

Interview with Bob Henry Baber
Ashland, Kentucky
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Green: So back in 1971 Antioch Appalachia is happening.

Baber: Antioch Appalachia actually is happening, I think, in 1971, but it's happening in Huntington, West Virginia just across the river from us. It's not getting too hospitable a reception, I wasn't around for early Antioch so I can't really tell it too well. What I do know happened is that Antioch moved to Beckley. Somebody had a connection in Beckley, West Virginia, I don't know what, because Beckley was a very unlikely place for Antioch Appalachia to end up.

Green: What is Beckley like?

Baber: Beckley is a high mountain town in southern West Virginia; it's a coal mining town; it's fairly old, it had a lot of old money around and it was also rather stiff to me, a rather cool town in some ways. I mean it's actually physically cold--it's fairly high up. But more than that it's a town that has, in my mind, airs to pretension that it probably doesn't deserve. It's not like gritty coal country, it's city but also it never had the real stuff, elements of it were kind of stuck up. But anyhow I guess Antioch found a home there.

And how I got hooked up with Antioch, that's kind of interesting. I had been to Beckley as a child once or twice for one reason or another. I was coming and going from Richwood, West Virginia and even though I'm a native New Yorkian--was born in New York, my dad being part of the great Appalachian out migration in the forties and fifties, he met my mother in a USO club in New York City during world war II--so I'm really a cultural hybrid, born to a Appalachian father and a New York City mother. I was raised with both of those things in my life and it impacted my art.

Green: Where were you raised?

Baber: I was raised in Levittown, New York, the great grand-daddy of all subdivisions. It truly was the first huge subdivision in the United States--Levittown. It's quite famous in sociological circles. It was a wonderful place to grow up, there were so many kids. This was all vets: talk about baby booms, this was baby boom city. There were so many different streets, this guy Arthur Levit built 50,000 homes in three years, that he had to come up with ways to name them and I lived in the bird section. There must have been 75 bird names alone, I mean it was big, then there were flowers, trees and just on and on.

Anyhow, my daddy was from Richwood, West Virginia and I used to go with my dad every fall to my grandparent's house. They live way up in the high country, elevation 4,000 feet in Greenbriar County near Richwood. We used to go in the fall and help them get ready for the winter, put in the storm windows, cut wood, make sure they had their supplies in, because it's a very snowy environment. I spent probably two or three summers, I really can't remember they all sort of blend together in my mind now, on my grandparent's farm. All you had to say to me was "West Virginia" and I was in the car and ready to go. I loved my life in New York but I never wanted to leave West Virginia when I was down there. It was an old farm, but old fine farm house, 170 acres of land, wild animals, bears, deer. Fords, creeks to be dammed. A

lot of cousins, my dad was one of ten kids so I had 36 first cousins and even though many of them had also left the region, in fact most of the family left West Virginia, they all would come back from time to time and spend summers in West Virginia. So I always had this thing for West Virginia, even when I reached college age.

I was part of that first hippy generation and took off from New York with a bunch of other buddies of mine and went to California. So I went to California but I would come back to West Virginia and spend my summers on the farm. By that time my grandparents had moved off. That happened all the way through the sixties for me on a regular basis with me hanging around Richwood and coming back to Richwood in the early 70s.

Well there was a poet in Richwood, a guy named Joe Barret who died last year, actually a Lexingtonian for the last ten years, and Joe wrote a book called Roots Deep in Sand. Richwood is a very small town and it was inevitable that Joe and I would get thrown together in short order and we did. So Joe and I were buddies.

I came back one summer, I think it was the summer of 1973, and I bumped into Joe as I always did and we would go to the mountain and read poems and drink wine and talk about the Beat poets--Joe was really into the Beats and I was into the Beats. He said, "Well, listen there is this dude, Bob Snyder, and he's got this school down in Beckley, West Virginia and you've got to meet him." I said, great let's go. So we hopped in the car, it was about two hours and we drove down to Beckley and I met Snyder, met his buddy P.J. Laska. They were both the only really bonified full time teachers for the school, although Don West was there too.

Green: Were you hooked into Don West before this time?

