroneously conceptualized as two contradictory social and economic systems. When wage work looked more promising than farming, they moved to a place where her dad had hope of being hired; when they took the train to Pennsylvania, Grandma Milam resourcefully made them a suitcase full of ham biscuits. The two ways of making a living supported each other. Eldreth’s family would not necessarily have experienced their life in terms of the imposition of a new, capitalist/industrial work rhythm that disrupted the continuity of family or the natural cycles of a life organized by agricultural production.

Still, what are we to make of Eldreth’s own imperfect comfort with bringing the two strands of her story together and with her inclination to privilege the agricultural side of her family’s economic strategy? Eldreth herself, it seems to me, clings to an image of the interdependent community of self-sufficient farmers as the cradle of the moral person and promotes listeners’ perception that such a community is where she is really from. She always claims the mountains as “home,” even though she also spent parts of both her formative and adult years in communities of industrial workers.

It is also significant that Eldreth tends to construct the stories about farming, raising their own food, and interacting with her parents and grandparents (though also those about cutting timber for sale) as what Pauline Greenhill has called “generalization narratives,” that is, accounts rendered in a continuous historical tense that describe what people used to do rather than events that occurred on a specific occasion (1994:34).<sup>3</sup> The accounts of her father’s wage work, in contrast, are usually much more specific reports, limited to what happened on one occasion. Generalization narratives have the rhetorical effect of depicting the activity as a typical and repeated event, the kind of occurrence that transpired so regularly that participants have lost count of and have amalgamated individual instances. Little Bessie, this kind of account suggests, was always over at Grandma Milam’s, always picking up songs, always helping out her father or mother. At the same time, details like the biscuit and blackberry jelly or a child’s disgust at skinning a groundhog give the accounts an evocative specificity that grounds them in particular times. Such reports give an impression of stability and continuity.

Indeed, Eldreth arguably invokes the “chronotope”—a characteristic organization of space and time—that Bakhtin calls the “idyll of agricultural labor.” In stories so structured, “life and its events are inseparable from this concrete, spatial corner of the world where the fathers and grandfathers lived and where one’s children and their children will live” (1981:225). For Eldreth, this solid “corner of the world” was Ashe County, where her maternal grandfather had always lived “as far back as I can remember. . . . And I never heard neither Daddy or Momma say anything about him being anywhere else. So I reckon that’s where he was from.” In telling these stories Eldreth asserts the claim about human character that this chronotopic deployment of time and space sets up, namely, that she is who she is because of her ancestors and their rootedness in a place and its ethic. In this atmosphere Eldreth depicts herself absorbing and being formed by explicitly articulated, timeless rules for living. She repeats her elders’ maxims to this day in ostensibly verbatim quotations, always attributed to the original speaker, as befits an authoritative word (Vološinov 1973:120). She thus claims both for her ancestors and for herself a moral value based upon hard work and absolute truthfulness, attributes crucial to her discursive self-construction. Her claim to revere truth grounds the validity of everything she says about herself and others.<sup>4</sup>

To put it another way, Eldreth herself is deeply invested in the idea that her childhood was part of “the good old days.” Eldreth is scarcely unique in this kind of attribution. Raymond Williams notes with critical humor the perpetual location in authors’ childhoods of successive, receding true “Old Englands,” noble and agrarian, but he equally warns against dismissing such images as mere nostalgia (1973:12). And there does seem to be something specific to the region about the precise qualities with which Eldreth endows those childhood years. As Jeff Todd Titon noted about a Virginia congregation he studied, “Without necessarily having been a time of churchgoing, the mountain past became sacred in

a far deeper sense, a golden age" (1988:138). Eldreth holds onto a markedly similar vision of "life in the mountains in the old days, when people had to depend on each other, when people helped their neighbors, [when] church on Sundays was the center of the community" (Titon 1988:140). Where does this image of a specific kind of community (rural, isolated, agrarian) as the encapsulation of the moral past come from for Eldreth and what is its significance?

