

'The Hollow,' by Bill Surface (Coward-McCann, New York, \$5.95)

FOR A TRUE PICTURE OF APPALACHIA, DON'T READ THIS BOOK-- IT'S FULL OF CONTEMPT, INCREDIBLY BAD

I must confess that I really don't want to review this book, "The Hollow" for the simple reason that it is such an incredibly bad book. I don't believe it should be given the dignity of a book review.

But the book apparently is being bought, read and talked about, and there is the danger that it may join that little shelf of "must" books about the Appalachian area that become more or less required reading for college students and bureaucrats. Those go a long way toward determining the shape and scope of programs public and private that are planned for this area.

The author, Bill Surface, was feature writer for the Louisville Courier-Journal some few years ago. We vaguely recall seeing his by-line on occasion. But we don't recall that he reported to any significant degree about mountain life while working for the Courier. Certainly, he never spent the time and got to know the mountains and the mountain people as did John Fetterman, Fred Luigart, John Ed Pearce, Kyle Vance, or David Hawpe—all Courier people who could approach the business of writing a book about Eastern Kentucky with some real authority, as, indeed, Fetterman has done in a much better book, "Stinking Creek."

Surface has written other books, one called "Inside Internal Revenue Service," and something called, "The Poisoned Ivy." It appears obvious that he decided to write another book, and picked Eastern Kentucky as the subject on the general premise that a quick fast buck could be made. You have the feeling that had the market demanded, or the publisher preferred, Surface would have written a book about "Quilt Making in Vermont," or life among the Florida Indians or mountain climbing in China, and would have brought to his subject just as much skill and energy.

"The Hollow" quite simply, attempts to detail five days in the life of an Eastern Kentucky mountain family living in a hollow.

In itself, that's not a bad idea. But Surface went to one of the most remote hollows anywhere in Eastern Kentucky for his locale, and then picked a degenerate man, his wife, and their ten children as his subjects.

Although not identified as such in the book, we have been told that Hell-fer-Sartin Creek in Leslie County was the hollow.

Now, there is nothing wrong, in writing a book about Hell-fer-Sartin, nor even about a couple with 10 children. But if the author who does so is honest with his reader, he will make it clear that he is writing about one of the most remote and isolated courties in the United States, a hollow that is unique for its long isolation. He will not claim, as does Surface, that he is writing about a "typical mountain hollow". Truth is, Surface, while pretending to write about a Typical Hollow, is doing the exact opposite. Hell-fer-Sartin as it exists today may resemble mountain life as it existed some 50 years ago, but it has little relevance to what is average or typical of the Eastern Kentucky today.

His description of Hell-fer-Sartin isn't even accurate. He pictures it as being covered with litter and filth from one end to the other. To the contrary, in wandering about in Eastern Kentucky in recent years I have always enjoyed a trip up Hell-fer-Sartin because of its cleanliness, its absence of clutter, its neat orderly yards, gardens and homes, the purity of the stream, the total beauty.

But that may be quibbling on my part. There are after all numerous creeks and hollows throughout the mountains that are littered with junk cars and trash.

The more serious, and in fact the really terrible part of the book, has to do with the mountain family Surface describes as being typical of the nearly one million people who still live in the mountains.

Coy, his typical mountain man, is described as a man who "has never held a job for more than four consecutive months since marrying June and moving out of his parents' house in late 1953." He is too lazy to repair a broken step on his porch, he gets by by making a once-a-month trip into the county seat to for food stamps. He encourages his ten children to stay away from school, etc. All in all, he has degenerated into some kind of creature who looks forward to nothing except bedding his wife down in their feather bed at night.

Surface would have us believe that Coy is just like all other mountain men; that his ten children will grow up to be just like him—and that by implication all public or private efforts to change him, or to improve the conditions that affect him or his family, have failed and presumably always will fail, not because the programs may be wrong or misdirected, but because Coy is somekind of animal of sub-human intelligence.

There are so many things wrong with this as the picture of a "typical" mountain family that a detailed refutation would just about require that another book be written. So I'll just try to touch on some of the more obvious points.