Baber: I knew of Don West's work and held it in awe. I didn't hold it in awe really from an artistic point of view because it was in that old style and I was trying to move away from that. I was in the throws of Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Patchen and Ginsberg and people like that, Bukowski in California and some of the Californian poets I met while I was out there. But I knew that Don was the bedrock. You could read his stuff and you could feel this deep, resonate, awesome, heavy, preachy, political stuff coming up through it. And to find out that Don West was down there and maybe get an opportunity to study with him and get to know him, that was meaty stuff.

Snyder and Laska on the other hand were a real different mode, Pete being the most political--having come up through the coal camps and his daddy being a coal miner. Both are pretty heavy weight intellectuals but Snyder may be one of the smartest people I have ever met in my life. Real brilliant character. So naturally when I met them, here is this little school with 75 people in it, not only them but three or four other writers hanging around and I was like O Wow. And it was in West Virginia, I had always sort of had it in my mind to come back and go to school in West Virginia.

But a lot of other things had happened to me in my life, including in 1971 getting shot through both legs in an anti-war rally in California and charged with attempted murder. I went to jail and spent a big three or four years trying to dig out from that catastrophe in my life, it really was a catastrophe. I actually limped back to West Virginia. When I got out of jail for being shot and charged with attempted murder of a police officer I came to West Virginia. I came to that farm like an old wounded dog, limping home. I wanted to get as far away from LA and everything as I could. I had to go back for trial, so I couldn't stay.

I eventually got convicted of assault of a police officer and got sent

back to jail, ended up doing two months, three years probation, fined--all that stuff. That scene in LA where that black guy got beat brought back a lot of bitter feelings I have about the LA police department. I know that first hand, the Los Angeles Police Department can be a mean bunch of dudes. So why it makes sense for me to tell you this is part of my escape from Los Angeles via West Virginia and New York was to end up, in all places, Colorado. Grand Junction, Colorado, it was a love affair, basically that took me there. I had done all right in Colorado, I had got back into school, I only had a ten speed bicycle, but I was kind of working my way back into the system, trying to survive and scrape myself together. It was rough sledding. I got elected student body president at Mesa State College, Grand Junction and that was going into that summer of '73.

So Snyder says to me hey man, why don't you come to Antioch for school. And I said, well shit sounds good to me. But I had an obligation to being student body president, so I went back there and meanwhile applied to go to Antioch and got the money stuff rolling. So by spring the money was in place, and my first wife, my girl friend then, Mona, we packed up our stuff and became the first outsiders, quote, unquote to come to Antioch Appalachia. It was really a function of money, they needed the tuition money. Snyder didn't care one way or the other but the school was in a pretty zealous regional mode. Strong Appalachian mode. And that was a function of all the things that had been going on, strip mining fights, stereotyping. So our reception at Antioch was not particularly warm. There were some people who helped us through that but it was pretty rough for a while.

I was not readily accepted into that. And I clearly was an outsider, I wasn't born and raised Appalachian, I had traveled all over the country. True, I had been doing writing about Appalachia. In fact the committee that admitted us reviewed some of the Appalachian poems I had wrote, so I was writing Appalachian poems, about my farm and grandparents, before I even knew or had any conception that there was some kind of Appalachian writing scene. So finding Snyder and Antioch Appalachia was like finding a city or scene you didn't know existed.

Snyder was there, Laska was there, there was a Kentucky writer named Dave Chaffin, there was a woman who was not really affiliated with the group but who was writing named Mildred Shackelford, who was a fierce, strong voice. Pauletta Hansel who was from Kentucky, Dave Morris, Joe Barret was on the periphery and there were other people out there too, most notably Gail Amburegy who I became good friends with. So it was a cluster of six, with another ten who were part of the group. We started reading and hanging out and having these discussions about art and writing and what it meant to be an Appalachian and what the politics of it were, what was political art, what wasn't political art, the big stuff. It was great and we started reading together, and finally somebody, I think it was Pauletta Hansel, said I think we ought to get a name if we are going to be reading as a group.

We had started doing stuff at Beckley, the college, and Beckley didn't know what to make either of the poets or of Antioch. Everybody said we were communists, which about half of us were more or less. That was never really completely accurate, I think although the group was pretty tuned into Marxist thought and held a lot its of values, we also were skeptical of all the dogmas associated with Marxism. We had to be as writers, because any of us as students of the world knew how writers were treated in the Communist world, at least I did. I'm sure Snyder and Laska and others did; those were the first people they carted off to the Gulag. Get rid of the writers, they were a cantankerous bunch and won't play ball; that's the nature of the writer.

