



*An article from  
Catholic Rural Life Magazine  
Fall 2002 volume 44 number 2*

## **FINDING A NEW SENSE OF OUR PLACE ON EARTH**

**Marie Cirillo**

**Catholic Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee**

It has always been really hard for me to visualize what life was like in these Appalachian Mountains during that period in American history before the West was open and the East was dependent on us for food, fuel and fiber. It is the images of walking hundreds of pigs from here to there that is most difficult to picture. I grew up knowing mining at the other end when a truck delivered coal to the family home in Brooklyn. I didn't know where food at the stores came from, but I knew all about the barrels of canned food we would ship to Brooklyn after a summer working in the garden and in the kitchen with my maternal grandparents in Kentucky

For over a hundred years this central part of Appalachia retains its fame for chronic poverty and out-migration. The extractive industries have a grip on the mineral rich lands. These are the areas where we have the landless poor, some of whom are despondent. Others are strongly rooted and, I believe, will never be apart of the Appalachia I know and love.

There are scattered counties within the coal mining region that are mineral free. Here two things are present. Families who have retained land have small farms where creative production and marketing is coming to life. The rugged terrain is not conducive to large farms. In many instances the larger tracks of land are owned by the Forest Department of the U.S. government. Some is owned by large timber companies. The strategies for making things work in each of these arenas are different. But over the years we are integrating ideas and activities from which the people are gaining some hold of their own potential as a region

### **Several significant factors play into a collective strategy.**

1. Land Tenure issues are between residents and absentee owners that include corporations, government and the millions of people who left the area with land still being passed on to heirs that are now scattered all over the country. The land tenure issues are around who owns the land, what they are doing or not doing with the lands, how the county is realizing revenue and how local people, who have the most long-term interest can work the land in a way that will lead to a sustainable economy and valued culture.

2. There is a governance issue. All of the counties included in the government's identification of Central Appalachia are rural counties. The population might range from 25,000 to 50,000. What is significant is that less than 25% of that population live within incorporated towns. Since so much of the land is owned by absentee owners, the county government tends to focus on supporting the towns. If I could not imagine hundreds of pigs walking to market, can you imagine what is going on in a region after a century of such neglect by local government?

3. Appalachia is known for its constant migration in and out. The Southern region of Appalachia has the poor leaving and the upper classes moving in. Central Appalachia has the more highly educated and skilled people leaving the area and more poor people moving in. If you were to travel within some of the more remote hollows of my community you can find settlements that look less ordered than some of the rural areas I visited in India.

Put all of that together in the context of the millions of Americans that know nothing but city or suburban life and we have a most in penetrable problem. If you think city folks don't understand the farm issues, then what do you think they feel about us. In fact, what do American farming communities think about us. One woman in this community never lets a visitor go without reminding them that a little bit of Appalachia is probably keeping their community going.

We understand what it means to be working with unrenewable resources. We have just so much coal left, and people have an intuitive sense of the years left to get the coal, gas and oil out of here. What will happen to the farmer and the farm equipment when the resource that make the equipment and keep it moving is gone? What will happen to our cities when energy sources to home, factory and transportation are gone? Yes, of course, the magnificence of the human species will find other sources. Even so, that will not be an easy transition. It could take several generations to live through such a change, and if those wanting to save their community who see and know and are making the connections today, what is stopping us from planning and acting together to hasten the transition to a more sustainable life.

Last week, a handful of people who live on a Community Land Trust in this inconspicuous, isolated place that carries all of the above problems put forth its best effort to catch the attention of two men from the Land Ethics Landscaping Company from Ann Arbor, Michigan. They were coming here, to Clairfield, Tennessee to spend a day up Roses Creek Hollow to help us with a land use plan for a 40 acre parcel of land recently acquired by the Woodland Community Land Trust. For 25 years this group has been organized by people in the community to get back some of the 40,000 acres taken from the people in the late 1800's. The Community Land Trust, while set up to serve the entire Clearfork Valley has, after 25 years acquired only 200 acres up Roses Creek Hollow. An equal amount has been acquired in Eagan, but resources have not been there to do much development.

