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## Listening For A Life

Patricia Sawin

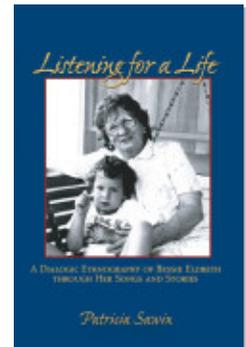
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### 3

*“If you had to work as hard as I did,  
it would kill you”*

#### Work, Narrative, and Self-Definition

During my initial stint of fieldwork I began most days by speaking with Eldreth on the telephone. As part of my greeting I regularly asked, “What have you been up to?” She just as regularly responded with a remark like “Oh, not much, I went out to the garden and picked beans and strung them and canned twenty quarts of beans this morning.” I was consistently taken aback by her response—both by what she had accomplished before I had done more than eat breakfast and because I intuitively expected her to stop after the “not much” and shift to another topic rather than giving me a literal answer—but I somehow never broke myself of the habit. Thus I formed a cumulative impression that Eldreth was determined to make me aware and appreciative of how diligently she works. Eventually I recognized that there was another twist to these interactions. I had unwittingly played a locally appropriate speech role, initiating a kind of conversational exchange that meant different things to Eldreth and to me. As Anita Puckett observed in the southern mountain community she studied, “One type of stylized conversational opening is ‘What are ya doin?’ Residents often respond with detailed narratives of recent tasks or activities that are engaging and occasionally humorous” (2000:131).<sup>1</sup> In other words, Eldreth and I were both following conventional means of initiating conversation, but we had different notions of what the convention entailed. I expected her to take advantage of the “What’s up? Not much” pair to defer having her activities become the focal “first topic” of our conversation, but she did not necessarily see that as the more polite option (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). Still, my impression stands. Although it was a miscommunication that drew my attention to the deep and complex involvement

of work in Eldreth's identity, many less confused conversations confirmed my conviction that I had accidentally glimpsed something profoundly true and significant. In our interviews when I asked her to fill me in about her life, she returned again and again to the topic of work, telling stories that highlight the many kinds of work she had done and asserting by means direct and indirect just how hard she had worked throughout her life. I thus came gradually to the conviction that in order to show Eldreth that I had understood and to respond to her purposes it was crucial to acknowledge my appreciation of her labor and to accord it prominence in this account.

Work is absolutely central to Eldreth's sense of self in two respects. First, over the course of her life Eldreth has created her identity and her relationships with other people not only, perhaps not even primarily, through talk but also through her labor, her specific deeds, accomplishments, and investments of energy. Her most definitive social relations entailed working *with* and *for* other people. Her labor and its products made life possible for herself and her family. Second, being hardworking is a cardinal virtue in Eldreth's system of values, a crucial but not unambiguous determiner of a person's moral worth. In steering our conversations repeatedly to discussion of her work, Eldreth, I believe, was thus offering two kinds of guidance for my project.

First, she was warning me not to neglect the bodily, practical dimension of her self-creation, not to mistake the songs and stories in which I had initially expressed interest for the whole of herself. Indeed, she implicated me in the intertwined bodily creation of selves and relationships with gifts of jars of home-made jams, soups, and sauerkraut that I gratefully consumed. At the same time, of course, she recognized in practical terms that I could not go back in time to witness or participate in her self-fashioning through labor, so the one means she had to make me appreciate this dimension of herself was precisely to tell me stories *about* it. Eldreth's response to me thus describes the limits and warns against the excesses of a language-focused analysis that, as Marx argued in *The German Ideology*, depicts consciousness in idealist rather than practical terms (1998). At the same time, however, her response suggests the potential of verbal communication, if understood in its richness as social interaction, to bridge the gaps between consciousnesses. Marx also recognizes that talk—as interaction and communication—is itself a form of practical consciousness (1998:49); and Bakhtin builds upon this Marxian perspective in advocating analysis, not of words but of socially situated and relationally motivated utterances (1986). I thus honor Eldreth's desire to foreground her identity as a worker and her identity as created through work both by conveying her accounts of her labors and by engaging in a dialogical analysis of her talk as an engaged, practical, social form of self-construction at many levels.

To understand Eldreth's stories as utterances entails recognizing that they are rejoinders in multiple ongoing conversations. That is, they are dialogic in the sense discussed in the introduction, having been formed in anticipation of the



Bessie Killens (Eldreth) as a toddler (lower left) with her older sisters Clyde and Maud, her mother Flora Milam Killens, and her younger brother Joe, ca. 1915.



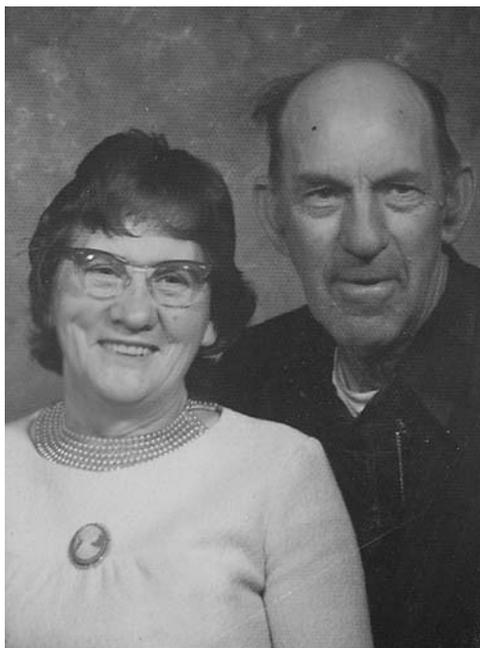
Bessie Eldreth with her sister Clyde Eller (center), one of Clyde's sons, a cousin, and a cow Clyde "kept as a pet." This photograph was taken in the early 1930s, after sisters Bessie and Clyde, inseparable though competitive as girls, had both married and started their own families.



