Black Swans and Safety Nets:
Food Aid, Dispersal, and Eugenics in Corbin Hollow

Glenn Davis Stone (corresponding author)
Washington and Lee University
gdavisstone@wlu.edu

Richard Knox Robinson
Ekphratic Productions

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ABSTRACT. After an area of the Virginia Blue Ridge Mountains was condemned for the planned Shenandoah National Park, the residents of Corbin Hollow were stranded in their homes as ecological and economic conditions worsened in the 1930s. They were depicted in the national press and in academic research as a backward and isolated community dependent on food aid that would benefit from being moved to new homes in the modern world. More recent researchers have argued that the community was actually vulnerable because it was overly dependent on the market economy and living in an ultimately unviable environment. Based on new archival research, we show that the demise of this community was more devastating than the previously reported dependence on food aid and loss of homesteads, but question whether their demise is best explained by economic vulnerability or ecological unviability. There are indications that before the 1920s the hollow, while materially poor, had features of a stable peasant economy including safety nets of a self-controlled resource base. The community's demise is best understood as the result of an unprecedented and unpredictable "Black Swan" cascade of economic and ecological disasters that shredded their safety nets. The cascade included societal interventions that were — or claimed to be — safety nets that greatly exacerbated the community's problems: a) food aid that prompted a pellagra epidemic, b) eugenic sterilization of many community members, encouraged by symptoms of pellagra, and c) permanent scattering of the formerly tight-knit community.

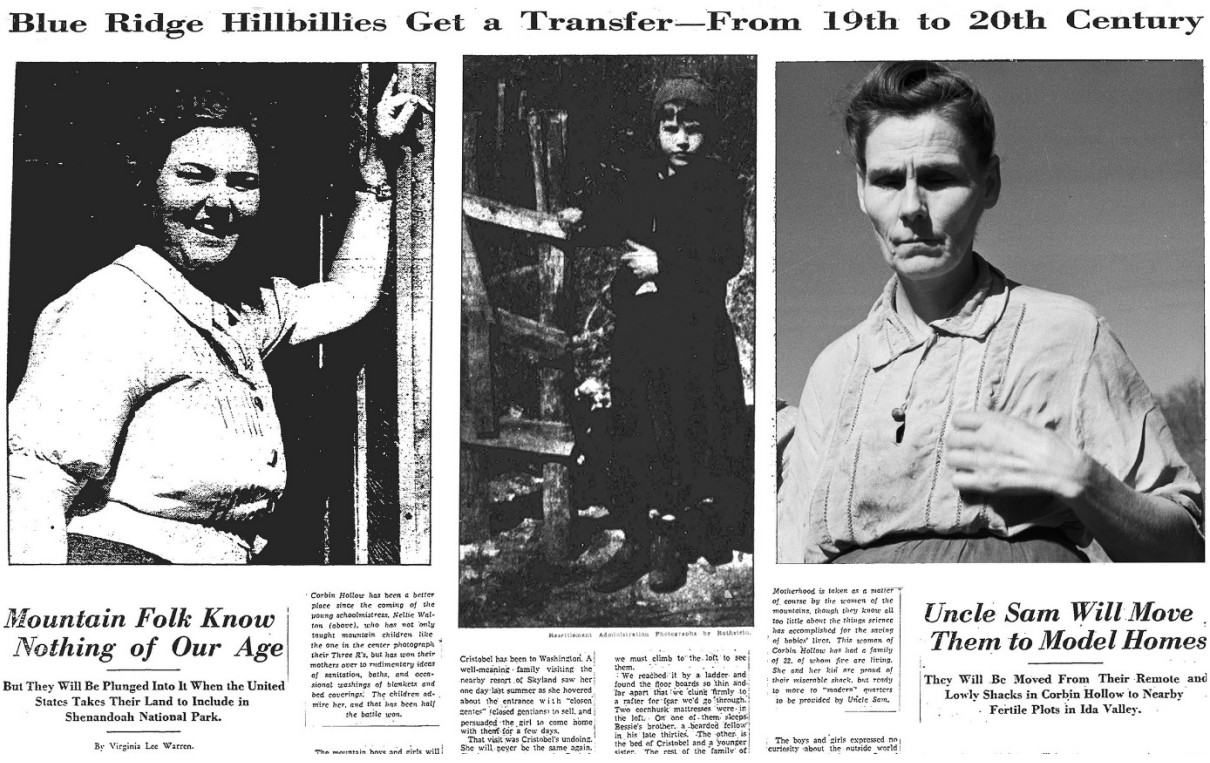
To hikers in Shenandoah National Park it may seem just a procession of forested hillsides, copperheads, and occasional collapsed chimneys. But to students of local history, Corbin Hollow is filled with ghosts.

The 14 families related to pioneer Fennell Corbin were among the 500+ families in and around the Blue Ridge Mountains whose homes were condemned by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1928 to create the park.[1] But the Corbins stayed on, stranded in their own homes, as conditions deteriorated in the 1930s. With their shabby houses and distinctive accents, they became fodder for lurid accounts in the national press of poverty, isolation, and cultural backwardness. They were described as "juvenile citizens of another world" (Daly 1931), a Rip Van Winkle culture just two hours from the nation's capital (Weil 1930) speaking a "queer Chaucerian English" (Chester 1932) that was only recently "discovered" by a group of hikers (Madison County Eagle 1935a); they had "no experience in farming" (Strickler 1935) and their children had "never tasted milk" (Sexton 1930), used soap, or played with toys. They appeared in government-commissioned photographs as glum barefoot hillbillies with "half-wit children." The academic study **Hollow Folk** identified the Corbin residents as exhibiting "the lowest level of social development…subsisting off the grudging, unaided bounty of nature" (Sherman and Henry 1933:4-5).

Everyone in a position of influence seemed to agree that they would benefit by being uprooted and "plunged" into a modern age of which they "knew nothing" (Warren 1935, Figure 1). After all, explained the Secretary of the Interior Ray Wilbur, "they have nothing to lose" (Chester 1932).

Explanations differed on why such a backward and untouched mountain community would exist. Environmental determinists, influential in academia and in the public imagination, pointed to the landscape. Ellsworth Huntington (1928) held that the "mountain environment means poverty, hardship, and isolation," especially in "the barbarizing severity of their Appalachian environment" (Toynbee 1948). Weil (1930) suggested that while Corbin forebears may have been "highly civilized", their descendants had been "gradually decivilized by environmental conditions." They were rendered a people without history who never left home (Daly 1931, O'Roark 1934).

[1] The family name has not been anonymized here. Not only are all the people under discussion long dead, but they were named frequently in contemporary local and national media, including the New York Times, Washington Post, and Associated Press; Fennel Corbin in particular was a well-known public figure. Modern scholars have also discussed these individuals by name (e.g., Lambert 1989, Horning 2004, Currell 2017). None of the individuals discussed fit the criteria for research subjects.



Blue Ridge Hillbillies Get a Transfer—From 19th to 20th Century

Mountain Folk Know Nothing of Our Age

But They Will Be Plunged Into It When the United States Takes Their Land to Include in Shenandoah National Park.

By Virginia Lee Warren.

Corbin Hollow has been a better place since the coming of the young schoolmistress, Nellie Walton (above), who has not only taught mountain children like the one in the center photograph, their Three R's, but has won their mothers over to rudimentary ideas of sanitation, baths, and occasional washings of blankets and bed coverings. The children admire her, and that has been half the battle won.

Resettlement Administration Photographs by Rothstein.

Cristobel has been to Washington. A well-meaning family visiting the nearby resort of Skyland saw her one day last summer as she hovered about the entrance with "closed center" relaxed gentians to sell, and persuaded the girl to come home with them for a few days.

That visit was Cristobel's undoing. She will never be the same again.

we must climb to the loft to see them.

We reached it by a ladder and found the floor boards so thin and far apart that we clunk firmly to a rafter for fear we'd go through. Two earthbulk mattresses were in the loft. On one of them sleeps Bessie's brother, a bearded fellow in his late thirties. The other is the bed of Cristobel and a younger sister. The rest of the family of

Motherhood is taken as a matter of course by the women of the mountains, though they know all too little about the things science has accomplished for the saving of babies' lives. The women of Corbin Hollow has had a family of 22, of whom five are living. She and her kin are proud of their miserable shack, but ready to move to "modern" quarters to be provided by Uncle Sam.

The boys and girls expressed no curiosity about the outside world

Uncle Sam Will Move Them to Model Homes

They Will Be Moved From Their Remote and Lowly Shacks in Corbin Hollow to Nearby Fertile Plots in Ida Valley.

Figure 1. Portion of the Washington Post article on Corbin Hollow (Warren 1935).

But this was also the heyday of eugenic theory and the notorious family studies of "socially defective" clans (Rafter 1988, Estabrook and McDougle 1926). In this hollow psychologists found that intelligence itself had gone “missing” (Weil 1930); the Corbins were congenital morons — if not “imbeciles” or perhaps even “idiots”, in the tripartite typology of the day. Poverty of culture and “pauperism” were assumed to be bred into mountaineers, passing between generations through a “hereditary channel” (Stoll 2017:172).

Environmental and eugenic theories could even merge: low-quality humans had ended up on low-quality mountain lands, as if by hydrology. The “great currents of men and ideas…move along the river valleys," Ellen Semple had written earlier (1911), and those lacking ability and ambition wound up in the mountain hollows like “backwash” (Sherman and Henry 1933:cover, Pudup 1990:63).

