

pay a visit to her home in Sylva, North Carolina, where they could see her handweaving. Not only did Ashe maintain her own business, she also built her own loom and dyed her own materials. An astute businesswoman as well as weaver, Ashe found that some of her coverlets sold so well that she could not "even get to keep one when it comes from the loom." Such conditions led Ashe to hire neighboring women to weave for her and to plan a new building to house the business.³

The stories of Nolan, White, and Ashe, along with those of hundreds of other craftspeople, suggest a complex picture of handicraft production in the Appalachian South. As weavers, these three individuals shared skills and a craft. Their stories reveal, however, that mountain craftspeople worked under a variety of conditions and circumstances, maintaining different degrees of autonomy over matters of design, production, and materials, and their attitudes about their work as craft producers were diverse. The producers, as well as the benevolent and commercial craft industries, mountain schools, and government projects, did help to shape craft labor and its products. Their endeavors entwined them in a variety of social and political relationships that constructed the boundaries of craft production in the mountain region. To comprehend these boundaries—and to get beyond those sentimental notions of the preindustrial artisan persisting in 1930s Appalachia—we need to explore the identities of mountain craft producers and the ways in which they themselves adapted their own customs and needs to the demands and structures imposed by educators and industry. What were the circumstances and conditions under which craft producers worked? What were the processes of craft labor? How did craftspeople define the goods they made, and how did they identify themselves? Only through such inquiries can we reveal the ways in which Southern Appalachian craft producers negotiated their own social and cultural worlds in a changing order increasingly shaped by capital and industry. As the following discussion shows, the mountaineers were deliberate actors in a specific historical time rather than vague and shadowy remnants of a distant past.⁴

Much of our knowledge about the worlds of mountain craftspeople comes from field notes recorded by researchers from the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau during 1933 and 1934.

when the bureau undertook a study of handicraft production in southern mountain homes. As compelling as the Women's Bureau evidence is, however, it must be evaluated in the context of the bureau's specific goals and interests. It was concern for the possible exploitation of women's industrial labor, as carried out in the home rather than the factory, that prompted this study. Aware of the presence of a number of large commercial employers in the area, the Women's Bureau researchers hoped to uncover sweatshop conditions in mountain homes among those working for enterprises that had "cheaply commercialized" crafts.⁵

Even as the federal government laid plans to incorporate handicrafts into their regional program for economic reorganization, the Women's Bureau questioned the possibilities for developing crafts as a means of earning a living. They also wished to dispel idealized notions of southern mountain craftspeople; bureau officials intended to reveal the presence of urgent need surrounding craft production in the mountain area and the ways in which unprotected homeworkers were victimized by low piece rates and poor working conditions in their homes-turned-workshops.⁶

The evidence collected by the Women's Bureau study paints a decidedly unromantic portrait of regional craft production. Bureau fieldworkers discovered that more than 90 percent of all craft producers in Southern Appalachia in 1933 worked for commercial enterprises. Semiphilanthropic endeavors like settlements and schools—the most aggressive promoters of the romantic image of the mountain artisan—hired only 3 percent. Craft production was almost exclusively women's labor: of approximately fifteen thousand craftspeople, 95 percent were women. In 1933, ten thousand of these were actually engaged by craft-producing centers—centers that ordered crafts from mountaineers and paid upon receipt of the goods—and all but six hundred of these women worked in their homes. Almost half of the women who worked in producing centers were also students at craft schools. Most were married or widowed heads of household between the ages of thirty and fifty; very few craftworkers were male heads of household or sons.⁷

These statistics, of course, were influenced by conditions in the area the Women's Bureau defined for its survey—the mountainous areas of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee,

Alabama, Georgia, and Kentucky. Because part of the Women's Bureau's agenda in this study was to identify potential earning opportunities for women in the Tennessee Valley in light of the TVA's planning, they made an effort to include the mountain areas lying "largely within the Tennessee Valley," as well as certain northerly sections of Virginia, West Virginia, and western Kentucky. Thus, the bureau surveyed some areas of central and western Kentucky situated outside the region that mountain social workers referred to as the southern highlands because it believed that the proximity and nature of these areas had certain impact on mountain industries. As a result, the study included chair companies and quilted textile manufacturers based in central and western Kentucky "in order that handicraft endeavors in the Southern Appalachian Mountains might be reviewed in their entirety." Moreover, it is unlikely that many Americans distinguished between mountain and nonmountain Kentucky; given the common perceptions of Appalachia and its states in the 1930s, it is likely that if you were a craftsman from Kentucky, in the popular imagination you were identified as a mountaineer, whether or not that was the case.⁸