Bessie Eldreth with her sons Bob and Denver and a nephew, taken about 1956. After Eldreth started performing in public, some of her sisters threatened to send this picture to the newspaper in order to humble her, evidently because her simple cotton dress and sturdy shoes and the boys' bare feet reveal the family's relative poverty.



Bessie Eldreth in the 1970s, around the time folklorists started inviting her to sing publicly.



Bessie and Ed Eldreth in the late 1960s.



Eldreth with grandchildren Drew and Stacey Eldreth, summer 1988, visiting a cabin in which one of her aunts lived when she was a child.

receptive understanding of multiple listeners, not all immediately or palpably present. In telling me these stories, Eldreth not only shapes her remarks to her image of me but also responds to internalized discourses, which reproduce the voices of past interlocutors, and anticipates the responses of distant future readers, those to whom she speaks through me. In depicting her hard work, Eldreth thus not only communicates brute facts about her experience but also positions herself relative to multiple, even conflicting, discourses regarding the moral valence of labor and laborers. According to subtle local gradations in value, working hard defines one as a moral and worthy person, while working too hard or at inappropriate kinds of labor can be shameful evidence of social degradation. In one sense Eldreth proudly depicts herself as hardworking and self-sacrificing, while at other levels she must struggle against potential negative implications of those very labels. Seen as utterances implicated in multiple discourses, Eldreth's stories about her work reveal the ideological component of her self-construction and the complexity of identifying herself as "a hard worker."

## A WOMAN'S WORK

When I put together all the stories Eldreth has told me about the work she has done, I am amazed by her knowledge, determination, versatility, and resourcefulness, as well as by the amount of sheer physical, intellectual, and emotional energy she has expended to surmount the challenges she encountered. Eldreth knows how to do—and for many years actually did, starting nearly from scratch—practically every task necessary to sustain human life at the material level. She has raised her family's staple foods from field grains to garden vegetables; tended farm animals and extracted their products, including milking cows and churning butter, collecting eggs, dressing chickens, and processing pork; collected wild foods like berries; preserved hundreds of cans of vegetables, soups, pickles, and jams to feed her family "from one year to the next"; and used these stores to cook three meals a day for a dozen or more people. Eldreth has cut timber with saw or axe, both for sale and for her own use, and has repaired and improved several of the rickety houses in which she lived. For years she scrubbed clothes on a washboard, having made many of the clothes and the lye soap with which she washed them. She has sewn quilts by hand as well as saved feathers from her chickens to make into pillows. She has worked not only for her own family but for neighbors and relatives both in the house and in the fields.

Eldreth does not talk about bearing her eleven children as a form of productive labor, though well she might. Like all women, however, once she was married and had borne a child, she was expected to assist her neighbors and sisters with the births of their babies, and she does describe this as a significant form of women's work. She became a favorite birth helper, one of those most often summoned; and although the family would also send word to the doctor and Eldreth

sometimes ended up assisting him, just as often she would have to deliver the child herself before he arrived. Once her children were grown, she babysat for nieces, nephews, and grandchildren.

Although Eldreth was not wholly isolated from commercial products, in many arenas of work she accomplished the whole process from the first steps, at least during the Depression and into the 1940s. Cooking a cake of corn bread began for her not just with mixing the batter from scratch and putting it into the oven but with growing the corn and taking it to the mill to be ground into meal, raising and slaughtering a pig and rendering the lard, and cutting down and chopping the wood for the cookstove. And if we recall that she did all of this while bearing a child approximately every other year and dealing with at least two in diapers constantly for twenty-five years, the amount that she had to do seems utterly overwhelming.

The few subsistence activities that Eldreth avoided doing are notable in that they define individual preferences and economic pragmatism rather than cultural patterns. Eldreth admits, for example, that she personally could never bear to kill a chicken and always had to get someone else to do that task. Tools had to be bought. So did men's clothes like overalls, as well as the shoes that she and her children consequently frequently went without. Notably, she did not engage in the spinning and weaving so often depicted and promoted during this period as a typical Appalachian occupation (Becker 1998). She learned and devised means of providing adequately for her family with minimal cash expenditure, making pragmatic choices about when to use her own labor to accumulate and process materials instead of paying the much higher price of items manufactured by others. Her considerable self-sufficiency, then, was a necessity born of poverty, not the result of adherence to something we might identify as "Appalachian culture." Although, as we have seen, she remembers her childhood fondly and portrays it as a happy time, when she gets started on the topic of labor she eschews nostalgia and shows no patience for those who romanticize the past through which she lived: "A lot of people talk about they'd like to see the good old days back years ago when everything was so cheap. Whew! They better be satisfied with what they've got."

In doing so much subsistence labor Eldreth was not unlike many of her neighbors or, indeed, other working-class people in rural America in the first half of the twentieth century. Buying, among food staples, only sugar, salt, coffee, and wheat flour and trading eggs and butter at the local store for occasional luxuries are common reports from the 1930s and 1940s. And Eldreth was likewise scarcely unique (in her community or other rural U.S. communities in which I have worked)<sup>2</sup> in continuing many of the thrifty habits of growing and processing much of her own food, even in the 1980s when trips to the Winn Dixie supermarket for twenty-five pound bags of self-rising flour and cans of Crisco had long replaced taking grain to be ground at the local mill or rendering her own lard. Eldreth also happened to get married on the eve of the 1930s

Depression, so her memories and stories reflect the fact that she took on the responsibilities of a family just when times were hardest for everyone. It is worth noting, however, that the difficulty and urgency of Eldreth's labor and her sense of herself as a laborer were influenced by her having always been among the poorest people in her community. Eldreth's stories reveal in passing that there were people in her community substantially wealthier than her family, for instance, the "Knox man" for whom her father worked, the doctor who owned one of the only cars, and the rich cousin who had an early Edison cylinder player when Eldreth was a child. This was the class who owned properties, both houses and land, that they rented to people like Eldreth (and her parents before her) or who hired her to do fieldwork or housework. In talking about her work, Eldreth thus positions herself relative to and anticipates the attitudes of both those who enjoy contemporary conveniences and those who "years ago" did not have to work as hard as she did.