Green: It's always been kind of a mystery to me, actually it hasn't been a mystery, why writers are allowed to say what they want to here--it's because they are ignored. Say what you want to, it doesn't matter.

Baber: That's true, I think that's really true; if the writers had more venues for publishing and had stronger voices, we might find stronger attention being paid by the authorities. I think they keep track of everybody. And I think if the country ever found itself in crisis, something really major, which god forbid would ever happen, I think it would be rough sledding for the writers. Artists are in trouble when political strife gets intense, because they are independent thinkers.

So we started doing our thing, Pauletta got the name, "The Soup Bean Poets". Soup Bean Poets was a great name because what we liked about it was that it had a down home, sort of working class ring, but not in a pretentious way. Just good old solid soup beans, you know? And it was a good name for us and as names are want to do in Literary History, they take on a mystique and power that they really don't deserve. History has a tendency to amplify those sort of things. Word began to get out about this group as we got out and did readings hither and on.

Now at the same time, and partly through the efforts of some people who were with the Soup Bean Poets, two people--Don Askins of Kentucky and Dave Morris who was at Antioch Appalachia--and a few others decided to get this group the Southern Appalachian Writers' Cooperative together. It was sort of the same idea, only not based in a little cluster in Beckley but sort of a regional idea tying the region together to get these writers from eastern Kentucky, West Virginia, southern Ohio, North Carolina and Tennessee to get together and begin to meet each other and network up and those sorts of things.

The first big meeting happened in 1974 or 75. Could have been spring of 75. So we cast out this net by phone and other ways. There had been a series of little meetings that led up to this first big meeting at Highlander. Wonderful meeting, really funny. We all met up at Highlander, we all went around the room, it was very tentative, very nervous on Friday night. Forty people none of whom knew each other, everybody who was there might have known two others who were there. Nobody really wanted to say that they were a writer, nobody did say they were writers. People went around the room and said, "I'm here to see what's happening, I'm here with so and so"; there just wasn't any trust there yet. I think people came into it with an open attitude to find out what was going to happen, but I think they wanted to assess it before they jumped in.

But by the end of the weekend a group had coalesced, things had really happened. A group emerged, a feeling emerged, a feeling of support and camaraderie, positiveness. So both of these groups, the Southern Appalachian Writers' Cooperative and the Soup Bean Poets ran parallel track, crossed paths. Almost everybody, until we had a publishing blow out, everybody was together. Working along the same lines.

Now it varied, some were from the tourist base in North Carolina, from the farm country of Tennessee, others were from the coal mining region of eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia and those people tended to be more political, more intense. A lot of us were under the sway of Pete Laska, who was very political. Don West was fierce, so there was a lot of political stuff coming out. And the times, it was the early '70s and the United States was still hopping in a big time political way, it was a cultural movement, strip mining was not regulated, stereotyping--"Deliverance" had come out a couple of years earlier and people were still pissed off about that. All the

kinds of things that people are concerned about, so there was a lot of fuel to it. A lot of righteous anger: a lot of righteous anger. But anger towards how things were going, not towards each other.

I don't remember Jim Webb being at that meeting, but Jim found out about the Soup Bean Poets. Then I think the Southern Appalachian Writers' Cooperative held a meeting at Beckley and Jim came to that. He got wind of something happening. He was at West Virginia--Williamson, that college down there. And so Jim showed up at this reading in this little room we had in Beckley. Well, he and I hit it off immediately. Jim and I had a lot in common, we were soul brothers that's all you could say. We liked to do the same things, we liked going to the bar and having a beer. I felt a great rapport with Jim's writing, I felt he had the heart of a poet. Jim could nail the political thing but he wasn't dogmatic. He had also read enough and widely enough, actually the whole scene at Beckley had a very bee-bop, jazzy, beat poetry flavor to it. It was a hybrid in itself. It was the beat scene come to Appalachia--the hillbilly beat kind of stuff. So it was wonderful, it was a rich mix.

So Jim and I got our friendship going right then, we started talking on the phone, sending letters back and forth. This was around 1977 when New Ground had come out. As you know, there had been a pretty major blow out with it--no one knows what happened to this day.

Green: It seemed like it just fragmented everything right in half from everything I've heard about it.