The land trust leadership believes people have to be with the land to protect it, to care for it, to have some reasonable return for working with it. The Land Ethic group came to help us with a land use plan that would include 6 house sites. Five local people stayed with these two men for a good five hours as we went through brush and briars, climbed mountains and walked through forested areas and enjoyed an occasional vista.

Some of the land had once been strip mined. Water oozed out in places from the abandoned deep mine not far from the property.

We wanted our visitors to grasp the challenge of our work and I hope we did not overdo it to the point where they might be thinking it a futile effort. What we did after our intensive focus on a land use plan was to give our consultants a quick tour of work done over the past 25 years. We had 17 houses, common grounds, a picnic area, office space, forest management designated areas. We showed them our maps.

Then we took a quick tour through the area pointing out how, within this isolated community we include the tail ends of two Tennessee counties and one Kentucky County. Then we went to the area where strip mining is being done. Even for me, the devastation of land was shocking. How a company can rip up in one week what it took the land trust 25 years to build up can leave one feeling rather limp. It is better to sometimes get angry. That keeps you standing on your two feet. Either way, the public image is an Appalachian people that are too sorry to know what side is up or a wild and uncivilized people that belong no place.

Why should the rest of the nation care about what is happening to the Appalachian Mountains and not exclude caring for the mountain people? Besides this being the International Year of the Mountains, besides this being one of the two mountain ranges in North America, besides the food and fiber, coal, gas and oil that these mountains have provided, besides the figurative reference of the Appalachia's being the backbone of the East Coast, we all need to spend a little of our Sabbath day and a little bit of our morning prayer time letting the Spirit enlighten us to how we are all part of one Earth. When ones backbone is eaten up by cancer the whole body is affected. Meditation can draw us in on our Earth body, help us feel the pain and challenge us to finding a new sense of our place on Earth.

So many people want to dismiss us as the dregs of society, but isn't it more accurate to see how the American addiction to comfort, pleasure, market products and a cash economy shapes the habits of the heart. Like a powerful drug, we become insensitive to life and Earth as the source of all life. I have come to prefer the dregs to the drugs.

Those who believe they have the superior knowledge and political advantage keep telling rural people to move out. There is no economic gain in the rural community that tries to build its culture around a right way to work with and heal the land. We keep getting the call to go to the city and we are listening to the wrong voice. That is, if we are seeking truth and integrity -- if we are searching for an America that can offer peace to our nation and the world.

I don't have to tell my readers what our American economy is based on. Those of us who know the sources of Earth wealth and know the special role of wealth derived from the life sources of Earth know that when our nation loses the knowledge, is inattentive to life sources, and unconscious of the relationship between healthy rural and urban centers, we have lost a fundamental truths and can therefore predict that we will lose freedom. No matter how right our church, government and educational institutions are, while they live off an out-moded economic system, they are part of the problem. That does not exempt individuals, families and communities, but it is the institutions we turn to for help and keep getting denied.

It is, perhaps the disconnect of the downtrodden from the resources of these major institutions, that forces them to take other approaches to personal and community life. Some of their behavior is considered illegal, but for those seeking truth and integrity, there is, what I call, enlightenment. I have been privileged to see that happen over the 35 years that I have been here. And here is the contradiction in my statement. For all of these years it has been the diocese of Nashville and then Knoxville that have kept me alive. And I do realize that has been a special blessing to me.

What springs forth in the Clearfork Valley is so fragile it could easily be trampled on and lost. But as long as I am around and have the investment of other people we shall act and speak about the seeds we are planting and the sprouts we are protecting. To start with, because there are no caring institutions people have organized many non-profit organizations. Some have survived for one, two and three decades. Some have failed, but the lessons learned have helped people grow and the resources gained were always transferred to another institutional base from which this community is served.