## STORIES ABOUT WORK

The conventional wisdom about women's (as contrasted with men's) personal narratives and the constructions of self realized therein is that men are more likely to discuss individual attainments and challenges overcome, while women are more likely to emphasize cooperation and relationships (Johnstone 1990; Tannen 1990).<sup>3</sup> Eldreth contravenes these expectations with many stories in which she is the central if not absolutely solo actor, responding to a human need with her labor. Or rather we might say that she talks about both work and relationship and thus about how work establishes her relationships with significant social others.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, although Eldreth employs certain regionally distinctive ways of speaking as narrative resources, I see no reason to label her narrative technique a specifically "Appalachian" style. Rather, Eldreth's ways of telling stories respond to her specific experiences, those of a historical subject defined by gender, class, and the particular time period in which she lived. Her favored topics and techniques also respond to her particular rhetorical goals as she anticipates the attitudes of listeners both past and present.<sup>5</sup>

The everyday, repetitive women's work that must have taken up the bulk of Eldreth's time—the cooking and cleaning whose products were daily consumed and daily renewed by her efforts—tends not to make it into her stories except as the kind of glancing references from which I constructed the general account of her labor, above.<sup>6</sup> The instances of work that she does spontaneously narrate tend to be those that involve a striking image upon which to dwell, those in which she herself feels that she went beyond usual expectations (often meaning beyond the bounds of what women would ordinarily have done), or those in which someone else comments approvingly on her labors, as exemplified by the following story sequence.

*Pigpen and Porch*

- BE: I went to the mountain once. I bought me a pig. (Now this sounds so silly.) I bought me a little pig. And I sold my shoes, off my feet, and paid for the pig [laughs].
- PS: Where, where? At a fair or at a . . . ?
- BE: No, they's some people that had some little pigs to sell. And I sold my shoes that I had on my feet and went barefooted for two dollars and bought the pig for two dollars. //That's what my pig cost me.//
- PS: //You just, like,// gave | traded these shoes to //these folks for . . . ?//
- BE: //Yeah,// yeah, I traded my shoes, bought the pig. And, uh, it was. . . . Then I brought it home and I went to the mountains and took the axe and cut down some trees just the size, you know, just big enough to make the foundation of a hog pen, pigpen. And I drug 'em in, and then I sawed 'em the length that I wanted my hog pen built. And I built me a pigpen and put my pig in it.
- PS: Wow.
- BE: And floored it, I put the logs, you know, on the ground. And then I floored it and nailed the plank across the logs and built the sides up. Made me a real pretty pigpen, put my pig in it.

[Sighs.] Went over at Momma's once then, and she said, "I have needed me a kitchen porch built." And I said, "Momma, I could build you a kitchen porch." And she said, "Could you?" And I said, "Yeah, I know I could." So I went right to work. I got me the hand saw. I dug out little places, four corners, you know, and put cinder blocks in under 'em. I put the | fixed the plank, you know, from agin the house to | laid 'em on the cinder blocks. And then crossed 'em. And then I nailed the | sawed the plank and nailed the plank on the kitchen porch and made her a purty little kitchen porch. She told me after that, she said, "Prettiest little porch I ever had was the one you built for me."

Now I used to | I could do anything just about. I sheeted the whole upper side of our house with | and sawed the planks with a hand saw. And then covered it with tar paper? And I bought the | I picked beans for some people that lived closest ('Course, now, I had to go over towards other side of West Jefferson to pick the beans) but the people that I got the | bought the lumber of was, uh, Aster Lewis that had a sawmill. And then I picked beans and got Lyle Osborne to haul it for me. And I covered my upper side of my house.

- PS: Wow!
- BE: And they's some people that lived out there on the hill from us and that man told me one time, he said, "I've sat out there on top and watched you cover that house," he said, "You work just like a man."

To whom had Eldreth told stories like these before me? Puckett's observations about the frequency with which people exchange "detailed narratives of recent

tasks” suggests that Eldreth may have shared versions of such stories with neighbors who were engaged in similar labors and with family members on whose behalf she worked. It also seems likely, however, that Eldreth has adapted her narrative style to explain what she did to people who did not experience such work themselves. The detailed explanation of her construction of the pigpen is a probable example, a kind of recitation that a contemporary with similar skills would not need to hear but that makes a strong impression on a person who has never considered the details of such a task. As we will discuss in later chapters, in certain other respects and in discussing other topics Eldreth does not adapt her stories to the likely understanding of present listeners, mentioning people and places as if they should be as automatically familiar to me or to a festival audience as to her. And I never got the sense that she thought consciously about elaborating stories to educate new audiences in the way that storyteller Ed Bell, studied by Bauman, expressly articulated that he did (1986). Still, labor stories in the form in which I encountered them are well suited to communicate with later listeners, people who did not share or benefit directly from the work—grandchildren, public audiences, me, and other ethnographers. That is, the stories function to substitute for the work itself in interactively constructing Eldreth’s identity as a worker.