One source is doubtless the Baptist church, with its emphasis on each generation falling farther away from the ideal set in the past (Bruce 1974). Both the hymns and the Bible discussion at the small church that Eldreth attends are full of references to "that old time religion" that is "good enough for me" and the need to return to the moral clarity and rectitude of past generations. In her specific case, I also suspect that she has internalized and applied to her own childhood an image of an idyllic rural past articulated in popular urban song compositions. As we shall see in the final chapter on singing, a substantial portion of Eldreth's repertoire consists of nineteenth-century Tin Pan Alley tearjerkers and early country music favorites that express a nostalgia for a perfect, but disappearing, rural life, a life that the writers had never experienced and that indeed never existed in that idealized form. "In a quiet country village stood a maple on the hill, where I sat with my Geneva long ago" begins a favorite song that Eldreth, ironically, learned from her father's brother, who traveled widely in the United States in search of work before returning to North Carolina.

The idea that the preindustrial rural community of a few generations back was a model of neighborly egalitarianism, the Jeffersonian ideal of an America built by solid, landed farmers, has different valences and purposes for Eldreth than for popular song writers in the 1880s or 1930s catering to the nostalgia of the uprooted or for anti-immigrant factions in the early twentieth century touting the southern mountains as a wellspring of pure Anglo-Saxon stock or for early collectors trying to record and promote authentic folk music (Whisnant 1983) or, for that matter, for Appalachian studies activists in the 1970s and 1980s seeking an image to inspire regional pride and a blameworthy enemy in the coal and timber companies. Eldreth, however, cannot help but be discursively implicated in and reinforced by the many other voices that have promulgated versions of this image. As Sheldon Pollock argues, there is no originary moment for a local culture. The sense of a localized culture as distinct (and in this case valuable) is inevitably generated through interaction with some translocal or outside entity, often one that wishes to subsume or marginalize it (2000).

I believe that there are two reasons this version of the past is so true and so discursively powerful for Eldreth. It enables her to make a strong claim to a personal rectitude inherently challenged by her father's mixed methods of earning a living and (as we will explore in greater detail in the next chapter) by her ongoing poverty. As a version of an irretrievable past, however, it also does not commit her to any actual critique of the causes of destructive social change. Eldreth is impelled to associate herself as strongly as possible with an unambiguously moral,

indeed revered, origin because the other obviously storyworthy fact about her childhood is that making bootleg whiskey was one of the economic strategies to which her father resorted and in which she as a child was involved. In discussing the matter, she seems to respond most strongly to local images of bootlegging not only as illegal but also as a lazy person's way to make a living and to her own beliefs about the immorality and danger of drinking. The vehemence of her condemnation and her desire to discuss it with interviewers may also, however, reflect her awareness of outside stereotypes of lazy, lawless hillbillies making moonshine, a consistent condemnation of mountaineers and rationale for outside intervention, from the days of post-Civil War missionaries to President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty (J. A. Williams 2002:201, 305).

It appears that Eldreth originally hoped to keep this facet of her family history a secret from performance audiences but got used to addressing the issue after her granddaughter Jean, more inclined to confront and play with stereotypes, began bringing it up on stage.

Dad worked hard. Jean's the first one that ever told that, you know, about him doing | about bootlegging. I tried to get her not to tell that. [. . .]

Somehow or other I just felt like from just a little young'un that it was wrong after Dad told me to | he set this big tub of corn out aside of a big old stump and gave me a little hammer and I had to set and beat that, just till I could pick up just handful of it and put it in another tub. And that's what he made corn whiskey out of. And I'd sit there all day long and beat that stuff, mash we called it. And I never knew nor never thought about it a-being wrong till one day he told me if I saw anybody coming to | to run. And from that day forward I knew it was wrong. He didn't tell me it was wrong, but I was small, but I knew when he said to run. Keep from getting caught, you know. [. . .]

I despise it, I really do. One day I's a-setting talking to Momma and I said, "Momma," I said, "I've often wondered how many purple drapes was hung over caskets from the liquor that was made in our families and sold." And she said, "What do you mean by saying something like that?" I said, "I've studied a lot about it." And she said, "Well, why?" I said, "Well," I said, "Liquor gets a lot of people killed in wrecks" and everything, which there wasn't many cars then. Everybody used horses, horseback riders.