When the Community Land Trust organized in 1977 to acquire, plan for and return lands to the people under protective covenants, it opened up space for homes, for agriculture, for forest management, for public facilities and public grounds. This has been the most productive of sprouting new ideas. We have built native material houses, being careful of trees used and the need to replant. We have organized crews of local and visiting volunteers to replace the cost of labor that we could not glean from our economic condition. We have models of economic development gleaned from third worlds like the Peer Lending. We are modeling a new national initiative called the Individual Development Account which is a savings club where for every dollar saved for an essential asset like a house, an education, a small business, the saver can get a two to one match. We have printed our Community Investment Certificate which is given to local youth who put time into developing community assets like the old school building. They are saving the certificates so that they can be exchanged for money they don't have to spend once the building opens as a community learning center. We help every resident on the land trust to do a *permaculture* plan for their one acre lot and then work with people from a cluster of houses to do the same for their common grounds. In all of these activities people are learning important things like land use planning, land care, a local economy, a sustainable community.

While we are physically isolated, politically ignored and socially unacceptable, this community has grown to where it is because of the friends they have found. Other rural communities in Appalachia allow for Peer Exchanges and mutual support. National organizations have found us or we have found them. When the make up of the groups are poor, like the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, we learn more about vision, values and principles. When the groups have resources, like the Schumacher society we find professionals and philosophy that support our wisdom, skills and vision. Our engagements with Tennessee State Organizations have helped channel modest funds from state and federal programs for housing and economic development. The long term involvement with the Sisters of Saint Joseph is preparing the community to initiate its living-learning center which will be called the Clearfork Community Institute.

Our most challenging financial need is to develop a fund to purchase land when it becomes available. We have never had what it takes to buy large enough parcels to legitimize a full time forester and a long term plan for a viable, sustainable economy. But thanks to our work in developing partnerships, we have a small

amount coming into the land fund every year. What we propose to individuals or groups is that they stick with the Community Land Trust for a five year period. We ask that they make a commitment to put a certain amount of money into the land fund each of those years. It can be fifty cents or fifty thousand dollars (neither of which has been applied by our existing partners). The important thing is that the land trust be able to predict how they can get money coming into this account. In recent years there were two occasions when \$50,000, was borrowed from the bank based on the ability to pay back from the land fund.

Because our economy has been based on the extractive industries for over a century, it is difficult for most people to imagine anything else. The few people who gain employment from these jobs are well paid and in a small way boost the economy. Hence it is extremely difficult to talk directly about the environment. A few years ago when the grade school in the community introduces some environmental lessons through their science class, some parents objected and that was it. A group of citizens started addressing this concern in 1999 by organizing an Earth Day Celebration event open to the public. There are no axes to grind. People get together to honor this spot on Earth that is home to them. We hike, sing, eat, play games and share the story of their life with anyone who will listen.

Celebration strengthens the spirit within and as we have started a journey by connecting the head, heart and hands we are compelled to celebrate the transformation of the Clearfork Valley. This year we plan to combine this celebration with the land trusts 25th anniversary and the worldwide effort to make this the International Year of the Mountains.

Marie Cirillo has been supported by the Catholic Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee to do rural community development for the past 35 years. She served on the board of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and received the Edwin Vincent O'Hara Rural Ministry Award in 1983 from the Edwin Vincent O'Hara Organization. As one of the founding members of the Glenmary Home Mission Sisters, Marie says she was honored to serve Monsignor Ligutti some home made brown bread on several occasions when he visited the Glenmary headquarters in Glendale, Ohio.



National Catholic Rural Life Conference  
4625 Beaver Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199  
(515) 270-2634  
email address: [ncrlc@mchsi.com](mailto:ncrlc@mchsi.com)  
website: [www.ncrlc.com](http://www.ncrlc.com)

This article was published in the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life<sup>®</sup>. No portion of this article may be reproduced without written permission from The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. To purchase the spring 2002 issue of Catholic Rural Life, please contact The National Catholic Rural Life Conference office at 4625 Beaver Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199, call (515) 270-2634, or e-mail [NCRLC@mchsi.com](mailto:NCRLC@mchsi.com). The cost is \$2<sup>50</sup> an issue plus postage and handling.

---