## NEGOTIATING THE VALUE OF WORK

Eldreth is clearly proud of all the work she has done. She seems in many instances to have a good sense of what kinds of work will impress those to whom she is talking, including tasks listeners might not expect a woman in a “traditional” cultural context to perform. An excerpt from a conversation Eldreth had with me and two other ethnographers, Dorothy Holland and Cecelia Conway, shows both how she shapes her current narration to anticipate our understanding and need for information and how she feeds off the admiration her account elicits.<sup>7</sup>

### *Cutting Timber with Clyde*

- BE: But before I left home, we’d get out pulpwood, chair timber, extract. [. . .] The extract’s out of chestnut, pulpwood’s out of poplar. You know, they make paper out of pulpwood. [. . .] Me and my oldest sister had a team of horses apiece, you know. We hauled extract down to the road on a wagon, we had a wagon apiece. And we hauled the extract down to the road till a man could take it on this big truck into West Jefferson.
- DH: What did you have to do to get it?
- BE: [Sigh.] Cut down the trees with a crosscut saw. Have you ever saw a crosscut saw?
- DH: Yeah.

- BE: Cut down the trees, trim 'em up. And then take rock hammer and wedges and bust 'em up into stick length, not stick length, but now like the cord had to be four foot high and eight foot long. And we had to cut that extract and haul it into town.
- DH: You and your sister did that by yourselves?
- BE: We'd pull it out with the | Some of the places'd be too bad, you know, to take horses in? We'd put a strip of hickory bark around our waist and nail it [a chain] to the end of the logs? Nose | You know when I say "nose the logs"?
- DH: Yeah.
- BE: And nail it to them and pull 'em out //down to the . . . //
- CC: //Good heavens, the two of you?//
- DH: //My God!//
- BE: Done it a many of a time.

In other instances, however, Eldreth seems less than confident in talking about her labors. She hedges her claims in odd ways, makes apparently unnecessary preemptive defensive remarks, or piles up more examples than seem necessary to convince her audience of the worth of her efforts. In the pigpen story, for example, she begins by ostensibly framing the whole account as a sort of joke: "Now this sounds so silly," as if afraid of the judgment listeners will make if they contemplate seriously the poverty and desperation that led her to trade what was probably her only pair of shoes for a pig that would eventually feed her family. Conversely, whenever she happens to describe herself as *not* working, she immediately corrects that self-characterization in a classic, revelatory false start (Polanyi 1978): "I know one time I's setting there and, uh, well, I wasn't a-setting there, I's a-getting supper."<sup>8</sup> This behavior suggests less a failure to read her current audience accurately than an involvement in multiple simultaneous discursive interactions. Eldreth is talking partly to her partner in the present conversation, sensing and reacting to the listener's evident reactions to her. But she is also responding to those historical local discourses relative to which she has over the years developed her sense of self and her self-presentation as a moral actor. And since, these days, her immediate audience usually consists of me or a group of Elderhostel participants or schoolteachers or others she identifies as "rich people," she also sometimes anticipates the negative attitudes about "poor people" that she attributes to wealthy outsiders (even though it seems unlikely to me that her present listeners actually hold such views).

Eldreth, I eventually realized, is trapped in a discursive catch-22, whereby working hard is the fundamental means of establishing one's moral and social worth, yet having to work that hard (for any of a number of reasons) labels one as aberrant, unworthy, or shameful. In order to appreciate the discrepancies between my actual (positive, sympathetic) reaction to her accounts and the kind of reaction she seemed in many cases to anticipate, I had (as discussed in the previous chapter) to revise my image of regional economic and social arrangements. Imagining the region as having been, up until the arrival of extractive industries in the 1890s, a

strenuously egalitarian society of self-sufficient yeoman farmers, I could not at first understand how her individual labors could be construed in any but praiseworthy terms. Understanding, rather, that surplus production for profit, waged and coerced labor, and significant economic inequality were established in the region by the very first European settlers and continued to develop throughout the antebellum period (Billings and Blee 2000; Billings, Pudup, and Waller 1995; Dunaway 1996; Inscoc 1989; Salstrom 1994; J. A. Williams 2002) casts her experience in a different light and provides grounds for appreciating the apparent defensiveness of her self-characterization.

Working from the revised historical picture, Wilma Dunaway crucially asserts that the moral ranking of people according to their social position and kind of work was already long ensconced in this region by the first decades of the twentieth century (that is, by the time Eldreth was born). "Respectability" was defined by the 3 or 4 percent of the Appalachian elite who owned large tracts of land, were highly educated, and did not engage in any type of manual labor. Smaller land owners, shopkeepers, governmental officials, clergy, and even wage earners like teachers and engineers could also be considered honorable so long as they were committed to education and self-betterment. Mere wage workers and sharecroppers, however, had no claim on social capital, and those who could not escape from poverty were blamed for their own impoverishment. "Hardworking people" (and by definition successful) were respectable and deserving; the "shiftless poor" were not (1996:258–259). Allen Batteau documented the extension of these attitudes into recent decades and their corrosive effect, noting that people labeled "just renters" were "thought of as transient [and] unreliable" and "lacked full status in the community" (1983:148) and that clients of various sorts were made to go through humiliating "rituals of dependence," whose "common outcome is the orchestration and manipulation of feelings of shame and inferiority" (1983:146). Shirley Brice Heath observed the internalization of this ideology among mountain folk who had moved to the Carolina Piedmont to work in the textile mills. "Men and women blame themselves and each other for not working hard enough when there is not enough money . . . For them, work equals money; if one works hard enough, there should be enough money, and if there is not enough money, someone is not working hard enough" (1983:41). Those who hold to an egalitarian ethos and a strong Protestant work ethic, yet are faced with mystified structural inequalities, are caught in a no-win situation, rhetorically as well as economically.