By the 1970s, amid changing stereotypes of the “hillbilly” (Harkins 2004), Corbin Hollow had come up for re-examination (Smith 1983, Perdue and Martin-Perdue 1979). By then eugenic theory had long since been discredited, and the earlier disdain was being replaced by more affectionate renderings. The popular sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1970) presented

mountain Appalachians as clean, amiable, and moral, if lovably oblivious (Harkins 2004:186-200); *The Waltons* (1972-1981) offered a sentimental view of family life in a village not far from Corbin Hollow. The 1972 *Foxfire Book* (Wigginton 1972) — a catalog of mountain lore — was a best-seller. Scholars reappraised the economic and cultural isolation in the hollows, pointing out that settlers had entered the mountains from all directions and traveled in and out of the hollows, including seasonal labor migration since before the Civil War (Wilhelm 1977:78,85).

In 1995 archaeologist Audrey Horning began a study of mountain settlements, combining archival research with excavations in Corbin, Weakley and Nicholson Hollows (Figure 2). She challenged the claims of isolation with evidence of radios, toys, and other consumer items in Corbin Hollow. She suggested that hollow dwellers actually suffered more from "their involvement with the so-called outside world" than from isolation, as their dependence on income from the nearby Skyland resort left them "wide open for disaster when the Depression struck (Horning 2021). Given their lack of good farm land and tools, the effects of droughts and the park creation, they were eventually left with "no safety net" and "little choice but to accept outside charity, albeit on their own terms" (Horning 2004:72-73).

Environmental historian Sara Gregg examined external interventions in mountain Appalachia during the early/mid-20th Century (2004, 2010). She questioned the assumption that Blue Ridge communities in general were "economically unviable," although the region was undergoing "steady population growth, the expansion of agriculture onto less fertile land, and ecologically devastating land cover changes" (2010:12-13). She saw Corbin Hollow as "one of few locations within the mountains that was economically and agriculturally unviable for the long term" (2010:31).

Literature scholar Katrina Powell, herself a Madison County native, used mountaineers' own letters to explore their experiences of displacement (Powell 2007, 2009, 2015). Literature scholar Sue Currell (2017) and filmmaker Richard Robinson (2011, 2017) examined depictions of the Corbins and their embedded agendas.

Here we use new archival research on events before and after removal to show how the harm visited upon the Corbin community went well beyond having to accept food aid on their own terms and being resettled. Before their expulsion they suffered not only from a remarkable series of economic blows and famine but an epidemic; then after the national media had lost interest, many of their younger members were eugenically sterilized, their tight-knit community permanently scattered, and their patriarch incarcerated.

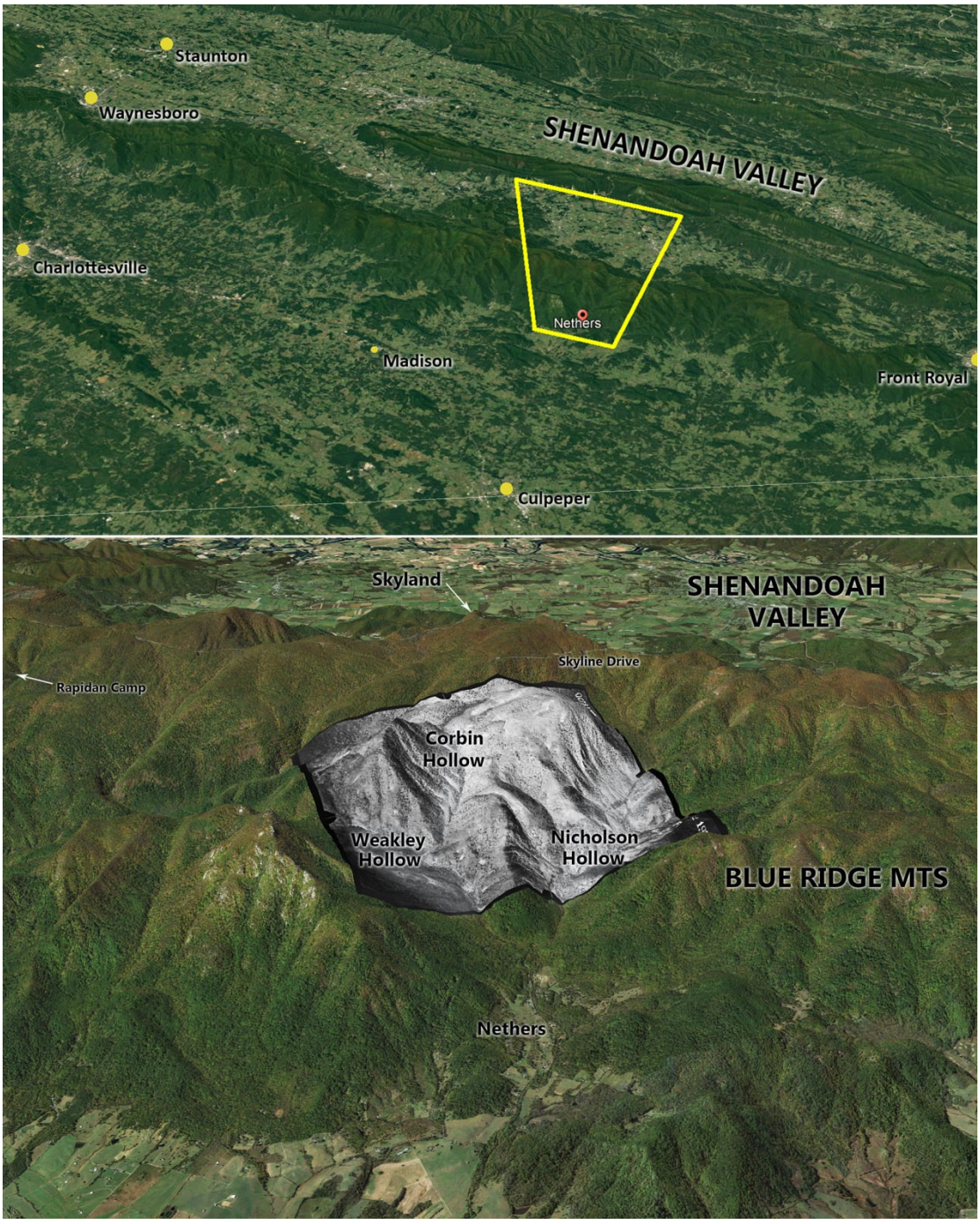


Figure 2. Top: WNW-facing Google Earth image of central Virginia, the yellow box indicating the location of the detail. Bottom: detail, with elevation-enhanced image in color and draped monochrome air photo from October 31, 1937.

But the tragic experience of this community has much to teach us about how marginal communities do — or don't — "get through" catastrophic challenges, and how different types of safety nets do — or don't — safeguard local economies, communities, and even bodies.

Rather than seeing socio-economic vulnerability as an autochthonous condition, we stress that all cultural adaptations are vulnerable to some events and not others; the point is to look at the specifics of local adaptations and ask what external inputs can overwhelm them and why. We find that the Corbins' demise was far from predictable; they actually suffered a rare and unprecedented cascade of setbacks with disastrous synergistic effects. What transpired in Corbin Hollow is less a case of economic vulnerability and ecological inviability than of what Taleb (2007) terms a *Black Swan*: an extremely impactful event that lies so far outside the realm of regular expectations that nothing in the past could have predicted it. However in Corbin Hollow the Black Swan was not a single event, but the intersectional synergy of a cascade that shredded normal protections of economy, community and health.

We will show that given the devastating impacts of this cascade, "getting through" would require external intervention; but societal safety nets not only failed but greatly exacerbated the impacts of the run of economic and ecological setbacks. Impactful interventions that intended — or claimed — to benefit the mountaineers' were a) food aid in the form of wheat flour and cornmeal, b) sexual sterilization to prevent unwanted children, and c) resettlement into modern homes. Each of these interventions contributed to the destruction of the community. Every class of professionals who could have recognized the deleterious effects of interventions failed to do so, and in most cases worked directly against the interests of the Corbins.

We first consider some key work on socio-economic vulnerability and show how the concept of a Black Swan cascade may advance this body of theory. We then summarize what is known about the Corbins' adaptation to life in the hollow, with particular attention to local safety nets. We then recount the cascade of setbacks that devastated the mountain population. Lastly we describe the tragic denouement in which they were failed by society's civic, judicial, and public health apparatuses after life in the hollow fell apart for them.

The Concept of Vulnerability

Central to the problem of "getting through" is the question of just how *vulnerable* the Corbins' early 20th Century adaptation was. The concept of vulnerability has long dominated studies of risk and disaster and strongly influenced thinking on poverty (Bankoff 2019), and the eventual devastation of the Corbin community would seem to be clear *prima facie* evidence of vulnerability. But as Watts (1993:118) points out, the concept rests on weak theoretical ground and does not correspond in an instructive way to real world conditions.[2]

[2] The vulnerability framework dates to Cold War-era interest in which flawed economies needed Western aid and scientific expertise (Bankoff 2019). The concept helped convince us of the Green Revolution myth in which American science rescued a billion Asians from starvation to which their backward agriculture and high birthrates made them vulnerable (Stone 2022:162-184).

Many analysts followed Chambers (1989:1), who defined vulnerability as a two-sided phenomenon: external "risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject" on one hand, and internal "defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss" (e.g., Bankoff et al. 2004, Adger 2006). But this framing is tautological: the only reason that external conditions are stressors is that they cause damaging loss. All communities are susceptible to "damaging loss" by *some* external inputs; all have mechanisms and strategies for getting through *some* external shocks but not others. This is even true of systems said to epitomize "sustainability." For instance, East Asian wet rice farmers thrived for centuries on efficient, ecologically balanced paddy polycultures (Netting 1993:232-260, Bray 1986), yet still were ruined by misguided state programs (Becker 1996).