Baber: I don't think it is as big of a deal now as what we make of it today. But it was a very big deal when it happened, I think. . .it's very hard to talk about it and get it just right. I mean, it hurt. It was a lick. And what it was was Bob Snyder being left out of New Ground. It was just a bad thing. I don't know how it happened, I truly don't. I didn't have anything to do with the editing of the book. I do know that Snyder told me after the fact that the Soup Bean Poets were to have been, by agreement, in the book as a cluster. But that didn't happen. Then Snyder himself wasn't in the book. The book had a coming out party that was very dramatic. I mean literally where it came out of the boxes, you've heard this story that we hadn't even paid for it when they all showed up.

The printer printed it without having diddly squat in advance: that never happens, how that happened was some kind of cosmic deal. And it worked out great; just goes to show you if only we could do them that way today, because everyone plunked down the money. Paul Steele, this West Virginia writer, showed up and had a big wind fall of some kind or another and plunked down 800 bucks, everybody else threw in a hundred which nobody had. Within a day we paid for three quarters of the book right then, so it just goes to show you if we could get someone to front the printing for us, we'd probably be fine. That never happens and no one can get inspired enough to come up with the money otherwise.

But Snyder was really hurt, and I think in the anger of being left out, the frustration of it, some paranoia, some feeling that maybe this was intended, he took offense. And there had been a rub between Snyder and Dave Morris, one of the editors. What happened there I don't know, I really don't. Snyder I think was hurt, genuinely hurt. He did a magnanimous job of shrugging it off. I think he let go of it pretty fast. You have to put it in context, it was the first collection of Appalachian poetry to come out and not to be in it was just a disaster. It caused a rift, some seeds of distrust to be thrown into a movement that had not had that before. It took quite a while to work through it.

Gurney was in a kind of super-cool California mood like o-well-that's-the-way-it-goes, no-hard-feelings, we-think-you're-a-great-poet, and-o-come-on. I think he literally said something to Snyder like come on can't you forgive and forget. And Snyder at that particular moment said, "No, no I can't!" It was a bummer.

But anyway, the book did come out. People were pleased to see it, to have a physical product of all the stuff we had been talking about and it was pretty well received.

Green: New Ground had a pretty heavy political introduction to it; what are your feelings about that? Were you right along with it? Was the entire group in agreement with the introduction?

Baber: I think the entire introduction was written by Don Askins and Dave Morris, so it was their voice, their writing. I'd have to pick it up again and read it to tell you the truth, it's been a long time since I've read it. But I think, by and large it reflected the group. It was probably a little political for some people. Now Don Askins was nowhere near as political as Dave Morris. He was a teacher, more traditional. I bet Dave Morris wrote the whole thing or most of it. Don Askins, for example did not like Don West's poetry and I don't think he has in New Ground. I don't even know if he was asked to submit. Don would have had to been asked to submit, someone would have had to go out of their way to say, "Don give us a poem or two"; and I'm not sure that happened.

This was a very thrown together type effort, so none of those channels had been established. If people did get asked--you can see how loose it was. I truly believe Snyder was not purposefully left out. I bet you that stuff fell in some crack in the printer's office, literally. And the printer didn't know diddly-squat and it just didn't happen. The book was sent off, New York or Boston or somewhere. And those people didn't know anybody in the scene; they were just the printer. I don't even think there was a final proof to see if anyone had been left out. So it was just chaos, you know.

Green: Good old fashioned chaos.

Baber: So to come back, one day I get a call from Jim Webb and this is a preview of Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel. Jim says we've had a big flood in southern West Virginia and you need to come down here. And that was all I needed. I was still pretty foot loose and fancy free. I hopped on my horse and went down to Williamson and my god they had had a hell of a flood. It looked awful. Jim and I got involved with this outfit called the Tug Valley Recovery Center which was shoveling mud and bringing in food. What we were doing mostly was writing statements for public consumption about what was going on. We were beating the drum against strip mining big time. We were saying strip mining is what caused this flood and it's just typical of what is going on in Appalachia and this is only an indication of how ripped off the region is. It was real political stuff--fierce.

Jim and I were just wound into it. Now, after a week or two, it was a bizarre scene, people living in sub-standard housing. Flooded houses, people crashed in floors in gymnasiums. And HUD had brought in all of these trailer homes which were parked on the four lane above Williamson and could not be brought into town because HUD had a rule which said you could not put HUD trailers into the flood plain.