In the first place, the ten children family is rapidly disappearing from the mountains. Although families still may be somewhat larger than national averages, a generally higher educational level, coupled with birth control clinics administered by state and local health departments, efforts of private physicians, the Frontier Nursing Service etc., have had a decided impact. The 10-child family, although not unheard of, is increasingly a rarity in the mountains and cannot be considered as typical of anything.

(And perhaps it is a minor point, but Surface indicates Coy's family never was able to get adequate medical attention from any source. The plain truth is that any family living on Hell-fer-Sartin in Leslie County the past few decades would have been

receiving the outstanding medical services provided by the Frontier Nursing Service, if the family wanted FNS help.)

In the second place, the mountain man who has worked no more than a four month period since 1953 is a rarity. Most men stay with their jobs until something better comes along. Absenteeism is not a problem in the mountains to the extent it is nationally for employers. Control Data at Campton, American Standard Plumbing and Heating at Paintsville and other firms previously acquainted with the high quality of mountain labor have been singing their praise.

Then too, it is a relatively rare mountain man who has not been able to find work since 1953 who has remained in this area. Census figures for the past two decades show quite clearly that most mountain men who couldn't find work here simply moved away, going north to Ohio, Michigan, etc. By and large, the ones who remained did so for valid reasons, age, lack of training, health etc.

One of the most annoying aspects of the book is that the jacket compares it to Oscar Lewis' La Vida. Lewis' works are great because he brings to them a deep human feeling and understanding, an obvious love for the people of whom he writes.

Surface, however, understood nothing of what he saw, and holds a deep contempt for mountain people that shows through on just about every page.

The business of picturing the typical mountain father as caring so little for his children that he encourages them to stay out of school is one example. For if there is one universal motivating force, it is the determination on the part of the parents to see that their children go to school and equip themselves to lead a better life. Any writer could go into any hollow in the mountains and find examples of parents who have made enormous self sacrifices, skimping on food, clothing, denying themselves any of life's money-bought pleasures to save nickles and dimes to keep their children in school and in countless instances, to help them get all the way through college, sometimes even through graduate school. To so totally negate this heart felt compelling drive that motivates so many mountain parents is nothing short of libel.

Surface is equally sweeping and equally erroneous, in his generalizations to the effect that \$500,000,000 in federal and state funds have been spent in the mountains since 1965, and the expenditure was a total waste, that all programs are failures.

You can reach that kind of conclusion only if you are ignorant of the reason for the programs or the conditions that existed in the mountains in the early 1960's. The fundamental fact is that most of the money has gone into programs under a great variety of names

for the one primary purpose of feeding and clothing people and keeping them alive. The mountains were on the brink of mass starvation in the days before the commodity food program, the jobless fathers' program etc. The fact that mass tragedy was averted, that people by the thousands were kept from starvation (and are still kept from starvation) is in itself a major achievement. And in those terms, \$500,000,000 isn't very much money. It figures out roughly to something under \$10 a month for each resident over the five year period. It could be argued that it is something of a miracle that so much has been accomplished with so little money.

About all Surface's book does is to feed ammunition to the kinds of people who believe that any expenditure of tax money is a waste.

But the book is a definite danger. There are a lot of people in and out of government, who argue Eastern Kentucky and the Appalachian area constitute a drastic problem requiring a drastic solution. There are many who argue that everyone should be forced out of the hollows into "growth centers," with the land all to be converted into national forest, where it would be easier pickings for the coal industry. And there is the school of thought that the typical mountain mother is a hopeless idiot—that her children should be taken from her and be placed in public institutions for rearing. Currently the Appalachian Regional Commission seems to be pushing this theory, and is about to finance something called the "Kentucky Infant and Preschool Program" which would take over most of the mother's functions, in effect nationalizing the mountain child.