So we cannot define a livelihood as resilient because it can "mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability" (USAID 2012) if all systems can manage some external inputs but be devastated by others. The related concept of *precarity* suffers from the same blind spot: if "precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others" (Tsing 2015:20), and we are all vulnerable to some "others", then we are all precarious and the term means little.

All cultural adaptations have some safety mechanisms. This was a central concern for cultural ecologists who examined how mechanisms for safeguarding subsistence were embedded in social institutions: thus Netting showed household forms to adjust for efficiency at multi-year food storage (1993:82-85) and Piddocke argued that potlatch feasts mitigated food shortfalls (1965). When cultural ecologists did recognize maladaptation, it was attributed to "disorderings of structure that in their nature both generate troubles and impede" adaptive responses (Rappaport 1993:300). We will see that before the mid-1920s the Corbins did have some economic safety nets, the eventual failure of which is difficult to attribute to their inherent failings. Political ecologists have focused on disempowerment in marginal communities, often manifested in market pressures and lack of access to resources (e.g., Blaikie 1985). We show that this perspective too offers only a partial fit to the Corbins, for whom the drop in cash income was only one of a several converging blows.

We will see the Corbins' demise as explained less by inherent vulnerability than by the synergistic effect of a *cascade* of setbacks, a Black Swan not in being an event but in having an unprecedented collective impact that few local adaptations could have weathered. The importance of cascades is recognized in recent natural hazards research. Departing from conventional research focused on independent hazards, Gill and Malamud (2016) analyze multi-hazard dynamics. They highlight the importance of *triggering*, when one natural hazard leads directly to a different hazard or a cascade of hazards, and *increased hazard probability*, when one hazard establishes conditions inviting another. Relationships between natural hazards may also be mediated by human activities in *catalyzing and impedance relationship*: anthropogenic

deforestation may catalyze conditions for tropical storms to trigger floods but may also impede volcanic eruptions from starting forest fires (Gill and Malamud 2016:667).

Cultures may adapt to rare individual hazards. In 1907 the Simeulueans of Aceh Indonesia were decimated by a *smong* (tsunami). There were no further devastating tsunamis until 2004, but the *smong* story endured and was credited with saving lives when that tsunami struck (Rahman et al. 2018). But cascades can vex any adaptive system. From the 10th Century, Norse culture in Greenland thrived with a diverse economy based on hunting, fishing, farming, herding and trading. They weathered the Little Ice Age and faltering trade relationships, but the 15th Century brought a cascade involving loss of pasture and marine infrastructure due to sea level rises, climatic cooling, increased volcanism, increasingly hazardous sailing conditions, collapse of trade networks, and ethnic conflict. Diamond (2005) blames the resulting collapse on the Norse's inflexibility, but Dugmore et al. (2012) show that the cascade had frayed multiple safety nets in a population was too small for effective reciprocal buffering.

A pervasive and fundamental factor in the buffering of local economies is the balance between market interactions (sales and purchases of goods and labor for cash, typically off the farm) and nonmarket (self-provisioned, or acquired through reciprocity) resources. The potential for dynamic readjustment between the two can be pivotal to getting through hazard cascades, although this dynamic has often been obscured by intellectual traditions that vilify one or the other form of interaction. Marx (1967 [1867]) envisioned a primitive economy in which all goods were produced for use value, and saw production for market value as opening the door through which capitalism would barge to create new and pervasive form of poverty. This sentiment can be traced to modern writers seemingly skeptical of smallholders producing anything for sale (e.g., Shiva 1988).

In contrast is a long tradition of political-economic theory that is contemptuous of self-provisioning. As early as 1767, Steuart held those producing nothing of value to others to be economically worthless and anti-social. The fetishizing of market interactions and vilification of self-provisioning live on in economic development circles today in which experts aspire to move the world's villagers from "subsistence farming" to the next "stage" where they live by the market and stop growing their own food (Sachs 2008:220).

But a partly "self-controlled resource base" and cooperative nonmonetary relations provide essential safety nets, writes van der Ploeg (2008:34 inter alia) in his influential study of peasant economies.[3] For instance Western Europe's catastrophic megadrought and heat wave of 1540 was a Black Swan disaster, but famines were mitigated by cooperative resource pooling across communities (Pfister et al. 2016).

[3] Peasants are classically defined as rural cultivators integrated into a larger society and economy through a dominant ruling structure (Wolf 1966).

Also crucial for buffering adversity are "flex goods" that offer both use and exchange value. Wild products often serve as flex goods; in much of Appalachia chestnuts were particularly valuable as they could be eaten, fed to pigs, or sold (Lutts 2004). Food storage is an obvious nonmarket buffer, and some crops are grown specifically for their storability (as we will see in Corbin Hollow). Farmers often keep animals not just for traction, food products and fertilizer but to sell when cash is needed.

Beyond these fallbacks, peasants can often meet shortfalls by taking on more — and more drudgerous — work (Durrenberger 1984). In many environments more labor can go into farming by adopting more intensive methods, boosting production although at the cost of higher marginal labor costs (Boserup 1965, Stone 2022:205-206).

Tensions between market dependence and self-provisioning have played a key role in the history of Appalachian poverty. Stoll's (2017) study of "the ordeal of Appalachia" in **Ramp Hollow** is basically a history of capital and state power assaulting nonmarket supports in household economies, from the 1791 Whiskey Tax onward.

This market/self-provisioned tension is key in the Corbin Hollow case, as Horning suggests. The obsession with the Corbins' supposed isolation, seen in **Hollow Folk** and other contemporary publications, was as much a comment on their self-provisioned economy as on their distinctive language and lore. We now know that not only were the Corbins not isolated from the market economy, but virtually no 20th Century Appalachians were. A U.S. Department of Agriculture survey published only two years after **Hollow Folk** showed "self-sufficing" households in the Southern Appalachians uplands to be producing an average of $450 worth of commodities (USDA 1935) — an impressive sum in depression-era dollars. Skyland proprietor George Freeman Pollock flatly claimed that the Corbins lived off of his resort, but this was no truer than the opposite claims that they were isolated hunter-gatherers.

As we reconstruct the Corbin Hollow economy leading up to the late 1920s, it had many features of a balanced peasant adaptation that might have gotten through most challenges short of the Black Swan cascade of disasters and perverse effects of supposed societal safety nets.

Corbin Adaptations and Safety Nets

Settler occupation of Corbin Hollow began in 1816 when Bluford Corbin bought land along Brokenback Run (Horning 2004:53). His grandson Fennell (or Finnel) Corbin pioneered settlement in the upper part of the hollow in the 1890s, probably drawn by proximity to both in-laws and the Stony Man Camp resort. Expanded and renamed Skyland,[4] by the 1920s this

[4] For further details on the Corbin settlements and history of Skyland, see Horning (2004).

resort accounted for much of the market component of the Corbin Hollow economy. It hired mountaineers for masonry, carpentry, cleaning, cutting wood, gardening, and making hiking paths; it also provided a market for forest products, fish, flowers, milk, and butter (Pollock 1960 [1937]:134).

Also crucial to their market orientation was that the Corbins were renowned basket-makers, selling their wares at Skyland and elsewhere (Madison County Eagle 1931). A man from another hollow later recounted:

> I've seen them Corbins carrying so many baskets they looked like a turtle. The Corbins weren't as bright as other people but they were hard workers at making baskets. They even dyed some with poke-berries - the baskets looked pretty (Smith 1983:25).

They also made and sold ax handles (Washington Post 1931) and moonshine (Smith 1983:24, Powell 2009:7).

Other sources of income included sales of chestnut and oak bark to tanning mills in the valley below (Washington Post 1931) and probably chestnut shingles (Smith 1983:7). Some Corbins may have also earned wages on mountain grazing farms as did residents of nearby Dark Hollow (Cave 1931). In a 1935 report, Madison County relief officer Florence Strickler wrote:

> Truck and wagon loads of chestnuts used to go out from the several mountain post offices and stores each day. These persons would buy clothes and provisions to last them through the winter. A great many of these persons were care-takers for cattle ranges. They received some cash, besides the use of several cows, the right to allow their hogs to run on acorns, and the privilege of cultivating all the land they wanted, rent free. Then there was timber to be cut and bark to be gotten out. They paid very well for this work (1935).

But despite Pollock's claims, the Corbins did have a self-controlled resource base before their Black Swan cascade. Little was written specifically about Corbin Hollow before the land condemnation, but various sources point to nonmarket safety nets. One important, although problematic, source is the household survey conducted in summer 1932 by Mirriam Sizer, who had taught in the Corbin Hollow school and later collected information used in **Hollow Folk**.[5] Collecting household economic and agricultural censuses is a fraught task for a teacher untrained in field methods, especially Sizer who — while in some ways an advocate for the mountain folk — lacked rapport with the subjects (who even filed assault charges against her) and who repeatedly emphasized their backwardness (e.g., Sizer 1929, Horning 2004:9). However some of her data are relevant and probably accurate. Note too that 1932 was already well into the Corbins' Black Swan cascade, meaning that Sizer's snapshot was of a local adaptation that had already suffered serious reversals. The 1935 report that relief officer Florence Strickler wrote for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provides a

[5] We are grateful to Sara Gregg for sharing Sizer's data, which she obtained it through FOIA request.

valuable, but also less than completely reliable, snapshot of life in the hollows at mid-decade. We can also draw on what is known about the hollows in general, much of which probably applied to Corbin Hollow.