Eldreth perceives that then and now people think of making moonshine as a lazy way to make a living and as something that, even as a child, she knew was illegal. She cannot quite assimilate this activity into her picture of the moral, neighborly community from which she claims to spring. She treats it as an anomaly, an exception to the family's usual behavior: "So we done a lot of farming. We didn't make our living just with whiskey, bootlegging, because, I'll tell you, we done a lot of work." And she emphatically sums up accounts of her father's other labors for the family—"Dad worked hard"—before launching into a description

of the whiskey making. She also finds a clever narrative means of defending her father while simultaneously using him as a foil. She depicts herself as a moral person, mourning those killed because of her father's whiskey, but does so in a reported incident, within which her mother can challenge the implied criticism of her dad. And then she can allow an older and more pragmatic self to excuse him, suggesting that it was not as bad to make whiskey in the past, since people get killed from drinking by getting into car wrecks, although in those days people mostly traveled horseback instead.

Similarly, Eldreth delights in the family musical talent that she has inherited but seems to feel that she must constantly defend her father because he played for parties where people drank and even drank a little himself:

My granddaddy Killens was a musicianer. He made his living a-playing music. And then my daddy, he played music too. I've told the children, I'd give anything if they could just a heard my daddy before he got down play the fiddle and the banjo. It just seems like he could just about make it talk; it's so plain, you know. And he'd have us a-singing. But he never did | I never did hear him sing unless he's a-drinking a little. If he got to drinking a little then he'd get to | oh, he'd just sing up a storm. He enjoyed singing and playing this music. But he'd always | I can remember when he'd set on the porch and read the Bible till twelve o'clock of a night before he'd even go to bed. He didn't have time, I don't reckon, to read it of a day. 'Cause we worked hard. I'm telling you.

Anxiety over maintaining her respectability never entirely leaves Eldreth. Her resulting tendency to make the rural idyll version of her childhood central and to treat activities that do not fit into that image, including her father's waged labor, as an aberration keeps her from articulating the kind of political critique that her experience might easily have inspired. That semiproletarianization was not new in Appalachia during Eldreth's childhood does not change the fact that she and her family were exploited and forced into desperate economic improvisation because of their incorporation into a global capitalist system that benefited others at their expense. She has experienced the travails of constant moving and watched her parents overuse land they farmed until there was nothing more to be extracted from it. She has seen hillsides denuded of their forest cover and smelt the sickening environmental pollution created by a chemical plant located in the midst of people's homes. Strikingly, for someone who identifies so strongly with her music, the first song she remembers making up describes her incorporation into industrial work rhythms defined by clock time.

I remember when Dad worked at Creston and that's the way I learnt the time of day, how to tell when six o'clock quitting time come. I'd go backwards and forwards across in front of the fireplace and I'd ask Momma what time Dad'd be in. And she'd say, "Six o'clock." And I'd march backwards and forwards from, well, before

six, and clap my hands in front of and behind me and sing, "It's six o'clock, quitting time," a-looking for Dad to come home.

And, as Raymond Williams argues for the English case, claims that a golden age of cooperative agrarian life has just passed away, though not to be taken absolutely literally, do mark periods of exceptional change in rural economies, that is, specific local advances in the capitalist transition (1973:36, 291).

Significantly, however, Eldreth's investment in the self-justifying discourse of respectability makes it much more difficult for her to criticize the systematic exploitation and degradation of her family or the environmental and social destruction that extractive industries wrought upon the mountain South during her childhood. In one sense this is true of any nostalgic vision of a golden age just a few years past. These images inchoately recognize a shift from the valuing of personal connection toward commercialism, but they mystify analysis and shield those who hold them from any commitment to create a more humane future, since such values are posited as incompatible with "progress" (R. Williams 1973). Eldreth's felt need to make claims in this idiom for her family's moral standing further hamper her awareness of the critique that Williams would say is inherent in her attraction to the image. To the extent that she depicts her family as self-sufficient farmers, it is harder to paint them simultaneously as abused wage slaves. To the extent that she valorizes hard work, it is harder to criticize economic exploitation. Indeed, one might argue, following Joan Scott (1991), that Eldreth's "experience" is so (inevitably) determined by internalized discourses that what she in fact experienced was valuable work against steep odds rather than excessive work for too little return. She tells a number of stories about dangers to which children and families were exposed "years ago," but all the dangers she construes as such are natural rather than hazards created by human negligence and greed. During the 1918 flu epidemic her father sprayed their house with sheep dip (a disinfectant) in an effort to block the contagion. When an uncle was bitten by a rattlesnake, his wife kept him alive by cutting both his leg and a freshly killed chicken open with a razor and using the chicken carcass to draw out the poison. When she was a tiny child playing out in a pile of sawdust, a snake wrapped itself around her legs so tight she couldn't move, and her mother whipped it off with a "willow hickory." In each case individual courage and cleverness averts a bad outcome.