Depicting oneself as hardworking is thus crucial to moral standing but can be treacherous for those who lack land or property. If you have to work so hard just to survive, that means you are poor and your respectability is automatically suspect. Given the cruel logic according to which wealth is taken as after-the-fact evidence of praiseworthy self-exertion, admitting that you engage in manual labor and nevertheless continue to be poor undermines the very claim to being a respectable hard worker. In this system, Eldreth, who lived in rented houses

until she was nearly sixty and who frequently hired herself out to neighbors for wages, must have felt herself to be in a precarious moral position. She was long ago discursively positioned such that everything she says about her labor must defend her against a local allegation of dishonor and unworthiness. Many of the remarks and stories I have recorded from her make sense as a response more to this historical, social, and moral context, rather than to actual immediate listeners. The often-heard or feared voice of local social criticism sounds more loudly in her ears than my recent questions.

Eldreth's investment in the image of herself as moral and praiseworthy because she is an exceptionally hard worker proves partially problematic for her in two more specific respects as well. One conflicted issue involves what forms of labor are deemed appropriate for each gender. Given her husband's combination of disinclination and disability, Eldreth had to take on a lot of what he would ordinarily have been expected to do if she was to keep herself and her children from starving, and that put her in a rhetorical position that, while defensible, clearly required explicit negotiation. The strictness of the division between male and female roles and the sanctions for breach are themselves a matter of some debate. John Alexander Williams characterizes the nineteenth-century mountain family as emphatically patriarchal, yet also notes that "particularly in the absence of sons, fathers sometimes trained their daughters to do men's work" (2002:123). Puckett, in her study of discourse in a Kentucky community, argues categorically that "when someone violates basic 'rights' activity patterns, such as when a woman 'works like a man,' then 'it's not right' and sanction, at least as gossip, is likely to follow" (2000:58). Kathleen Stewart, in contrast, sees gender roles in the West Virginia community she studied as themselves discursively negotiated.

Ask about gender differences and there will be loud and universal claims that men work in the mines and women keep the house, that men bring in the money and women get up and fix the breakfast, etc. But because such claims are made with such certainty they, like any other *braggin* talk, will also elicit an immediate counter claim that begins with the words "still yet." "Still yet" there is nothing more ridiculous than a woman who will not split wood or haul coal or shoot off the head of a thief in the night just because she is a woman. Nothing is so ridiculous as a man so "babified" he cannot cook himself a meal if he has to. (1990:46-47)

Eldreth's behavior suggests, similarly, that the rules of the speech/labor economy were situationally flexible, at least up to a point. There seem to be two dimensions that influence how far Eldreth could go without incurring gossip and scorn for doing "man's work," her age and marital status and the perceived regularity or permanence of the role. She grew up in a family in which all but two of the children (including the three eldest) were girls, so the boundaries of who did what may have been more permeable; and, indeed, the willingness of Eldreth and some

of her sisters to work in the fields and woods was probably encouraged as crucial to the family economy. As described previously, Eldreth relates chopping down trees with her sister as a teenager without the slightest hesitation. Once she is a married woman, however, limitations become firmer and violations riskier. Eldreth, I would argue, has become expert in making a virtue of necessity, as the story about putting siding on her house demonstrates, but it does take some effort. We cannot know what her neighbor truly meant by "You work just like a man." In Eldreth's telling, however, it comes off as a straightforward compliment and confirmation of her own pride. It is worth noting, however, that she reinforces this interpretation both by first adducing her mother as a character witness who praises her labor without reference to its gendered nature and by telling other stories in which she herself praises her mother and grandmother in the same terms.

Stewart argues that in the perpetually back-talking, wisecracking community she studied, "gender 'ways' are so conventionalized and so dramatically performed that they tend to be clearly externalized as discourses rather than internalized as identities" (1990:46). Eldreth, however, participates in a much more reticent "Appalachian" discourse community and has a more precarious social position because of her economic standing. Interestingly, I discovered just how strongly she had internalized the gendered labor divisions from her long suppressed reaction to something I did. My former husband, in a gesture both feminist and practical, taught me to change the oil in my own car, and I proudly sent Eldreth a snapshot documenting my new accomplishment. A decade later, after I had visited her with a new partner of whom she approves because he "treats [me] right," Eldreth finally revealed that she had been horrified by the photo, having taken it as evidence that my husband was forcing me to do kinds of work I "had no business doing."

Still, in her own case at least, any individual task could be given a positive spin. Eldreth drew a firm line, however, between working *like* a man on a single occasion and taking on the kind of regular, extradomestic, wage-paying job that was evidently seen as a male prerogative and responsibility. Although she describes having done housework, work in the fields, and even timber cutting for other families for pay, she is adamant in insisting that she never held a "public job." And although she understands that times have changed and she is by no means critical of her daughters, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters for having taken a variety of regular wage jobs, it is a point of pride that she herself never did. She even recounts having turned down an offer of a job in an insurance office, preferring to go on cleaning houses to get the cash she needed. She might, as a practical matter, have eschewed a job with set hours because it would have (or would have been seen as having) taken her away from her family and her woman's household duties for too long. I also suspect, however, that in Eldreth's mind, committing herself to a job would have identified her as the family's main breadwinner; and that would have been tantamount to an open admission that

things were not going as they should in her marriage. That, in turn, would evidently have brought suspicion and shame on the wife more than the husband, or so she feared. Ed's unwillingness to work very hard to support his family was probably an open secret, widely known but rarely discussed explicitly. Apparently, however, as long as Eldreth could maintain the fiction that she was not really providing most of the family's support, she could likewise hold onto her respectability.