To begin with, nature had much to offer. Despite claims that these hollows had been "stripped of cover," even in the mid-1930s seven-eighths of the park area was "covered by a green blanket of forest" (Engle 2017) and 1937 air photos show no shortage of tree cover (Figure 3). A substantial portion of subsistence came from hunting and especially trapping (Smith 1983:24, Sizer 1932). Hogs ran free in the forest until being captured for slaughter or sale; Sizer recorded four Corbin households owning pigs even in 1932. Streams were fished, particularly for the prized indigenous brook trout for both subsistence and sale. Plant resources included berries, another flex good that could be eaten or sold as jam. Chestnuts fed both humans and hogs, and could be sold at local stores for winter supplies; one mountaineer reported that some families "would get more than $200 for chestnuts gathered in a few weeks" (Meadows 1931).

There were also gardens, cultivated fields and orchards, contrary to Strickler's claim that the Corbins had "no experience in farming" (1935). Note that although Fennell Corbin's occupation was recorded in the 1910 US census as "odd jobs," the 1900 census records him as "farmer." All families had gardens and staples such as sweet potatoes, beans, parsnips, potatoes and especially cabbage, which stored particularly well: as one visitor noted, "they bury [it] in the ground and thus have a continuous supply the year around" (Gregg 2004:425-426). Although the Corbins farmed less than those in most nearby hollows, Sizer recorded the 14 families in the hollow owning 41 hoes, 2 mattocks, 2 rakes, 20 corn knives, and 4 forks (1932:23). All hollow households but one were tilling at least one acre of land; the average was 3.3 acres (compared to 5.0 in Weakley Hollow, 4.8 in Richards Hollow, and 2.7 in Dark Hollow). The land in the upper hollow tended to be especially rocky and steep, but residents could and did work some land not directly adjacent to their houses and also land that was not platted to them. They also shifted residences during times of uncertainty (Horning, pers. comm. 2019).

Most families had orchards, the apples serving as both subsistence and sale; they were dried and stored (Hitch 1931:312). The 1937 air photos show 30 apple trees for Fennel, with other orchards comprising mostly between 15-25 trees.

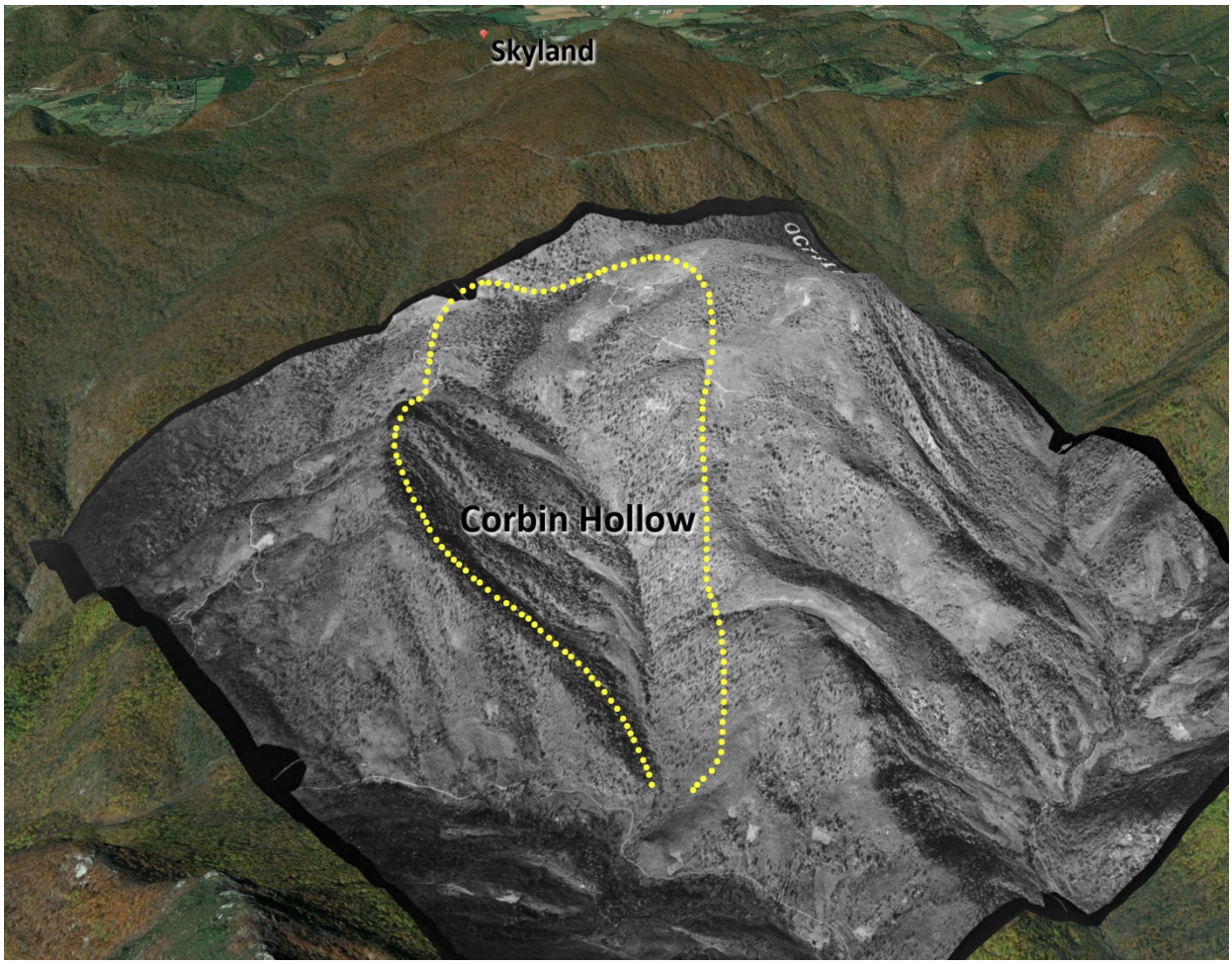


Figure 3. Detail of Corbin Hollow from Figure 2. Most of the white patches are homesteads.

One weakness in the safety nets in Corbin Hollow was a shortage of reciprocal institutions for managing risk and mobilizing labor — the cooperative relations valuable for surviving adversity. Elsewhere in mountainous Appalachia, reciprocal labor institutions brought dozens of adults together for tasks like forest clearing and harvest (Pudup 1990, Otto 1989:55). However the population of Corbin Hollow was simply too small; the flip side to the problem of "unchecked population growth" in the hollows (Gregg 2010:12) was the lack of the safety net that would have been provided by more people.

There is no doubt that residents of Corbin Hollow were materially poor and their physical environment challenging, but until well into the 1930s daily life there was much more fulfilling than the jarring descriptions of "perennial starvation and squalor" (Chester 1932). Horning (2004:65) illustrates as much with a sketch of an imagined morning visit to the hollow.[6] And for

[6] Even some of the sensationalist writers acknowledged the Corbins to be "happy" — although they dismissed

many years they had key elements of a market/self-controlled economic balance, even if for a few families the self-controlled resource base was less reliable than for others (Smith 1983:26, Horning 2004:67). The Corbin community was probably equipped to weather a wide range of adversity. However what was in store for them was an unprecedented cascade of hazards that would shred their safety nets, break apart their close-knit community, and then "plunge them into a modern era" that had its knives out — literally — for people like them.

A Black Swan Cascade

Corbin Hollow's Black Swan cascade began slowly in the early 1920s as the chestnut blight steadily killed the most valuable trees in the forest, a "calamity" for mountain communities (Strickler 1935). The loss of chestnuts would have directly impacted the food supply for humans, hogs and game animals (Lutts 2004:497). The blight would have also decimated any income from selling nuts at the local store or bark to tanners; a 1931 Washington Post article on the Corbins cited the closure of a Shenandoah Valley tanning company as the hollow's "first industrial blow". Blue Ridge mountaineers cited 1927 as the year of crisis (Smith 1983:7).[7] Therefore households in Corbin Hollow were already struggling by 1928 when the Public Park Condemnation Act set in motion the transfer of land and evictions.[8] Those lacking clear land titles received little compensation and those in debt saw their payouts absorbed by creditors (Strickler 1935); the Corbins had both problems and were stuck in the hollows where further economic blows would rain on them.

By 1930 the Depression was in full swing and at Skyland Pollock had mostly stopped hiring mountain labor (Strickler 1935). At the same time the market for the baskets tumbled. The Red Cross even intervened to help broker a sale to Richmond buyers because "baskets have moved slowly since the start of the depression" (Madison County Eagle 1931). Paid work on mountain grazing farms would have dried up (Cave 1931).

Then the weather also took an unusual turn for the worse. In 1930 an extreme drought dried up mountain springs (Hitch 1931:318) and corn yields dropped by 70% statewide (Gregg 2010:33).

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their happiness as "a negative thing" resulting from "not knowing any better" (Warren 1935), or as the New York Times put it, not being intelligent enough to be nervous (Weil 1930).

[7] Ironically, Virginia's chestnut trade was just starting to grow rapidly before the blight, with an estimated annual value $200,000 (representing 2 million pounds of nuts) in 1914 (Lutts 2004).

[8] In May of 1926 the US Congress authorized the establishment of Shenandoah National Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with the condition that the federal government would buy no land. For SNP, Virginia "would have to gain titles from the landowners — the nameless and faceless mountaineers whom no one could envision protesting, whom no one could envision suing in a court of law, whom no one could envision refusing to leave what many outsiders considered their godforsaken, hardscrabble homes — then donate the deeds to the federal government" (Eisenfeld 2015:34).

