

Belonging in Grundy County: Spheres of Patterns and Run-on Sentences

Who is Appalachian? And more specific to my summer, who is Grundy?

Diane Sawyer, in her recent work “Children of the Mountains,” might chalk up this people to overall wearing, mountain-dew teeth chewing, outsider weary, family-loyal mountain folk, and she is not alone. Popular literature depicts this region like colonialists describe natives: exotic, the ‘other,’ simple due to poverty but more aptly nature, and everything different that makes the ‘normal’ normal. These images and perceptions of Appalachia have become mere platitudes, as all do through overuse - when cliché markers become representative of a culture and people, deep complexity is lost. And the tragedy is not just that Appalachia has become known by these reducible qualities, it also that Appalachia has internalized these images itself. Allen Batteau, in his work *Images of Appalachia*, argues that the outside perspective of Appalachia does not remain on the outskirts of its communities, but seeps into the very fabric of the place. Appalachia, then, knows itself as much through their own lived experience as those commenting on it.

But this seeping is in no way a disturbance, because that would suggest that Appalachians could know themselves without commentary. No one anywhere can ever fully know themselves alone, although the Protestant thread woven in American culture might lay claim to be able to through the navigation of the ‘soul.’ Anthropology uses interview and observations to get at a people, knowing full well – despite what Psychology argues – that an individual fails to conceptualize themselves in a larger context, squeezed between influential patterns.

So asking ‘who is Grundy’ could quite possibly be the most ambiguous question to ask. But the question for Grundy is not as broad as it appears, because Grundy commentary narrows it through its frequent debates. Like all communities do, Grundy places people within its lines. I wanted to know what it took to ‘*be Grundy*,’ as they so often refer to it, and know the levels of belonging the place was ordered by.

This question required multiple approaches: interviewing four-generation Grundy residents and newly arrived ones, observing at the grocery store, church, and at the Tractor Pull, and reading literature on Appalachia, to understand historical influences and recent renderings of the culture. More than ever, this research made me aware of the ever-present need to provide ‘answers’ in social science and my own tendency to rebel against such a pressure. My question, although asked in several different ways with numerous methodologies, led only to run-on sentence explanations, with no period in sight. This was the beauty of my time in Grundy – that knowing was through continuous descriptions and a cascade of ever-generating questions. I was uncomfortable with this lax wrap-up, but have now come to terms with it ideologically: Grundy, amidst its popular clichés, is a place with many spheres that lead to various and often contradictory truths.

For this reason, my central thesis provides much room to wiggle. I came to know that belonging in Grundy could roughly be described by the rhetoric pertaining to it, and was also understood through the experiences that contradicted that very rhetoric. I saw three spheres of belonging in Grundy, an observation, which, in itself, I realize could be lacking.

The first sphere was history, namely family history. Like many small communities, family roots are central to the community's function, because trust and knowledge are fostered through a multi-generational presence. In the middle of the Piggly Wiggly, I observed a scene typical of this sphere: an older man stops a running child in the middle of the aisle, turns his head up with his hand and asks, "whose you?" The young boy, not in the least bit startled, responds as if he had many times before, "I'mma Nunley." "Whose Nunley," the man responds, now evermore curious. "John's Nunley," the boy says, itching to continue his run. The old man, now satisfied, looks at the young boy with deep recognition, as if he knew all he ever needed to know, and lets him go. History allowed people to place one another through association. Strangers, one interviewee said, one "never knew what to do with."

But strangers, those people who did not have a very long history in Grundy, still found a place to fit in the community. One man, born and raised in a small town in Georgia, moved to Grundy with values he said aligned with Appalachia's. Owning very little and "never having two dimes rubbing up together in his pocket," he made sure to never seem "like he knew more than anyone" or "that he was better." Egalitarianism is central to the fabric of Grundy, and the finesse of social interaction was often arranged around equality in conversations. The second sphere, then, was shared values.

The third sphere was practice, what people did. A middle class man, although from a rural community, came to Grundy to teach at the high school. Teaching, a profession that often isolates you within the community because of its value for advancement at the cost of staying in Grundy, set him apart from others. However, when he began coaching football and winning games, his presence in the community changed. He was beginning to be invited to family reunions and homes for dinner. Partaking in a communal bond –

football – allowed him an ‘in’ to the community, despite his higher social class and lack of history.

The spheres can, at once, mutually support and contradict one another. That is to say that belonging is a multiplex social phenomena, which never has strict guidelines, but finds its essence through norms and exceptions and everything in between.

This project did several things for me, namely to deepen my love for the Grundy community and to open further my mind to the myriad explanations of the world and the humans on it. Curiosity can often be killed by definitive ends, so this summer only sparked more questions, more imaginings, and more thirsts for understanding. This will surely lead me to further research and schooling, something I knew beforehand, but has only become more clear. This internship has, like all things Sewanee has done for me, thrilled me more with learning. I am grateful for the opportunity Career Leadership and Development afforded me.