Green: Is this the Buffalo Creek flood?

Baber: No. Buffalo Creek happened in 72. Gail Amburgey wrote some of the most political stuff to come out of it some of which ended up in the first book Jim Webb and I put together. Anyway, after about ten days by coincidence there happened to be a SAWC meeting going on. So we packed up our stuff and went on down. We weren't thinking too much in terms of literature, we were thinking in terms of political essays and statements. So we drove down to Highlander, and I remember we got about 50 miles away from Williamson and we went into shock, as people who have been in great traumas and find the rest of the world kind of merrily sailing along get in. We couldn't believe, and we got down to Tennessee and it was like real life, smooth.

But we were all pumped up and we blew in breathless to the SAWC meeting. We drove all night to get there. Everybody was just sitting around and we said hey we're going to do this anthology. It's going to be the next book to come out of SAWC. And while New Ground had a political statement this is going to be about the flood, Appalachia's demise, we're going to write about it, tell about it, change people's hearts, protest it, scream and wail. And everybody said great go for it. We more or less took over the meeting.

So we did, we started working on it. We sent out a call to gather political pieces, we want your political stuff for Mucked. They take the buck we rake the muck, that was our handle. We did, we got wonderful stuff: we got Gail Amburgey's flood poems from 1972, Snyder whipped us up a couple of pieces, Laska had some good stuff he took from his books, Jim had some not stuff, I threw some things in there, Dexter Collet from Kentucky, Jim Wayne Miller. And we put out that little rag, it wasn't really much--only about 36 pages.

Green: How much burning heat do you need though?

Baber: Just enough to start a fire. We put out a hot little book that people liked and that people are still talking about. And I don't think it's too terribly dated, you could go back and read the book and get a sense, a very clean sense of the anger, the frustration, the dismay that people were feeling at that time. We boiled it down. We had submissions of relatively soft pieces but we weren't looking for soft pieces. We weren't in a soft mood so we only took the pissed off poems and put them in there.

Green: Mucked comes through that way. I've had opportunity to go back to it, read it, and show it to people who are interested in the area, and it has raised those feelings. Did you get feed back from people afterwards? What kind of effect did you see-- like throwing a stone in a pond?

Baber: Well, we continued to get a lot of poems coming in. I think Jim and I and the work that we gathered were about as political as anyone wanted to go. In some cases it was even a stretch for people like Snyder who is not overtly political but whose work has political ramifications weaved through it. Joe Barret's work was like that too. But their political writing tends to be weaved into the larger body of work. It is fraught with imagery and might have a more holistic view.

But Mucked was a diatribe. This was pulpit-pounding and that was what it was meant to be; and I think once that happened we felt a certain sense of relief and satisfaction. Later everyone realized there was danger in the dogma of it, but we really tried to find poems that had a political heart and that were not god awful preachy. And that's hard to do. It really is hard to make a political statement and not get preachy. And the book has a little bit of that in it, a little bit preachy at times, it comes off a little heavy handed.

So what I think happened after that was that there were a lot of people who liked it. The poems just kept coming to Jim, to me. But not political stuff necessarily, a lot was of a cultural assertive nature: political but in the sense of not being as heavy-handed as Mucked was. I think it is a good thing we said that, and I think it needed to be said. But that wasn't everybody's way of doing it. Many of the poets were somewhat broader softer mode. And, I'll speculate, some of them were afraid of being pigeoned-holed by the political stuff.

I've always felt that this argument of art versus politics was a bogus argument. It's a self-serving argument of the system: we're going to divide political art from commercial art, but the best art should have everything in it, all the way from kissing and love making to politics.

Green: When it comes down to it, when something is stated well enough, everything is a political statement: anything that makes you look at your life, makes you look at your relationship to those people around you and see the responsibilities, ties, and connections. How can that fail to be political? But yet, somehow, to me, most American work fails horribly in that necessary responsibility of speaking to the collective entity. The poets. And so as the result we go to the other extreme, which to some extent Don West is on which is overly political. And it seems really hard for us, as Americans, to get a balance.

