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0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia  
Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

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## THE ROAD TO POVERTY

Although urban poverty in America commands a great deal of attention in the media, the rate of poverty in rural America is fifty percent higher: one out of four children in rural America lives in destitution. This is particularly true in Central Appalachia, which has become a symbol of intractable poverty and the failure of public policy. Sadly, the problem of chronic low income is as persistent there today as it was in 1964, when President Lyndon Johnson visited and announced his famous War on Poverty. How poverty develops and why it remains are the broader topics of this provocative social historical analysis of poverty in a rural Appalachian county.

Dwight Billings and Kathleen Blee examine the making of wealth and inequality in persistently poor rural communities through the history of Clay County, an especially poor section of the Eastern Kentucky mountains in Appalachia. Though this area has been the target of repeated antipoverty and economic development programs, few of these have had a lasting impact. The authors uncover the systemic problems and patterns of low income by tracing the economic, sociocultural, and political development of Clay County from early agricultural and industrial development in the midnineteenth century to the advent of the timber and coal industry in the twentieth century.

In the process, they take to task the overly simplistic “culture of poverty” and “internal colonialism” explanations for poverty, providing a much more compelling and complex picture that will upset many people’s long-held perceptions. Appalachia, the authors remind us, has always been multiracial. Eastern Kentucky, rather than being isolated from the world capitalist system (commonly cited as the reason for its retarded development), was very much a part of it. Billings and Blee analyze economic inequality as the interaction over time of markets, culture, and the local state.

This study of the long-term institutional basis of rural poverty contains fascinating, new historical detail based on the authors’ meticulous archival research. This book makes an important contribution to basic research on inequality – pointing to the shortcomings of treating symptomatic problems of low income while failing to address systemic ones – at a time when American policymakers are struggling to design and implement effective programs to overcome poverty.

Dwight B. Billings is Professor of Sociology and Associate Director of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky. He is the author of *Planters and the Making of a “New South”: Class, Politics and Development in North Carolina, 1865–1900* (1979) and co-editor of *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (1995) and *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region* (1999).

Kathleen M. Blee is Professor of Sociology and Director of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh. She is the author of *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (1991) and editor of *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest* (1998).

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# THE ROAD TO POVERTY

The Making of Wealth and  
Hardship in Appalachia

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*University of Kentucky*

KATHLEEN M. BLEE

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To James S. Brown  
and the people of Beech Creek

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## CONTENTS

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i>	viii
<i>List of Tables</i>		ix
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>		xi
<b>I. Public Policy and Historical Sociology</b>		<b>I</b>
1. Introduction		3
<b>II. Antebellum Capitalist Markets</b>		<b>25</b>
2. Frontier Kentucky in the Capitalist World System		27
3. Industry, Commerce, and Slaveholding		51
<b>III. Antebellum State Coercion</b>		<b>103</b>
4. State Making and the Origins of Elite Conflict		105
<b>Photo Essay</b>		<b>137</b>
<b>IV. Cultural Strategies</b>		<b>155</b>
5. The Patriarchal Moral Economy of Agriculture		157
6. Racial Dynamics and the Creation of Poverty		208
<b>V. Postbellum Capitalist Markets and the Local State</b>		<b>241</b>
7. From Marginality to Integration		243
8. Feud Violence		
<i>with Pam Goldman, Sharon Hardesty, and Lee Hardesty</i>		281
9. Epilogue		316
Appendix 1. Data and Methodology		339
Appendix 2. Genealogies		345
<i>Notes</i>		347
<i>Index</i>		427

Cambridge University Press

0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia

Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1.1	Nonmetro counties with persistent high poverty, 1960–90.	5
Fig. 1.2	ARC designated Appalachian subregions.	6
Fig. 1.3	Kentucky counties and Appalachian Kentucky.	7
Fig. 2.1	Wilderness Road and the Kentucky River Country.	31
Fig. 3.1	Clay County's antebellum salt wells.	62
Fig. 3.2	Civil suits by bearers of promissory notes, 1830–49.	90
Fig. 3.3	Civil suits by bearers of promissory notes, 1810–1900.	91
Fig. 3.4	Apprenticeship and indenture.	92
Fig. 4.1	Distribution of cases by type, 1810–1900.	113
Fig. 5.1	Trends in farm productivity.	193
	Photo Essay (PE FIGS. 1–23) after page	136

Cambridge University Press

0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia

Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## TABLES

2.1	Total Valuation of Property in Kentucky River Counties, 1839	49
3.1	Salt Manufacturing in Clay County, 1820–80	66
3.2	Clay County: Census of Manufacturing, 1850	68
5.1	Farm Size and Values in Clay County, 1860	166
5.2	Farm Production in Clay County, 1860	167
5.3	Farm Laborers' Relationships to Beech Creek Heads of Household (Excluding Sons and Daughters), 1900	175
5.4	Case Docket Comparison: Johnson Family, Feudists, and Total Clay County	177
5.5	Average Sample Farm Characteristics for Northern U.S. Farms with Three or More Improved Acres, 1860	180
5.6	Beech Creek Farm Values, 1850–80	183
5.7	Beech Creek Livestock Inventories, 1850–80	185
5.8	Output of Principal Crops and Products in Beech Creek, 1850–80	186
5.9	Corn Production and Livestock in Beech Creek, 1860 and 1892	188
5.10	Change in Beech Creek Household Size, 1850–1942	189
5.11	Surplus Agricultural Production in Clay County, 1860	191
5.12	Surplus Production in Beech Creek, 1850–80	192
5.13	Beech Creek Farms Not Producing Agricultural Surpluses	194
5.14	Household Types in Beech Creek, 1850–1942	201
5.15	Household Type by Land Ownership of Household Heads in Beech Creek, 1850–1910	202