A second problem for Eldreth arises from the fact that the work that confers moral standing is defined in contrast to leisure and to easy ways of making a living. This means that, to the extent that she is involved in such activities, Eldreth must defend herself against the implication that they are immoral. We catch hints of this anxiety especially in passing remarks. I remember only one instance in which Eldreth described accepting charity, and she framed even that as a form of effort on her part: "One of these days if we get a break, I'd like to show you just how far we walked. I'd walk from Three Top to West Jefferson to get a change of clothes for the young'uns, I mean, give to 'em. I didn't buy 'em, give to 'em." And recall her immediate self-correction when she happened to describe herself as "setting there," rather than engaged in housework, in establishing the scene for narrative action. Most crucially for Eldreth, the music that she loves and that is so much a part of her special identity tends to be regarded as a leisure activity and is thus susceptible to criticism in this moral economy of work. In the previous chapter we observed Eldreth's determination to portray her father as a hardworking and thus worthy man even though he played fiddle and banjo and even made bootleg whiskey. In the chapter on singing we will similarly note her tendency to characterize her music as either a productive accompaniment to work or a socially useful contribution in its own right.

Internalized local rules for moral conduct are not the only submerged discourses influencing Eldreth's self-characterization as a worker. In speaking to current extra-local listeners—ethnographers and members of public audiences—Eldreth necessarily anticipates a response based on past experience and at times projects onto those with whom she is interacting attitudes they may not actually hold. Eldreth certainly has reason to be suspicious of outsiders who express an interest in mountain people and mountain culture. She complains particularly about antique dealers, who once unabashedly went door to door offering to buy items out of people's homes, hoping to get bargains from owners ignorant of their possessions' worth on a wider market. The iron bed on which I sleep when I visit was a cherished gift to Eldreth from her mother, and she never tires of describing its value and how often she has refused offers for it from dealers.

Interestingly, however, Eldreth tends to identify the people who form most of her performance audiences not so much by their extra-local residence (although they come from all over the United States and even from other countries) as by wealth. When the topic of her performances at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife (where we got to know each other) comes up, she regularly

repeats the observation, “We met some rich people in Washington, didn’t we, Patisha, but they was nice.” As the slightly defensive tone of this remark suggests, she anticipates “rich people’s” possible disdain and, reciprocally, is prepared to disdain those who would not respect her. The most significant aspect of the label, however, is its implication that she perceives the distinction between herself and the people who come to Elderhostel programs or whom she meets when traveling to perform in terms of class rather than culture. These are “rich people” precisely and definitively because they have not had to do the kind of hard, subsistence labor that has made Eldreth who she is. In this respect she pragmatically situates herself at odds with one of the ways in which a folkloristic perspective tends to position her, as an exemplar of old-time Appalachian culture. From the moment of the region’s “rediscovery” by other Americans in the late nineteenth century, the self-styled mainstream conceived of Appalachians as “our contemporary ancestors” (Shapiro 1978; Whisnant 1983). The second wave of interest in Appalachia as a repository of “valuable folk culture” (in the 1960s and 1970s) was connected with a conception of “the folk” as conservative people who prefer and intentionally perpetuate older ways of doing things (Glassie 1968). Once I became cognizant of Eldreth’s use of the “rich person” label for her audiences, however, I realized that I had never heard her use the terms “Appalachian,” “hill-billy,” or even “mountain folk” to characterize herself or her family.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the sight of an old washboard on sale at an auction provoked a negative outburst:

And some of ’em said, “Oh, there’s an old-timey washboard.” And I said, “I wouldn’t have that thing in my house,” I said, “They ain’t no way that something like that would go in my house.” I said, “I worked too hard washing on them things a-washing for everybody in the neighborhood,” I said, “to help support my young’uns.” And I said, “I hate ’em.”

While appreciating the attention she receives when she performs, Eldreth thus emphatically, if implicitly, rejects those who would treat “country” living as merely a style or a nostalgic memory and insists upon the substance and value of what she has accomplished. Eldreth is proud of her ability to make things from scratch and does prefer some homemade products to their “modern” alternatives (for example, her own corn bread and pinto beans to the fast-food hamburgers and pizza her sons occasionally bring home). That she sees the washboard as a symbol not of simpler times but of backbreaking labor should serve as a potent reminder, however, that what she wants to be admired for is her energy and resourcefulness. She is not charmingly old-fashioned (as Fabian puts it, an “other” ostensibly separated from us by time [1983]) or culturally distinctive. She insists upon being recognized as poor and hardworking and upon being respected as such.

I eventually realized, also, that Eldreth saw me as a person who really did not have to work very hard (months of “fieldwork,” not unreasonably, appeared to

her simply as an extended period in which I had no job and nothing else to do but hang around in Boone and come out to talk with her day after day). I did not grasp how I must have looked to her, however, until I volunteered to help some neighbors set out cabbage seedlings and arrived at her house at day's end exhausted and wearing muddy jeans, instead of freshly showered and wearing the skirt and blouse I had thought respectfully appropriate for visiting her. The delight with which she fed me supper after my labors that day made me aware of how my usual preparations for what was to me the work of interviewing her marked me as a nonworker in her eyes. Eldreth is so dedicated to being welcoming, so willing to embrace any individual on a friendly basis that she did not draw a line between us on those grounds. Over and over again, however, she would sum up a conversation with the remark that has become the title for this chapter: "If you had to work as hard as I did, it would kill you." Indeed, everything that she has said to me must be considered in light of the fact that, in the wider project as in our individual conversations, one of my principal purposes, in Eldreth's eyes, is to serve as the foil by contrast with which she can depict herself as meritoriously hardworking.