Baber: Well we tried to in Mucked, I don't know whether we succeeded. We tried to get political pieces that were art, that's what we tried to do more than anything else. Tried to get pieces that didn't sound like o.k. here comes the message, or pieces with imagery that was so strong--like Snyder has one piece in there that is just stunning. It is a poem about a woman whose husband has been killed in the mines and they've brought his lunch box home. And this is a piece which was incredibly tragic but very soft. It ends up with her sitting there smoking a cigarette¹, sent chill bumps up and down my spine.

Or Pete Laska's piece, probably the best political piece ever written in Appalachia, "A Poem to My Grandmother". The first time I heard it I just. . .and I still to this day think it is one of the most incredible pieces I've ever heard. It's so political that in a matter of twenty lines it captures the whole essence of what was going on in the Soviet Union, the war between the red and the whites, and what was going on in the coal mines in Appalachia. It ends like this: it was told to him by his grandma--she comes over from the Soviet Union, she's a Russian immigrant and ends up in a coal camp in West Virginia. Her husband gets killed in the mines, her life is a disaster, it's truly god-awful, so she writes to her sister in the Soviet Union. Gets this reply: "living in tents and the holes in the ground. if you've got a crust of bread in your hand don't come back."

I mean the first time I heard that I said "my god"--talk about poetry, talk about distilling down two whole cultures and the whole scene for poor working class people. If you've got a crust of bread in your hand don't come back--it boggles the mind that someone could do that in a poem. And that's what we were striving for in Mucked. We were trying to get right down to that stuff where we could put this in people's hands. We could put in a coal baron's hands and all he's going to say is "close the book, get rid of it, I

1. "Spring in Glen Jean"

don't want to talk about it". It was too hot to handle, that was what we were striving to do. We may not of succeeded but that is what we were trying to do.

I don't know if you could do something like Mucked today.

Green: I don't think so. The places you could do that are in the inner city. When you are writing like that you're not writing for everybody---you are writing for a group of people who are in dire enough circumstances to need to hear words like that.

Baber: Well, Jim and I talked about it later and we were distraught for the Appalachian culture. We were crazed, we were mad, we were depressed. Jim and I couldn't get together, we couldn't get together without talking about strip mining. After a while we realized we were in danger of being buried by our depression. I can remember saying, "Where are the flowers, where is the love". It is what happens to people who are being exploited. Truly they being to lose the joys of life, they begin to become part of the system that is depressing them. And start to even mimic the roles, not that we were, but you are pressed down and you start pressing yourself down.

Green: You take on the two sides. It's like The Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Friere. You have the oppressor and oppressed, it takes two sides playing out roles, both sides of being stuck in the role. Which, of course, is our one hope of being white males in this society is saying we can break out of the role of the oppressor.

Baber: Well, hope springs eternal doesn't it? So that was Mucked.

Green: The next one to come out was Strokes? That was like three years later. What happened in that time?

Baber: Not much with the co-op. Getting the books out was always a hassle. We barely got Mucked out. Jim had some connections at the printing shop in a college at Logan. None of us had any money, we didn't have a pot to piss in. Jim and I did Mucked on nothing. We might have done it on two hundred dollars and that was hard, that was scraped together. It was a giveme. We coaliated it ourselves.

So after Mucked there was a lot of discussion about trying to do the next new ground or whatever it would be. There was talk about trying to do a book that was just fiction, but it didn't happen. Finally, I decided to print everything in Appalachia that no one else would print. We've almost come around full circle as we talked about censorship in last year's meeting at Highlander.

I've always been interested in pushing the envelope. I like the idea of the bepop Appalachian stuff, the contemporary in Appalachia, which I think is happening. I think Appalachia has both the old elements and the new and I wanted to give the writers the opportunity to be as new as they could. So we threw that net out, to see what would happen. Some interesting stuff came in. Some political stuff, some sexual stuff, and the universal mix of things somewhere inbetween.

Green: What was happening with your own writing at this time, your own artistic development? What evolved in your own life from the time of Assorted Life Savors from your connections with SAWC and Jim over the next four or five years?

Baber: I think the biggest thing that happened for me was that I got from Antioch a political understanding. I mean, I knew things were screwed, I just didn't know exactly why. When I came to Antioch, I had no idea who owned Appalachia, I knew the people were desperately poor. I knew things shouldn't be that way, the state had timber, coal, workers, scenery, it seemed to have all the mix you would need for prosperity; yet, the region was on its ass. Then I started to see the relationship between exploitation and the stereotyping of people--the old model if you can get the people's self-esteem low. I don't think anyone devised these strategies but it sort of unfolded that way.