The drought in summer 1932 was almost as bad,[9] but its impact was even worse as food reserves were already decimated; the staple crops of cabbage and potatoes failed across the hollow. In December the Washington Post reported that “hog pens and chicken houses…[were] emptied by forced sale to recoup drought losses” (Washington Post 1932). Then an unusually cold winter brought the Corbins “the keenest privations of their lives” (Washington Post 1932). The shortage of livestock, cited in **Hollow Folk** as evidence of the “lowest level of social development” (Sherman and Henry 1933:5), was largely the result of the cumulative effects of these events.

As noted above, agricultural intensification may mitigate food shortages, but here it offered little relief. In Boserup’s (1965) classic model of agricultural change, farmers prefer land-extensive methods of burning, fallowing, and shifting cultivation for their relatively efficient returns on labor. When needed they shorten fallows and adopt labor-intensive practices like plowing, fertilizing, and weeding (Stone 2022:205-206). But intensification was rare in mountain Appalachia. Stoll surmises that the mountaineers lacked the knowledge to intensify (2017:151); others have posited that they could not afford to (Gregg 2010:20, Yarnell 1998:24, Otto 1989:57). Yet there are many cases of Boserupian intensification by farmers with no more knowledge or cash for inputs than Appalachians (Netting 1993). The issue was more one of agroecology (Gregg 2004; Stone and Downum 1999). In most of mountainous Appalachia, extensive methods were particularly advantageous (Otto 1989:55-56); fallow-based cultivation of maize was especially efficient (Nicholls et al. 1937).[10] So hillside fields were usually left to fallow after a few years (Pudup 1990:68-69, Gregg 2010, 29). In Corbin Hollow intensification was further impeded by particularly steep slopes (Figure 3) where animal-drawn plowing was virtually impossible; Hitch noted cultivated plots where it seemed too steep to farm (1931:314), and Gregg cites observations about mountain fields where "a man has to hang on to a root with one hand while he hoes with the other” (2004:418). Irrigation was impossible, and no amount of knowledge, cash or desperation could have mitigated the severe droughts.

What hollow folk did was to practice human traction. Sizer described how “one man usually guides the plow while two pull it,” and noted that “Uncle Fennel made an especially built man-plow” (1932). Human traction was also described in nearby Dark Hollow, a woman guiding the plow as her husband pulled it (Sizer 1932).

By the mid-1930s conditions deteriorated further for the roughly 350 families still in the park area as daily lives were increasingly dictated by officials in the National Park Service, the Resettlement Administration, and FERA. Most economic activities were tightly regulated by

[9] Precipitation data for Madison County for the 244 summer months between 1900-1960 show that July 1930 was the driest month in the entire period; August 1930 and August 1932 were also among the six driest.

[10] Burning fertilized leached mountain soils; fallowing offered protection from the mountains frosts (Gregg 2010:26, Otto 1989:57).

permits and written permissions (Powell 2009, 2015).[11] Hunting was banned; so was collecting the splits used to make the baskets that were a crucial source of income (Madison County Eagle 1935b, Strickler 1935). When children from the hollows tried to sell flowers to visitors on the new Skyline Drive, parents were ordered to keep them home (Powell 2013:464).

Even the final resort of land sale was compromised by the technicalities of land ownership. There appear to have been only one legal landowner in the hollow, four cases of possession by right, and three others without recognized ownership (Horning 2004:57-58). The average cash settlement was only $570 (Gregg 2010:229, Lambert 1989:316-318); for comparison, the average settlement in adjacent Nicholson Hollow was $1,323.

All of the Corbins had been removed by 1937. The evictions were construed as a benefit: a societal safety net, as shown below. But by then, the surging poverty in the hollow had already led to two other interventions claimed to be safety nets. Each of these "safety nets" contributed to the Corbins' Black Swan cascade.

Societal Safety Net: Food Aid

There were already nutritional problems in Corbin Hollow by the late 1920s, and one of Fennel's adult sons died of pellagra in 1927. Pellagra is a serious malady that manifests as the "three D's" of dementia, dermatitis, and diarrhea; untreated it can culminate in the fourth D of death (Flannery 2016). It is now known to result from a shortage of niacin, a key dietary precursor of which is the amino acid tryptophan present in meat, fish, eggs, and other items in the Corbin Hollow diet in normal times. Corn germ has some tryptophan that can be made bioavailable by making it into hominy (Briggs 2015), but the degermed cornmeal common after 1900 had none.[12] The spread of this cheaper meal led to a pellagra epidemic in parts of the south where diets were heaviest on corn, such as in textile areas and institutions like prisons and asylums (Humphreys 2009:1738). Whole wheat has some tryptophan, but the refined wheat from roller mills that became common in the early 20th Century had almost none.

Pellagra's etiology was contested in the 1920s-1930s. A 1915 experiment showed the disease to appear in subjects on a corn-based diet typical of the Southern poor, and to be cured by a balanced diet (Kraut 2004). But this was hotly dismissed by Southern leaders (who resented the blaming of their foodways and poverty), by anti-Semites (who scorned the dietary explanation as "Jewish science"), and by eugenicists (who attributed physical and behavioral abnormalities to heredity) (Flannery 2016). Eugenicists took particular interest in pellagra because its

[11] The micromanagement of the lives of those remaining in the hollows led to the remarkable body of correspondence showcased in Powell's **Answer At Once** (2009).

[12] The adoption of the Beall degerminator after 1900 led to a surge in cornmeal lacking in vitamins but with longer shelf life.

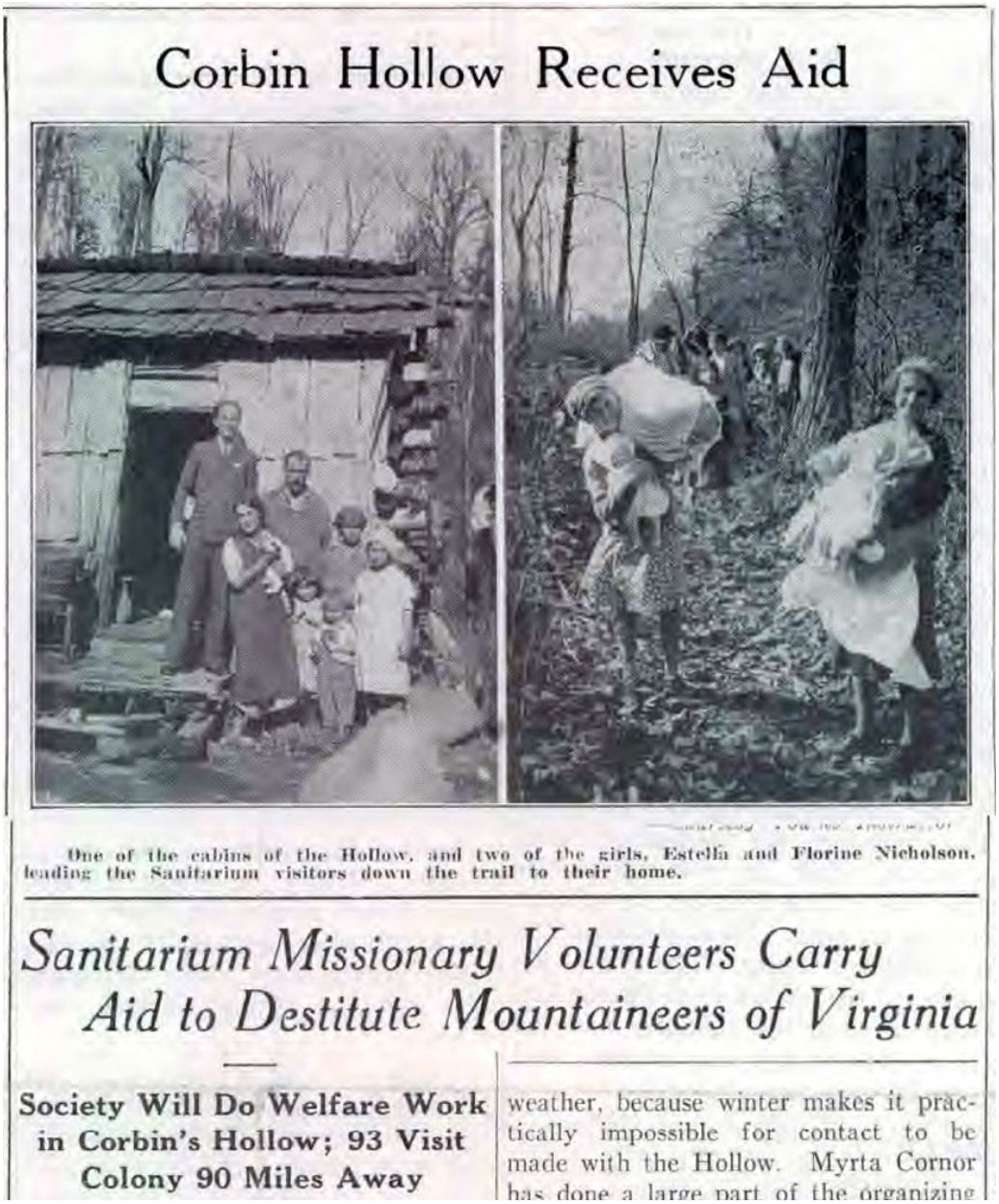
psychiatric symptoms were easily construed as “feeble-mindedness.” The suppression of the science on pellagra led to tens of thousands of deaths, and has been termed the medical fraud of the century (Samaan 2012:612, Chase 1977:215). This became relevant to Corbin Hollow as food insecurity worsened there and food aid began to appear (Washington Post 1932).