Interestingly, since she has gotten to know and trust me better, Eldreth will at times blatantly apply the painful label "poor" to herself. When I proposed bringing my parents to meet her, for example, she responded, "Come up and show them how poor folks live." She was partly teasing me, and the phrase serves also as a conventional politeness, a disclaimer of one's ability to provide fully adequate hospitality. My inclination, however, had always been to avoid the subject, to act as if there were no economic discrepancy between us. Eldreth, in contrast, refuses to let me deny that difference but simultaneously demands that I disavow the very label she has applied to herself (to the extent that it has pejorative connotations), asserting positively that our friendship transcends, though it cannot erase, class differences.

In interacting with the people who come to hear her sing and tell stories, Eldreth now negotiates between her longstanding impression of outsiders and her present, positive experiences. That it is noteworthy to her for rich people to be "nice" not only suggests the kind of contempt she anticipated or at least dreaded but also subtly yet brilliantly turns the moral tables, since her remark implies that people like herself are usually kind and generous, while one should expect rich folks not to be. And while the new kinds of people with whom she has had an opportunity to talk in recent years do not entirely liberate Eldreth from dealing with the older discourses that she has internalized, they do offer new opportunities for her to negotiate a positive interpretation of her identity as a hard worker. These audiences contribute to Eldreth's self-construction in two distinguishable ways, corresponding to the particular possibilities of two novel kinds of conversational interaction—the public performance and the ethnographic interview.

The kinds of performances in which Eldreth is invited to participate usually involve some framing by a folklorist or musicologist, whose purpose is to situate

her music in its cultural context. This means that Eldreth herself and her life experience frequently become as much an object of interest as her singing. As often occurs in a festival setting, everyday life is transformed into a performance and becomes susceptible to unusual attention (Bauman, Sawin, and Carpenter 1992). Eldreth, prompted by her presenter, simply mentions that she raised eleven children or that she regularly cooks dinner for thirty or forty people on Sundays, and she receives applause. It must be sweet for Eldreth to receive overt admiration from precisely the class of people who did not have to work as hard as she did and whom she would once have expected to look down on her. A particularly poignant and delightful moment transpired in the summer 1988 Elderhostel taught by Mary Greene. After discussion of the thirty or forty people who regularly stop by Eldreth's house on Sundays after church and have a bite of dinner, a woman in the audience asked Eldreth if she had a dishwasher. She first replied, "No," and then suddenly switched to "Yes," holding up her two hands. The laughter and applause that she evoked rewarded as remarkable both her present verbal cleverness and also the thousands upon thousands of dishes she has washed and dinners she has cooked.

While public audiences praise and validate everyday activities long taken for granted, interviews offer opportunities for frank discussion of topics that Eldreth seems not to have felt comfortable broaching previously with family and neighbors. In interviews she finds herself in the uncommon yet not unwelcome situation of being the object of undivided attention and of being involved in the kind of extended, thoughtful conversation that may be conducive to the sharing of secrets. She also, not incidentally, has often found herself talking with women who hold explicitly feminist views. While neither I nor the other interviewers in the handful of additional taped conversations to which I have access articulated a feminist philosophy explicitly, we evidently managed to communicate our beliefs in subtle ways. For example, in the conversation with Holland, Conway, and me, cited above, Eldreth reveals that she is hesitant to share anecdotes that are critical of her husband. Our well-deployed silence, however, communicates and eventually persuades her that she does not have to bite her tongue in this company.

### *Dish Pan*

And then I did it [cut timber for sale] after I left home. Some things a body shouldn't even talk about, . . . [hesitates, but we remain completely silent, emphatically refusing to reinforce her self-censorship, even with an "um hmm."] but, you know, me and two or three of my boys, no, me and one of the boys and one | the oldest girl. After I got married we got us out a big load of extract. Well, back then it'd a-brought about \$30. And we got out a big load. And my husband didn't help get it out. And, uh, after we got it out, got it busted, and got us a man to haul it, he said that he's | he'd take it to town. He didn't want me to go, and so I didn't go, and

he took it to town. And do you know what I got out of that big load of extract? I got a tin dishpan. He kept the rest of it [laughs]. That's the truth.

Similarly, in a conversation with me about her participation in a religious camp meeting held near the town of Todd during the 1950s, Eldreth inserted a brief but telling record of a conversation with a friend.

But he [the pastor who led the religious meeting] called me a little slave, he said, | I asked Miss Ruth Greer one time, and I said, "Why does he call me a little slave?" And little darling. And she said, | I said, "He don't know whether I ever worked hard or not." And she said, "News gets around."

Those who cared about Eldreth could tell that she was "slaving," working too hard and not receiving proper appreciation and reward. And they tried to tell her so, but not so directly as to cause embarrassment. At the time, she called up that sympathetic naming only in order to deny it—"He don't know whether I ever worked hard or not"—and thus to deflect the potentially shaming connotations she has internalized. In the context of a conversation with me years later, however, she could transform the earlier interaction, telling the story to adduce contemporary witnesses to her self-sacrifice and her husband's neglect (see also Sawin 2002). A colleague who read this work in manuscript faulted my inattention to the Christlike pattern he saw in Eldreth's life of redemptive self-sacrifice.<sup>10</sup> I cannot, of course, disprove that Eldreth at some level gained comfort and strength from taking Christ as her model. It is striking, however, that she herself never makes that connection in discourse. The church she attends stresses God as the source of rules and Jesus as both savior and friend more than Jesus' life as pattern for one's own conduct. It is worth noting, furthermore, that the idea of Christ as a model may be less accessible to women than men. Consider Begoña Aretxaga's observation that the explicit Christ imagery accorded male Irish Republican Army hunger striker Bobby Sands was never applied to female IRA prisoners who protested in self-sacrificing ways (1997). Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, even when Eldreth praises her own and other women's risking bodily harm to save their children, she tends to characterize such self-sacrifice as just what a mother would (naturally) do. Limitations on available imagery and terminology do influence a speaker's discursive self-presentation.