So for me what was happening was the crystalization of some of my own interest in life. An interest in Appalachia, and I've always been a very political person because of what had happened to me in California and because both of my grandparents are very political. One was from New York, a very conservative republican, the other was from Appalachia, a FDR democrat. I've always been interested in the connection between politics and literature. To me the clarity, even it was horrible, of Appalachia's politics was great fuel for my writing and continues to be. What can you say, the stripping of a mountain, and the stripping of a people: there it is. You strip-mine mountains, you strip-mine people, you pay them minimum wage, you throw them out of the factory.

What I was trying to do was apply Don's strong politics but bring in the crystal modern image in it with I could. To try to use the metaphor, the image, the language to say those things in a way that was more modern. And also more and more it was beginning to accept writing about my own family, which is still an ongoing process for me. I am beginning to see that my Appalachian family was a subject to write about, which I really wasn't doing in the beginning. In fact, I made a conscious decision early on in my writing career to not write about myself much. Because I saw, in the context of the university scene, just a whole lot of "interior" poems.

Green: The "I" poem?

Baber: It wasn't the I that bothered me so much as it was into the brain, real cerebral stuff, real angsty. It just didn't excite me. So I made a decision to try and take picture poems, to try and capture stuff outside of me. It took a while for me to work around seeing my family as something to write about, when I did it's given me more to write about than I can probably ever do in my life time. Because I had such a big family and they were such story tellers and my Dad had a strong voice and was an interesting man.

Green: This seems like a good time to get you to read a poem to the infamous tape-recorder: "A Poem to James Collins"

Baber: Let me tell you a little bit about this poem. I've never thought about this before but this is very much in a Don West mode. Don was able, when he really nailed it, to capture the farmer or coal miner's voice in a way that really was quite wonderful. We teased Don, we made a little fun of him when we were at Antioch Appalachia. All of us did. But it was a teasing done in the way that you would tease a grandfather that you really revered. You might tease him but bymygod you wouldn't say anything in front of him and you certainly wouldn't let anyone else run him down. It had that family sort of feel to it. O, Don is writing that old time stuff, rhymed stuff, but Don is a force to be reckoned with, and you can find his influence weaved through all

this work.

This poem happened when I was teaching for West Virginia Tech in a literacy program. I ended up in a black lung meeting near Montgomery, West Virginia. I don't remember what little town it was in. I was basically trying to find folks I could teach reading and writing skills to; that didn't happen, but this poem did.

I was at this black lung meeting and there were 25 or 30 people there. It was right after Ronald Reagan had gotten elected, they were very mad and very angry. There were people in that room who could not get black lung benefits who knew this story all very well. And this fellow, James Collins got up in front of the room to talk: he was vice president of the local chapter of the black lung association. I later found out that he could not read or write. But it didn't matter. He more or less said what I'm about to read to you: I've taken a few poetic liberties with it but he was incredible. He said his piece and said it in a way that just galvanized the room, and he quit his talk crying. Very moving, poetic experience. As soon as it was over I took some notes on it and worked this piece up. I can't really read it in here the way I like to read it which is with a real loud punch line. "This ain't suppose to be a slavin' place" and usually when I'll read it I'll go BAM because that's what he did-- a real crescendo of anger. Anyhow, "A Poem for James Collins"¹:

Now youse may not believe it, but it's the truth
I throwed lumps as big as I could lift
to get my Daddy his quota.
Why coal was so much a part of my life
I thought God made it before he make night,
but tell that to the Labor Board
and see what'll getcha--
a knock on the noggin with that headache stick
the sheriff's got ahangin on his hip

this ain't suppose to be a slavin' place
but we got widders out here
their husbands died
and they tell her autopsy autopsy
cut him open
see if he got the blacklung
hold them lungs up to the light
listen to hear
iffin there's any air left to be wrung out

but this ain't suppose to be a slavin place

tell em that
see if they stop pattin their hair
and clicken their pens,
scream it in their ears
THIS AIN'T SUPPOSE TO BE A SLAVIN PLACE
they'll say youse outa order
hang a sign on youse like yousa a pop machine

1. Mountain Life and Work, May/June 1980, page 14.

or somethin--

youse outa order Mister, outa order

Well if this be order
give me a wheelbarrun of chaos
and a pop bottle full of shook up rattlesnakes

Green: Did you ever show that poem to him?