Food aid came from some private sources, including Skyland owner George Pollock and President Herbert Hoover, who by early 1931 personally provided about 30 barrels of flour and supplies of sugar to the hollows (Meadows 1931).[13] Food aid came from private charities, including Washington-area missionaries (Figure 4). It also came from government relief: in summer of 1932 Congress voted to buy surplus wheat for the Red Cross to distribute (Poppendieck 1985), some of which came to Corbin Hollow (Chester 1932).[14] The Madison County Emergency Relief Office also distributed surplus food.

Almost all of the donated food was called “flour” which referred to both wheat flour and cornmeal; a photo by Resettlement Administration’s Arthur Rothstein is even captioned “Making cornbread with relief flour.”

[13] Hoover’s Rapidan Camp mountain getaway was only 10 miles from Corbin Hollow and he had a long standing interest in the local mountaineers. But even as the Depression brought hunger and even outright starvation (Poppendieck 1985:xv), Hoover remained implacably opposed to government food relief. Instead he favored private voluntary and local interventions, fearing that government relief would erode traditions of generosity and mutual self-help (Lambert 1979:539, Poppendieck 1985:51).

[14] Hoover reluctantly signed the bill, and only after convincing himself that the aid was not a government dole because it consisted of a commodity rather than cash (Lambert 1979:536-537, Poppendieck 1985:68).



Corbin Hollow Receives Aid

One of the cabins of the Hollow, and two of the girls, Estella and Florine Nicholson, leading the Sanitarium visitors down the trail to their home.

Sanitarium Missionary Volunteers Carry Aid to Destitute Mountaineers of Virginia

Society Will Do Welfare Work in Corbin's Hollow; 93 Visit Colony 90 Miles Away

weather, because winter makes it practically impossible for contact to be made with the Hollow. Myrta Cornor has done a large part of the organizing

Figure 4. A 1933 article on food aid being brought into Corbin Hollow (Takoma Park Sligonian 1933).

Pellagra was rare in agricultural areas, but as the Corbins lost access to locally sourced food (including vegetables and hunted game) and subsisted on degermed flour from food aid, pellagra spread. In August 1935 the Madison County Eagle reported that "Corbin's clan reported in clutch of epidemic" (1935a) without naming the disease. But pellagra is strongly suggested by the symmetrical dermatitis visible in Rothstein's photographs of Corbin children (Figure 5). The "impetigo" that a teen-aged Corbin girl was noted to have (in the eugenic

sterilization case discussed below) was surely pellagra dermatitis. There is no record that the health status of the Corbins was ever diagnosed or even considered, although the disease was well known.

Figure 5. The symmetrical dermatitis symptomatic of pellagra seen in Rothstein images of Corbin children.

If rampant pellagra was not enough of a problem in its own right, it would also contribute to the Corbins' vulnerability to Virginia's eugenics apparatus.

Societal Safety Net: Eugenics

The Corbins' upcoming "transfer to the 20th Century" celebrated in the press (Figure 1) was specifically to 1930s Virginia, which was in the thrall of eugenic theory and policy and second only to California in forced sterilizations of the poor. As offensive as it seems today, sterilization was explicitly framed as a safety net for patients; indeed this had been the linchpin of the case that legalized eugenic sterilization. The driving force behind this conceit, and the law in which it was enshrined, was The Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-Minded asylum in nearby Amherst County. Its superintendent, eugenicist Dr. Albert Priddy, had been sterilizing lower class "patients" until he was sued by the family of an involuntarily sterilized woman in 1918. The Colony then had its lawyer craft text for a state law to indemnify physicians performing eugenic sterilizations. To allay concerns, the law recognized "both the health of the individual patient

and the welfare of society", and stated that "defective persons" in the state's custodial care

> would likely become by the propagation of their kind a menace to society but who if incapable of procreating might properly and safely be discharged or paroled and become self-supporting with benefit both to themselves and to society.[15]

Sterilization would occur only "under careful safeguard and by competent and conscientious authority", under the assumption that physicians would operate with the best interests of patients in mind (Lombardo 2008).

The Virginia Eugenical Sterilization Act was enacted in 1924 and promptly tested in a case designed to achieve judicial approval. This was the Buck v. Bell case, in which lawyers went out of their way to establish — albeit through distorted and perjured testimony — that sterilization would be in Carrie Buck's own interests (Cohen 2016, Lombardo 2008). The law was affirmed by the Supreme Court in 1927 in what is now seen as a contender for the Court's worst decision ever (Cohen 2016).

Particularly relevant to the case of Corbin Hollow is that sterilization had come to be explicitly constructed as a children's right issue (Powell 2013). In 1930 President Hoover hosted a eugenics-dominated White House conference on child health, and he explained in a live radio broadcast that the conference aimed to safeguard the health of the nation's children, ten million of whom suffered from deficiencies that hindered human progress (Kline 2006:20-21). His goal was a generation of children that were happy, educated, and "properly born." In 1935 the American Eugenics Society embraced the goal of minimizing children born to parents "unable or unwilling to provide good training both intellectually and morally", using sterilization to spare children from this "affliction" (Kline 2006:23,34).

Unmentioned in discourse on sterilization as a children's rights issue was who would protect children from forced sterilization.

Virginia's 1924 law only authorized sterilization on individuals committed to a state asylum, where decisions on the "best interests of patients and of society" were left mainly to superintendents (who were reliably eugenicists). But the bar to commitment was low, the process being instigated simply by a citizen complaint: husbands could commit wives, fathers could commit children, and social workers could commit children in their care.[16] In many cases the consent came from disempowered people being manipulated and deceived. The

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[15] *Eugenical Sterilization Act*. Virginia General Assembly, 1924, ch. 394.

[16] Commitment further required approval by a hospital board, which was normally pro forma. The law included safeguards including the patient's right to a guardian and to an appeal process, but these protections were toothless given the enormous power differentials. Even in the high profile test case of Buck v. Bell, the patient's lawyer colluded with lawyers from The Colony (Lombardo 2008).

overwhelming majority of those sterilized were poor, and mountaineers — stereotyped as untamed and backward — were especially vulnerable. Years later, a retired county supervisor recounted the sheriff's men driving into the mountains to conduct "sweeps" in which they "loaded all of them in a couple of cars and ran them down to Staunton [Western State Hospital] so they could sterilize them." Their offense, said the supervisor, was being on welfare during the Depression: "Everyone who was drawing welfare then was scared they were going to have it done on them…[t]hey were hiding all through these mountains" (Robertson 1980, Black 2003).

The Corbins would have been an obvious target for the eugenics apparatus. In a state that had received the green light to sterilize "inadequates," their supposed inadequacy had been authenticated by social science, dramatized by journalism, and depicted by government photography (discussed below).[17] They also inhabited land for which better-heeled segments of society had designs, and ideas of land clearance were tied to views on eugenics (Powell 2013:463); the same Virginia legislators who had passed the Eugenical Sterilization Act passed the Public Park Condemnation Act in 1928. Of course the "condemnation" in the law's name technically refers to the expropriation of private property, but the evictions were eased by condemnation of the hollow folk as feeble-minded social inadequates.

But if these were not reasons enough for them to fall under the surgeon's knife, there is also the near certainty that many of the Corbins were exhibiting pellagra dementia. The dermatitis seen in Figure 5 normally appears only after dementia is manifested (Green 1970, Briggs 2015). Pellagra dementia may include irritability, poor concentration, anxiety, delusions, stupor, apathy, depression, confusion, and memory loss (Green 1970, 1971, Hegyi et al. 2004:4).[18]

The first indication that the Corbins were in the crosshairs of Virginia's eugenicists appeared in a 1932 letter to the director of the National Park Service from Lyman Sexton, a prominent physician who had taken on a quasi-official role with the Park during the transfer. After describing the people of Corbin Hollow as treacherous drunks "of the lowest type," Sexton (1932) noted that arrangements were being made "for moving out and colonizing the worst of these people" — a chilling reference to the "The Colony" noted above, Virginia's leading facility in eugenic sterilizations.[19]

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[17] They even resembled the families targeted in eugenicists' studies, the classic "white trash" study of the "Happy Hickories" — a clan described as descended from a common ancestor who lived in inaccessible ridges of Appalachia (specifically southeastern Ohio), beset with imbecility, dependency, and basketmaking (Sessions 1918, Rafter 1988:254). As depicted, the Corbins matched the profile, from the demented patriarch (Fennel) to the mental failure, dependency, and even the basketmaking.

[18] This makes Warren's (1935) comment that "a psychiatrist would have a hard time digging up an interesting case in Corbin Hollow" rather ironic.

[19] Pollock also depicted the Corbins as drunks, but the Washington Post's Virginia Lee Warren found that the lone drinker in Corbin Hollow was exceptional (Warren 1935).

The process of committing Corbin children for sterilization was already underway before their families were evicted (Currell 2017:482-483). In fact, the image of a sullen Corbin woman in the Washington Post article from November 3, 1935 (Figure 1) was cropped from a photo showing her beside her 17-year old daughter, who had recently married a young man in another hollow (Robinson 2017, Currell 2017:484). A document in the Madison County courthouse shows that in July of that year, Florence Strickler had obtained "X" marks on sterilization approvals from the girl's illiterate parents and husband, who certainly had not been told that the newly married girl would be rendered sterile. Two days before the article was published, she was committed to The Colony, her commitment papers citing "peculiar acts & speech" as well as "headaches & nervousness." She was also stated to suffer from "impetigo" which was probably pellagra dermatitis. After her salpingectomy, she was kept at The Colony for almost five years before being discharged as "Improved."