Cambridge University Press

0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia

Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*List of Tables*

5.16	Mean Age of Household Heads by Household Composition in Beech Creek, 1850–1910	203
6.1	Number of Free African Americans in Clay County and Number of Whites in Beech Creek, by Gender and Census Year, 1850–1910.	209
6.2	Persistence Rates of African Americans and Whites: All Household Heads and Landowning Household Heads, Clay County, 1850–1910.	217
6.3	Characteristics of Landowners, by Race, Clay County, 1850–70.	220
6.4	Farm Equipment and Livestock Holdings of Tenant Farmers, by Race, Clay County, 1850–70.	224
6.5	Literacy, by Gender and Race, Clay County, 1850–1910.	226
6.6	Persons Unrelated to Household Head, by Race, Clay County, 1850–1910.	232
6.7	Mean Age of Persons Unrelated to Household Head, Clay County, 1850–1910.	233
6.8	Racial Differences in Landholding and Family Relationships among the Elderly, Clay County, 1850–1910.	235
6.9	Relationship to Head of Household for Elderly Women, by Race, Clay County, 1850–1910.	236
6.10	Living Arrangements of African American and White Children, Clay County, 1850–1910.	237



Cambridge University Press

0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia  
Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When we began this study, two very different ways of explaining Appalachian poverty had been advanced. An older approach, which attributed the region's persistent poverty to an antiquated system of cultural values, conceived alternatively as a traditionalistic folk culture or a culture of poverty, was giving way to a newer model that conceptualized Appalachia as an exploited internal colony. By documenting the history of railroad building, timbering, and coal mining around the turn of this century, social scientists and historians had shown that the mountain region's poverty needed to be understood in terms of Appalachia's intimate connection to the wider national economy, not its supposed isolation from it. However, it also seemed clear to us that depictions of Appalachia's economic exploitation by absentee corporations begged the question of why such dependency characterized Appalachia's road to rural poverty in the first place. We thus became interested in studying the contours of Appalachian social life before, in the vernacular, "Coal became King," or, to paraphrase a lyric by Kentucky songwriter John Prine, before "Mr. Peabody's coal train done hauled the region away."

We chose a longitudinal case-study approach in order to see why and when Appalachian individuals and households began to experience and cope with impoverishment, and we chose Appalachian Kentucky as a window on the wider Central Appalachian experience. The brilliant ethnographic and survey research of James S. Brown, conducted in the three rural neighborhoods of "Beech Creek" (a pseudonym) in Clay County, Kentucky, beginning in the early 1940s, and on their outmigrants to the urban and industrial Midwest in the 1960s, provided us with an indispensable starting point for the present study.

By first studying the historical trajectories from 1850 to 1910 of the ancestors and their neighbors of the people of Beech Creek, about which Brown taught American social science so much, we began to understand in human terms that profound changes had taken place throughout Appalachian history well before the era of the modern coal industry. And, by comparing the expe-

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0521655463 - The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia  
Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface and Acknowledgments*

riences of these Beech Creekers with those of others in the wider but not so distant environment – farmers and merchants, men and women, wealthy people and poor, African Americans and whites – we began to develop a complex picture of Appalachian social change that, we hope, challenges conventional wisdom and stereotypes of the region. At the same time, we hope to have contributed to the broader understandings of regional development, social inequalities, and the efficacy or limits of particular public efforts aimed at social betterment.

When Brown first began studying the already impoverished inhabitants of Beech Creek, he meticulously documented the rapidly vanishing way of life of Appalachian subsistence farming households. What began as a dissertation project directed by Talcott Parsons at Harvard University became a life-long work of science, art, and love for Brown who, to this day, has maintained a relationship of friendship and respect with the people he lived among and visited for almost sixty years. Because our work would not have been possible without his prior labors, direct assistance, and constant encouragement, this book is dedicated to James S. Brown and the people of Beech Creek whom he respected so much.

Many other people have also helped us in this undertaking. Data collection was greatly facilitated, and often made fun, by archivists such as Terry Birdwhistle, Kate Black, Lisa Carter, and Bill Marshall at Special Collections and Archives of the Margaret I. King Library of the University of Kentucky; Shannon Wilson at the Berea College Library; and Mark Wetherington, director of the Filson Club. Laura E. Johnson of the Clay County (Kentucky) Historical Society was also remarkably helpful and generous with her time. We are grateful as well to the staffs of the Baker Library of the Harvard University School of Business, the Clay County (Kentucky) Clerk's Office, the Kentucky Historical Society, the Kentucky State Library and Archives, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Archives, and the University of Louisville Photographic Archives.

Besides our countless debts to intellectuals whom we know only through their writings, we are grateful to so many scholar/friends for their insights, advice, and encouragement – in some cases over many years, in others at crucial moments. Included are Richard Angelo, Mary Anglin, Tom Arcury, Alan Banks, Fred Bateman, David Brown, Francie Chasen-Lopez, Tim Collins, Wilma Dunaway, Cynthia Duncan, Ronald Eller, Dick Gilbreath, Linda Gordon, Thomas Hakansson, David L. Harvey, James Hougland, John Inscoe, Robert Ireland, Ronald Lewis, Sally Ward Maggard, Clyde McCoy, Virginia McCoy, Mary Beth Pudup, Paul Salstrom, Harry Schwarzweller, Susan Silbey, Gene Summers, Louis Swanson, Ann Tickamyer, Altina Waller, and Halliman Winsborough. The mere listing of their names does so little

Cambridge University Press

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Dwight B. Billings and Kathleen M. Blee

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Finally, we wish to acknowledge each other. The alphabetical listing of our names does little to convey the extent to which our efforts in this research and writing have been truly equal as well as the mutual satisfaction and joy of collaboration that this project has meant for both of us.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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