In all of her stories about work, Eldreth was responding at some level to an implicit, hostile question: If you were indeed such a hard and worthy worker, why are you still poor? The benefit to her of the conversations upon which this book is based is that they allowed her, in ways previous conversational contexts discouraged, to respond to that challenge more or less directly. At times she simply slipped in a remark in passing, referring, for example, to those who were relatively secure financially during the Depression and who maintained their position

by exploiting people like her: “The ones that could give you fifty cents for all day long working, they thought they had it made.” At other times she wrested control of the conversation to make a point I was not expecting:

PS: What kind of work did Ed do, different stuff or . . . ?

BE: Well, for a long time he didn’t do anything much. That was a whole lot of my problem, that I had to work so hard, I’ll be honest with you. That’s where I had to do a lot of hard work. He’d | It didn’t seem | he didn’t | He didn’t seem to let it bother him whether he really worked or whether he didn’t. He didn’t work for his family like he should have. I wouldn’t want [gestures toward the tape recorder], you know what I mean, but it was true, he. . . . After we’d been married I guess, probably, maybe fifteen year he done some sawmill work and he got his hand cut almost off his | in the edger saw, when he was sawmilling. And then that knocked him out of work from | for several year and he couldn’t do nothing, only what he could do with his left hand. And then he got that emphysema, and it finished him up.

By imputing blame to others who took advantage of her and to the husband who failed to do his share even when he could, Eldreth is able to defend herself against the implication by which she seems to be haunted, that her poverty was her own fault and thus a sign of moral failing.

According to Eldreth’s own accounts, her husband was not the only person whose actions contributed to keeping her in poverty. And her analyses, as we have seen, do not take account of wider forces, like exploitative labor policies of industries in a capitalist periphery or the speculation that led to the Great Depression. Her husband, however, is the one from whom Eldreth expected better treatment, the one who entered into the labor partnership that constituted a marriage in that historical context but did not keep his half of the bargain, either emotionally or financially. It is notable that she also describes doing all kinds of very hard work with her father and siblings before she “left home” to marry and that it seems likely that her work load decreased gradually after her children grew up and she became part of a much larger informal productive unit in which employed adult children provided for some of her needs while she babysat or cooked for them. Nevertheless, during our first interview she identified a demarcated period—from her marriage to her husband’s death—as the time during which she had to work *too hard*. In Eldreth’s terms there can hardly be a more damning criticism than “he didn’t work for his family like he should have,” and many of her accounts effectively set her up in contrast to her husband, precisely as the person who did work for her family, not only as she should have, but actually above and beyond standard expectations. Eldreth’s conflicted feelings about her marriage and her role as partner are intimately intertwined with her sense of herself as an overtaxed and underappreciated worker. Her self-defense as a hard worker who could not escape from poverty constitutes an implicit criticism of the gender system that trapped her in an exploitative relationship from which

she could not escape. Economic marginalization and gender exploitation are inextricably connected in her experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

As I worked on this manuscript and realized how central I thought Eldreth's own work should be in the account of her self-construction, I called her to check out that impression. Her initial response was, "I can hardly believe I ever worked that hard," although after a moment's musing she proceeded again to tell me stories of specific instances of extreme and exemplary labor, continuing until our conversation was deflected onto another theme. Like pain and other bodily experience, the memory of hard labor does not linger in the flesh (Scarry 1985) unless it caused injury and disability. Telling the stories again, however, is a means of making the work of years past a continuing component of the subject's ongoing identity, that is, of the self reflected back to Eldreth by those who know her story and see her as the person she narrates.

Focusing attention on the details of one's labor is a common and conventional local mode of verbal interaction, an available form for describing and enacting one's social worth. It is something of a stereotype, especially for the generation that experienced the Great Depression as did Eldreth, for an elder to criticize his or her younger listener with some variation of the "if you had to work as hard as I did" theme. That Eldreth is thus scarcely unique in her emphasis on labor and its products does not, however, change the fact that work is a crucial component of both her self-concept and her sense of her own worth. Her stories describe labors that her listeners could not have witnessed, directly imprinting the image of her as a hard worker. They simultaneously enable her to negotiate with a contradictory and unfair social system that blames and further punishes the poor, while depriving them of full credit for the hard work they do. In her conversations with me Eldreth also seemed aware of the necessity of characterizing her labors so as to make an impression on those—prominently including me and those who might read what I would write about her—who must stretch their imaginations to envision the sheer physical effort and the desperate resourcefulness that was her daily lot for many years.

'Cause we worked hard. I'm telling you. I said to somebody just a while back, "It would kill the young people today," I said, "they'd be people, more people than ever had been a-committing suicide if they had to work like the people used to work." They'd starve to death because they didn't know how to start. Wouldn't they? It's true.

It is not clear to me to what extent Eldreth may appreciate the work that went into this book as a form of labor in any sense comparable to her own. On the one

hand, she has often generously expressed her willingness to “help you in any way I can with your work.” And in recent years, on the too frequent occasions when I have postponed a visit because of being busy at the university, she resignedly accepts my excuse with what I take as a cherished compliment, “I know you work hard.” On the other hand, the months and years of transcription, analysis, and writing are necessarily invisible to her. Still, I offer my labor as a response to hers, the “responsive understanding” (Bakhtin 1986) that provides evidence that I have tried my best to listen and comprehend.