Justifications for sterilizing other Corbin children, viewable today in the Madison County Courthouse, include "silly conduct", "tantrums", and "incessant talker." A particularly sad case was the 14-year old boy from a neighboring hollow who was left homeless after his mother died and his father abandoned him. This left him "backward, stubborn, antagonistic, unable to learn," enough to be committed and sterilized.

The Colony's records indicate that 11 of the Corbins were committed and sterilized. Most were minors. It is also likely that Corbins were sterilized at outpatient clinics, but records are scattered and incomplete. It is virtually certain that over half of the 25 children and young adults in Corbin Hollow in the 1930s were sterilized.

Societal Safety Net: Resettlement

As strained as the claim seems today, the forced removal of the Corbins from their homes was widely cited as an act of good will — a government rescue of a downtrodden population. As noted, no less an authority than the Secretary of the Interior had proclaimed that they had nothing to lose; they would "get a break" and be "better located" when "a great deal" was "provided by Uncle Sam" (Horning 2004:20). Even some Corbins were convinced the park takeover would be "the finest thing in the world" (Powell 2007:32).

For some evacuees elsewhere in the park — for instance, older residents who were offered full value for their land — the move to the lowlands was probably welcomed. But most bitterly opposed their removal, as dramatized by Robert Via, who fought his eviction up to the US Supreme Court (Lambert 1989), and Mel Cliser, who literally dug in his heels when he was dragged away, handcuffed and singing the national anthem (Powell 2015, Cliser ND). Concerned about public outcry, park promoters had steered attention towards the impoverished Corbin Hollow. The fact that life was falling apart there because of an

unprecedented cascade of ecological and economic shocks was easily obscured by the salacious trope of a backward cultural isolate untouched by time (Daly 1931, Hampton 1932).

These depictions took pictorial form in the work of photographer Arthur Rothstein, later famous for his other Depression-era images. Rothstein was hired in 1935 by the Resettlement Administration to document lives of those remaining in the hollows. As Robinson (2011) and Currell (2017) show, Rothstein's photos were designed to support the narrative of cultural and mental failure.[20] Rothstein focused on Corbin Hollow, creating a vivid portrait of grim poverty with subjects such as Fennel's weather-beaten face and rickety cabin (Figure 7). The material poverty shown in the photographs was used against them "as evidence that it was necessary to remove them so that they could have access to a 'better' life" (Powell 2009:20).

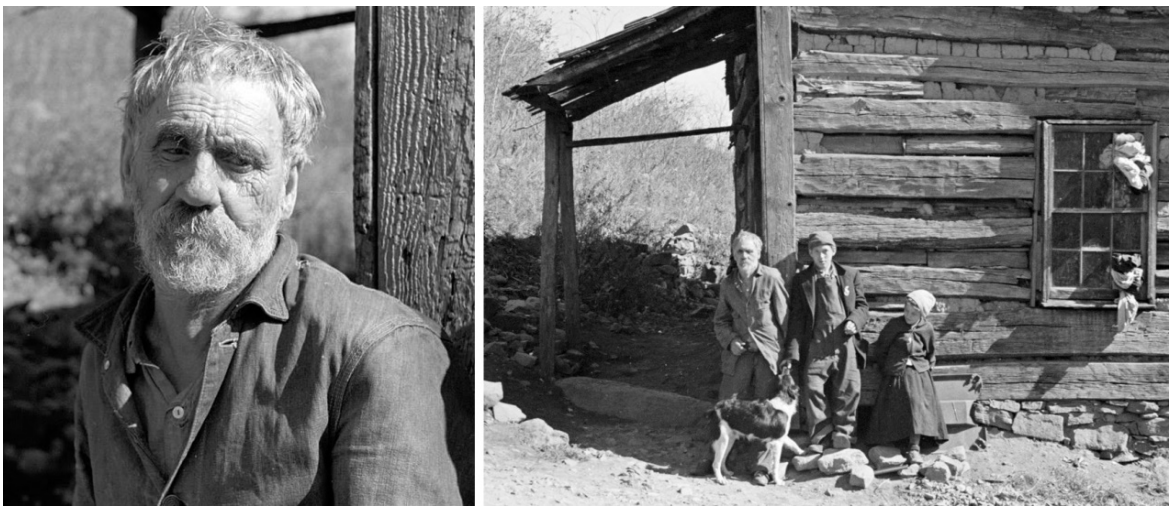

Figure 7. Left: Arthur Rothstein's photo of "Fennel Corbin who is being resettled on new land, Virginia"; see text on where Fennel was actually "resettled." Right: Fennel and two of his grandchildren at his house.

But while the depiction of wretchedness in Corbin Hollow was calculated, many people were sincere in the conviction the Corbins not only needed to learn to use soap and stop chewing tobacco, but to learn moral principles (Sizer 1929) and adhere to the right religion. Actually the hollows were hardly without religion; in fact Bailey Nicholson, who lived in Corbin Hollow (and was married to a niece of Fennel's) was a reverend. But the competition between faiths for the Corbins' allegiance had begun even before they were moved. Some teachers at the local school were from an Episcopalian mission, and Rev. Nicholson's son described a Pentecostal preacher

[20] Rothstein's images are available at Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/coll/item/2004678400/.

who came to “save” hollow residents (Zimmerman 1933). The Corbins could be missionized in situ, but removing them to a location with a proper church (Chester 1932) was understood as part of the civilizing mission of resettlement.

The first problem with the “great deal” from Uncle Sam was that few Corbins ever got into “model homes” in a “fertile valley.” After eviction, those without means could get resettlement homesteads only through government-assisted loans, and only those who passed interviews and were determined to be eligible “were granted ‘permission’ to incur debt on a resettlement home” (Powell 2009:13). Some got into resettlement homes only to lose them because they had no way to keep up with mortgage payments — a “second blow” after being displaced from their mountain homes (Powell 2009:28). Those not in government housing were left on their own to find housing.

But beyond such individual-level setbacks was a social tragedy: although the Corbins had been a very close-knit community — for which they were ridiculed — the expulsion process left the community broken up and permanently scattered. The paper trail of residential histories is incomplete and sometimes ambiguous, but resettlement deeds and commitment papers reveal that families and individuals wound up in Madison, Duet, Leon, Etlan, Brightwood, Waynesboro, Lynchburg, on Poor House road near Criglersville, Takoma Park Maryland – and of course at The Colony in Amherst County (Figure 6).

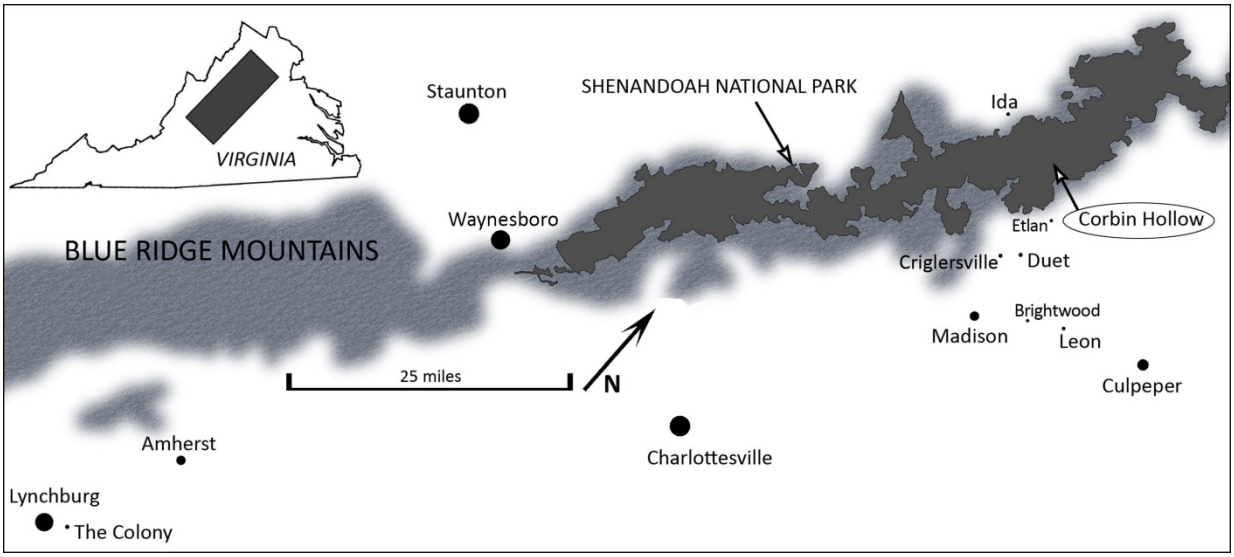

Figure 6. Locations mentioned in text.

Several of those committed to the Colony never rejoined their families. With incarceration periods ranging from one to eight years, some Corbins decided that they had nothing to return

to, choosing instead to make a new family with other former residents of The Colony (Bishop 1994).

For patriarch Fennel Corbin, who had pioneered the settlement of the upper hollow and who had designed the man-plow to till the steep fields there, there would be no further family life. After his eviction in early 1937, Fennel was relocated to Waynesboro. In April an article in the Luray newspaper quoted a letter claiming to be dictated by Fennel from an "old folks home" where he was "spending the closing days of his life." In the letter, which bears no resemblance whatsoever to how he actually would have communicated, Fennel supposedly says that he is well treated, but that he "longs for the roar and swish of Broken Back River… as it swirled and snarled by my cabin's door" (Page News & Courier 1937). In 1940 he was committed to Western State Hospital in Staunton, where he died in 1945 and was buried in an unmarked grave.