Conversely, the threat to Eldreth's health posed by the dye plant and the threat to all of their lives from the precarious economic position they were put into by false expectations of well-paying work in Pennsylvania are presented not as dangers heroically overcome (still less as evidence of structural exploitation) but as experiences of individual misfortune. And Eldreth's desire for individual attention and praise for herself and her family further blocks any incipient critique. These incidents exist in what Bakhtin calls the chronotope of "novelistic time":

In this everyday maelstrom of personal life, time is deprived of its unity and wholeness—it is chopped up into separate segments, each encompassing a single episode from everyday life. The separate episodes . . . are rounded-off and complete, but at the same time are isolated and self-sufficient. The everyday world is scattered, fragmented, deprived of essential connections. (1981:128)

These are personal stories rather than examples in a larger scenario with wider political import. The tragedy of her parents' moving themselves and seven children to Pennsylvania in expectation of a good job and her father instead being reduced to the most backbreaking of menial labor assumes less salience in Eldreth's narration than the train conductor's admiring exclamation over "the mother of seven children." Her experience of being sickened by the smell of the dye plant becomes a story not of a greedy company carelessly poisoning the environment in which its workers must live but of Eldreth's individuality and sensitivity. And her parents' willingness to move away from Damascus (ostensibly) because the dye plant made their daughter sick reveals parental concern but does not identify the plant or the company running it as an enemy to be actively vanquished. If she does not understand what her family went through as exploitation, she cannot draw on that experience to criticize exploitative structures. In Eldreth's mind the only remedy for poverty is taking personal responsibility for hard work, not agitation for structural change. Her childhood stories demonstrate how an effective lack of critical social consciousness can be produced by the necessity to invest oneself in advantageous positions in discourses concerning personal worth.

## CONCLUSIONS

Eldreth tells two kinds of stories about the years before she got married that sit uneasily with one another. The fact that she does, relatively unselfconsciously, present these stories together as aspects of her childhood experience coincides with the revised historical portrait of Appalachian economic development. Capitalist extraction, renting of land, supplemental wage labor that did not pay enough to enable workers to give up subsistence farming, and a precarious livelihood for the landless were not new in the region during Eldreth's childhood and were not unexpected. Her combination of accounts of travel and industrial labor with stories suggesting that she was always and essentially a member of a small, deep-rooted community also probably reflects the attitude of her parents. Those other strategies may well have been supplemental and secondary means of making it possible to continue to live (most of the time) in a rural mountain community that claimed their loyalty although it could not offer them a decent living (see Roseman 2002). Nevertheless, the glitches and hesitations in Eldreth's accounts where the two discourses come together and the insistence upon adding

a mention of farming to any account of industrial work tell a different tale. Eldreth's need to lay claim to an inherent moral rectitude and her investment in a romanticized view of agrarian life blocks her ability even to experience as such and certainly to criticize the kind of structural exploitation a historical, political analysis would conclude her family went through during her childhood, which coincided with the final incorporation of the region as a capitalist periphery. Her desire to hold onto the image of her childhood as a simpler and better time, when people lived by the values of neighborliness and hard work and when she had these values instilled into her, is partly a defensive reaction against the labels of shiftlessness and degeneracy so often applied by outside observers. It is also, however, a means of resisting the definition of herself wholly in terms of her subsequent role as a wife. This was the childhood that formed her essential character, as reliable witnesses attest. And these were, she repeatedly insists, "the happiest days of [her] life" before her marriage to Ed Eldreth solidified her poverty and set her up to be abused and exploited because of her gender as well as her class. Eldreth's stories of childhood, then, serve as the first of several examples in which her need to defend herself against certain undesirable personal implications makes her complicit with the overall hegemonic control of her exploited region.