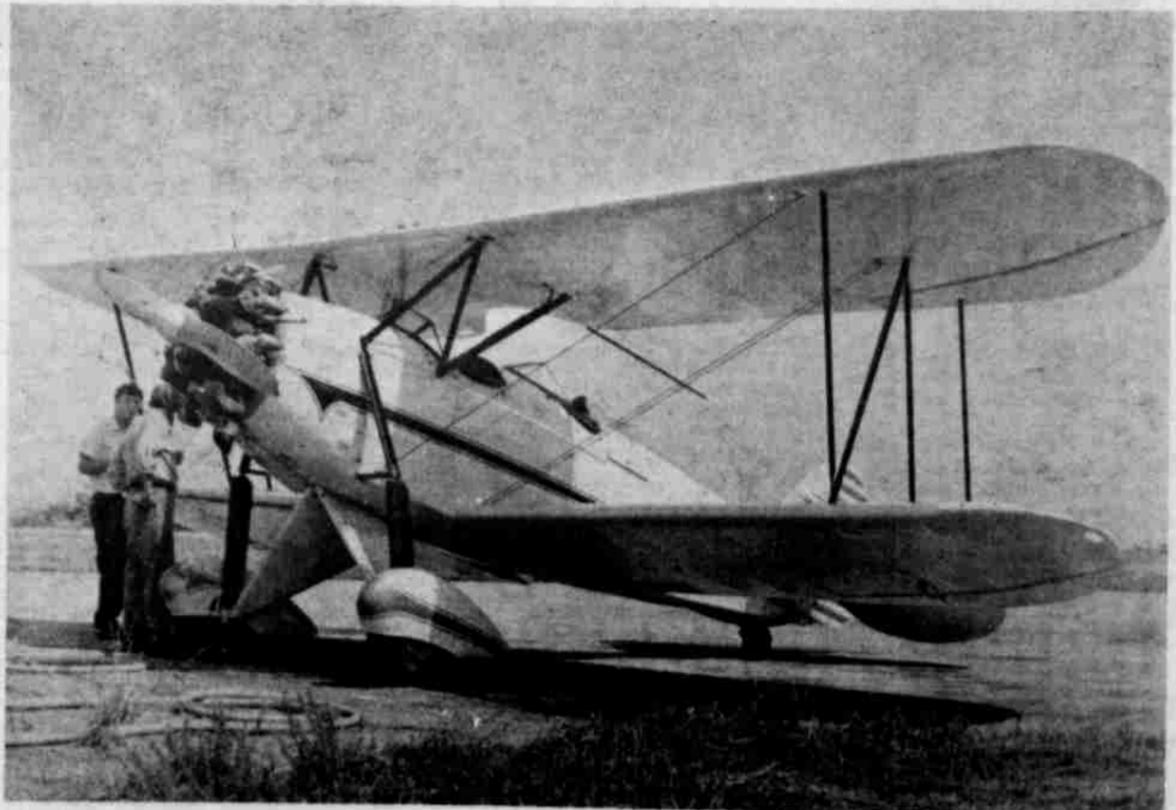
In other words, since mountain people have not "voluntarily" changed to the liking of many government and other outsider types, change may well be forced upon us—using such things as Surface's book justification.

Most mountain people who have read Surface's book are incensed by it, recognizing that it gives totally false pictures of the area and its culture.

Mabel Kiser of Millstone, who heads the Millstone Sewing Center and who writes for The Mountain Eagle on occasion, grew up in Knott County in one of the most remote hollows and has lived most of her adult years up another hollow in Letcher County. Her natural interests and concern for people, her work in her church, and her work in trying to provide clothing for those who need it has brought her in constant contact with people at heads of hollows throughout much of the area.

"I never knew a mountain family like that," commented Mrs. Kiser about Surface's book. Neither did we.

--TOM GISH



FLYING MACHINE--J. O. Mohn and Roy Crawford inspect their recently purchased 1930 model plane at the Whitesburg Municipal Airport. The plane, a Waco RNF, was made by a firm which went out of business after World War II. The propeller is made of laminated Sitka Spruce. Mohn flew the plane Sunday to try stalls, takeoffs and landings. It spent the week at the airport. (Photo by Lauran Emerson).

Letters to the editor

Promises

To the Editor:

Well the primary election is over and we didn't get anything done to the roads.

The Ditch Lines haven't been cleaned out since James

Caudill went out as Judge.

We have some great scenery on Linefork if it was developed. The caves have brought lots of people from different places and states.

We also have some great wealth on this Pine Mountain

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