It is not surprising that officials had no interest in keeping members of the community together. On the contrary, the archives reflect a tacit consensus that the culture of Corbin Hollow was best obliterated, which the scattering surely achieved. The impetus to break up problematic communities is well known in settler contexts, sometimes termed *cultural genocide* in larger-scale cases (Woolford et al. 2014). An apt parallel to the Corbin case is found in Colin Turnbull's (1972) study of another "mountain people" — the Ik of Uganda. Evicted from where they had lived as hunter-gatherers and forced onto a reservation to farm just as a drought was setting in, the Ik were facing starvation. Turnbull saw what he described as relentlessly selfish, treacherous, and anti-social behavior. When he saw little improvement in a second round of fieldwork, he advocated that the Ugandan government disband the Ik villages and force the population to assimilate into other tribes. But this did not happen, and subsequent research showed Turnbull to have over-generalized from a temporary period of extraordinary scarcity caused by an unprecedented convergence of economic and ecological setbacks; the Ik were not, in general, a particularly "selfish" people at all (Townsend et al. 2020).

With Friends Like These

The final element to note in the Corbins' Black Swan cascade was not an act of commission but many of omission. As the supposed safety nets of food aid, sterilization, and resettlement devastated a community already reeling from a convergence of ecological and economic blows, no interlocutors called serious attention to the physical and social violence these people were enduring. In fact every category of professionals that was — or arguably should have been — charged with supporting the Corbins actually worked against their interests. Five categories of professionals warrant comment.

Social scientists. From our perspective today, the scholars behind **Hollow Folk** lead the parade

of those who failed the Corbins. The vested interests of anthropologists and other social scientists who study rural cultures may not align perfectly with those of their subjects, but we do prioritize the sympathetic telling of people's stories and contributing to wider understanding of cultural differences. We have a disciplinary ethos of not disadvantaging our subjects. In contrast, **Hollow Folk** was a sneering smear job incorporating a dubious analysis based on notes from an untrained amateur. Remarkably, the book was graced with a laudatory preface by Fay-Cooper Cole, chairman and founder of the anthropology department at the Univ. of Chicago (where Sherman was on the psychology faculty). Ironically Cole had even been a student of the legendary anthropologist Franz Boas, who had established standards of careful ethnographic fieldwork (of precisely the sort that Sherman and Henry had not done),[21] and who had discredited ethnocentric and evolutionary cultural comparisons (of precisely the sort that they had done with their ill-defined scale of "social development").

Hollow Folk continued many themes published a few years earlier in the pseudo-scientific **Mongrel Virginians** (Estabrook and McDougle 1926) set in nearby Amherst County — a stunningly irresponsible jumble of vicious innuendo and hearsay decorated with descent charts. This eugenic-inspired treatise described and depicted dirty and deteriorated houses to "illustrate that occupants were feebleminded and could not look after their property, justifying eugenicists' demand for segregation and sterilization" (Currell 2017:485).

Hollow Folk too had consequences, playing "a crucial role in the propaganda justifying the removal of the area's inhabitants" (Fender 2011). But it also helped to establish the mental failings in the hollow at a moment in history marked by fixation on "feeble-mindedness". The book helped to establish that these hillbillies were not just backward but mentally defective, in a time of widespread enthusiasm for rooting this supposed trait out at the genetic level.[22]

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[21] A review in the American Journal of Sociology pointed out that the study lacks "techniques for bridging the language and cultural differences". It goes on: "In view of the abundant literature on ethnographic method there seems to be little justification for this" (Faris 1933:256).

[22] Depictions of mountain folk had long been demeaning but generally without impugning their intelligence (Powell and Murray 2023). "Hillbillies" were lampooned in cartoons and fiction for their lack of formal education and use of non-standard dialects; their men were lazy moonshiners and their women smoked pipes and hid contraband whiskey in their underwear; adults were incestuous and children animalistic (Harkins 2004:110, Mencken 1917). Yet outright stupidity had not been a stock feature in stereotype. A 1899 consideration of "Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains" in **Atlantic Monthly** represented mountain people as poor but resourceful, able to "step into the forest and find or fashion some rude substitute" for what they lacked (Frost 1899). H.L. Mencken, one of the country's leading intellectuals, savaged "gaping primates from the upland valleys" (Harkins 2004:110) and described the southern poor as filthy, lazy, and brutal (1917) but not stupid. Nor did Pollock disparage the mountaineers' intelligence; on the contrary he singled out the Nicholsons (in the adjacent hollow) as intelligent (Pollock 1960 [1937]), although he withheld the compliment from the Corbins.

But the psychic wasteland depicted in **Hollow Folk** was in a work of social science, with data supposedly indicating abysmally low intelligence. In his cultural history of the hillbilly icon, Harkins writes that "conception of dangerously inbred and imbecilic mountain folk was increasingly common in 1930s public discourse, not only in **Hollow Folk** but also in popular medical periodicals" (2004:111).

Journalists. There were many articles on the Corbins in the media between 1929-1935, including coverage by the New York Times, Washington Post, Takoma Park Sligonian, and Associated Press. None made more than a shallow attempt to explain their economic problems; most lauded their upcoming move. Warren's 1935 Washington Post article at least included a touch of skepticism about "vague" government promises and whether the Corbins would really "gain as much as they are bound to lose," but it also recycled caricatures from **Hollow Folk** and repeated the claim that the Corbins would be moved to "model homes."

In the decades following their removal, not a single journalist investigated what actually happened to these people.

Teachers. Schoolteachers in Corbin Hollow not only educated children but in many cases acted as guides to visitors and interpreters of local culture. However their interpretations appear to have consistently evoked disapproval and lack of empathy. Mirriam Sizer was a sometime advocate for the mountain people, but she was also disdainful of local culture and supported removal from the hollow for reasons of hygiene and education (Powell 2013:466). She was distrusted and roundly disliked in the hollows (Powell 2009, 2007); the letter from Lyman Sexton that referred to "colonizing" the Corbins was written to defend Sizer against charges brought after she hurt a Corbin child. After teaching at the Corbin Hollow school, Sizer collected the data used in **Hollow Folk**, including IQ tests that paved the way for children being designated as "feeble-minded."

Another teacher in the Corbin Hollow school in the mid-1930s was Ruby Ruebush, who signed as a witness for the sterilization permission for the girl described above. It seems inconceivable that the girl's new husband would have knowingly agreed to have her sterilized, and Ruebush's failure to explain this is indefensible.

Social Workers. Virginia in the 1920s and 1930s actually had various humanitarian institutions and policies for aiding the impoverished and diseased. Non-governmental organizations active in catering to the poor included churches, fraternal organizations, the Red Cross, Overseers of the Poor, the Salvation Army, and Community Welfare Leagues (Hoffer 1929:56). Florence Strickler was the Senior Worker in Federal Relief Work charged with working with the Madison County displacements, and later head of the county's Department of Social Services. Her 1935 FERA report praised the "law abiding," "industrious" and "honest" mountaineers (Strickler 1935), but indications are that her role was anything but benign. Her time with FERA and Madison's Social Services coincided with a surge in sterilizations and it was she who signed most petitions for commitment.

Physicians. The story of the Corbins' ordeals after their expulsion is littered with bodily aggression by physicians. Lyman Sexton, who enthused about colonizing Corbins, had even treated some of them (Lambert 1989, Sexton 1932). But all commitments were signed by local

doctors, and all sterilizations in asylums were approved by superintendents — invariably physicians who had no difficulty in convincing themselves that the sterilizations benefited their patients as well as society.

A Final Note

To use the events in Corbin Hollow to help us think through how marginal communities do — or don't — "get through", we first note that a hallmark of Taleb's Black Swan is that despite its status as an unpredictable outlier, we tend to devise explanations after the fact making it explainable and predictable. This is termed *hindsight bias*: the tendency, once we know the outcome, to overestimate our ability to have predicted it, and to reinterpret past evidence to fit the known result. The nuanced analyses by Horning and Gregg do note the combination of setbacks, but readers will be forgiven if they conclude that the hollow economy needs to be understood in terms of its "vulnerability" as discussed above. We will never know how long the community would have endured and its "satisfaction with life" (Warren 1935) persisted absent the Black Swan cascade, but it does appear that until well into the 1920s the Corbins had a range of internal safety nets and some of the crucial balance between reliance on external-market-based and self-controlled resources.

Almost a century later, interest in the "undying past" (Lambert 1989) of the hollow folk lives on in social media, academic writing, and in civic organizations such as the Blue Ridge Heritage Project and Children of the Shenandoah (Blue Ridge Heritage Project nd, Homa 2021, Powell 2015, Eisenfeld 2015, Powell and Murray 2023). The primary focus understandably remains on the removals, which we now know have been even more devastating than previously understood in the case of Corbin Hollow. But we also find that instead of a singular event, removal was a process that contributed in diverse ways to a Black Swan cascade. Well before its residents were expelled, Corbin Hollow's economic safety nets were being shredded by oppressive oversight by park officials. Then the community's plight was sensationalized to legitimate a sugarcoated account of what was in store for the mountain folk. The lurid media and academic attention probably helped to bring them into the crosshairs of Virginia's eugenics apparatus and promote the scattering of the community.

Residents of Corbin Hollow were left in urgent need of external safety nets, and elsewhere the country was helping other newly impoverished people survive by the biggest basket of public-aid interventions in its history. But it was the actual interventions that finished them off, giving new meaning to Horning's surmise that the Corbins' downfall stemmed not from isolation, but their involvement with the "so-called outside world" (2004:72) of 1930s Virginia.

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