In 1934 fieldworkers visited almost 60 of 105 identified craft-producing centers that employed five or more workers, ranging from the small enterprises typically run by guild members to large commercial companies such as Cabin Crafts, which manufactured tufted bedspreads. Under the direction of Bertha Nienburg, the fieldworkers interviewed more than five hundred craft producers in their homes; of these, almost two-thirds worked tufting bedspreads or caning chairs for commercial companies. Thirty percent of the centers they visited were in North Carolina; Kentucky and north Georgia each accounted for 22 percent of the visits, the latter reflecting the considerable impact of bedspread manufacturers in north Georgia.⁹

The evidence from the Women's Bureau study must be considered in the context of its collection, however. The questions that field investigators asked craft leaders, manufacturers, and producers reflected not just the agendas of the Bureau itself but their own cultural and social perspectives. The Women's Bureau investigators were outsiders, "experienced home visitors"—college-educated, middle-class women dispatched into the mountain region for a spe-

cific purpose. There they encountered worlds alien to their own and ways of living that were critically deficient in those amenities that urban, middle-class Americans used to measure standards of living and success.¹⁰

One can imagine some of the encounters between local people and the Women's Bureau investigators. Having obtained contacts for individual craft producers through the benevolent and commercial industries, the fieldworkers came prepared with forms, from which they read their questions and on which they filled in the gathered data. They inquired about household composition and the identities of craftspeople in the family—their ages, experience, types of crafts they made and where, the hours they worked at crafts for their own use and for sale, and how they marketed their goods. They also asked informants about their methods and the time required to complete particular tasks—and, of course, about gross and net earnings from craftwork. Attempting to get a more complete picture of the household's need for income from handicrafts, they quizzed their subjects about other sources of cash income, the food they raised and purchased, and their relief status. They also inquired as to whether some members of the household preferred to do other work. Although much of the data on the Women's Bureau questionnaires was quantified, the investigators included written comments that elaborated particular issues arising from their conversations with the mountaineers.¹¹

Thus, we must regard the surviving evidence of these encounters as a negotiation between at least two parties: representatives of the federal government who asked the questions and chose the data they needed to demonstrate their own theories and support their arguments, and the mountaineers who nonetheless generated their own responses.¹² The questions themselves sometimes revealed the cultural and social distances between fieldworkers and craftspeople. As a result, bureau workers sometimes made inappropriate assumptions based on the mountaineers' statements. Interviewers asked, for example, if the craftworkers ever used their skills to make objects for use in their own households. Although the typical response was that the producers lacked the means to purchase raw materials for work they would not sell, the bureau used this question to "determine their appreciation of their own handicraft."¹³

Despite its flaws, the Women's Bureau study does help create a social portrait of Appalachian craftspeople in the 1930s. Many were farmers who raised part or all of their food. Others were displaced coal miners or other industrial workers who returned to the region during the Depression and found its resources insufficient to support their families. Clearly, craftworkers used their skills to obtain much-needed cash income, however small. The median annual income from crafts in 1933 was only fifty-two dollars, and those who earned three hundred dollars or more worked in production centers or as independent craftspeople. All of these wages compared poorly with the minimum earnings of factory workers in the South — twelve dollars a week, or six hundred dollars a year. Only 15 percent of the households visited by Women's Bureau fieldworkers depended entirely on their earnings from craft production for cash, but over three-quarters of the families had no other regular source of income.¹⁴

This sort of data helped the Women's Bureau in its efforts to draw a new picture of mountain craft producers that would dispel romantic notions of self-sufficient, traditional mountain artisans. The focus of its inquiry, and the people the bureau hoped to make visible, were the hundreds of mountain craft producers hidden in their homes, making goods out of need for cash but making profits for others. Relatively few of these craftspeople depended on skills passed down through the generations. Producers working through the benevolent institutions and schools frequently learned their skills at these centers (although a small number of weavers did claim long years of experience). Those working for the tufted bedspread and chair companies usually learned their techniques from neighbors or family members who were similarly employed. Many craftspeople, however, described themselves as self-taught. Such was the case with most of the women who worked for quilting and appliqué studios, although their mothers most likely taught them to sew. Some "self-taught" artisans were quite accomplished. At age seventy-one, Aunt Cordelia ("Aunt Cord") Ritchie of Hindman, Kentucky, became known for the fine workmanship and design of the willow baskets she taught herself to make some fifteen years earlier. Ritchie learned by copying pictures and taking apart extant baskets and studying their construction. The preparation