Baber: Never saw him again. what's interesting is that just now, in the last six months, there has been a call to reevaluate the whole black lung scenario and how they're giving out the benefits. It's ten years later. There have been thousands and thousands of miners and their widows who have gone without anything. These are the people who have built the country, literally gone down in the holes to get the coal to make the steel that built Chicago and New York. We've treated them like nothing.

Green: How do people around here and in particular the people whose building you are in, Ashland Oil, feel about these really strong political urges that you have, which are just clear sight to me. I don't know what Ashland Oil's political stance is in the region but it seems to me that as a large conglomerate force, it is one of the forces which helps silence voices like you. How does that go together?

Baber: It doesn't. It's an incredible contradiction in my life and Ashland Oil has no conception whatsoever of me as a political artist or of political art. Period. They just simply don't know, and it would be a problem for me if they did. Now, they probably wouldn't care much, sort of what we were saying earlier, I mean if I want to get out there and read some anti-strip mining poem, if I don't want to go out of my way and say--ya and Ashland is with Arch Mineral who is one of the biggest strippers in eastern Kentucky.

Green: Otherwise they would just ignore you unless you bopped them right on the head.

Baber: You would literally be going up to John Hall and saying you're raping Mother Earth. They just simply don't know. Our organization gets about a third of our money from Ashland Oil and I'm happy to take it and we'll use it to do good things in the community. For whatever reasons they do give their money some of is doing good things in the educational realm. Now you'd have to ask them what their motivations are. They are not the worse organization to come down the valley, but they are polluting the valley, no doubt along with a lot of other people.

I have mixed feelings about what is going on. It's an irony of my life that I would be here and working in part for Ashland Oil. That irony's not lost on me by any means. On the other hand, Ashland Oil has been a big funder of the Jesse Stuart Foundation. They have tried to move the art scene forward in the tri-state even if only in the safe and traditional venues. Jesse Stuart was real conservative himself, a champion of traditional American values, he owned stock in Ashland Oil. But the company was founded on a lot of educational tenets, so I don't know, at this point in my life I don't really want to think about it because I've got three kids to support, I got bounced out of my last job because of a censorship battle. I basically scram-

bled to this job at the River Cities Art Council. I'm glad Ashland didn't do their homework: had they done their homework and really checked me out they wouldn't have allowed me to be hired.

On the other hand, not only have they treated the organization that I work for well, they've treated me damn well. They really have. And it would be hard for me to say anything negative about Ashland Oil on a personal level, right now. I will say that I hope they do well by the environment, I think they should clean up their refinery to the greatest possible extent they can. But when somebody has been really good to you, I mean just between you, me and the fence pole, well I've been treated better here than I was at Appalshop that champion of Appalachian culture.

I can't sort it out either. It's frustrating for me. It's confused me. Like one of the guys I work with real well at Ashland Oil is a guy named Frank Justice, who is a good old West Virginia boy--and I kind of like Frank. He is a great story teller. First time I met him he spent two hours telling me about his West Virginia family, and it was great shit. I just like the dude: I mean, he'll stick up for the company and he's a great person but my idea of what the corporation was and I don't think it's being tempered by my age as much as it's being softened by meeting the people who are working for that company--who are just people like us. And it makes me realize how tied together we all are in sort of a funny way and I'll tell you what I mean.

There has been a big law suit across the river with a bunch of people suing the Ashland refinery for pollution. The refinery is polluting the air, along with many others in the valley, Armco is probably polluting the air the most. And they're not being sued but Ashland is. It's a sort of double standard we all have, we don't want a land fill in our backyard, but we'll put our garbage cans out every Monday. We don't want a refinery across the river but we'll drive down to Super America and tank up. I have a problem with this, Lawrence Ferlinghetti once wrote a long poem about traveling in the United States by train the second to the last line of which is "who stole America?" and the last line is "Myself I saw reflected in the train window". And I see that about myself now. I have railed against strip-mining and I abhor it and I fear for the mountains, but I'm also a consumer; I consume electricity fueled by strip mined coal. It's a fact I can't deny it. So I don't know how a person reconciles those things in life. Maybe I didn't want to think about them ten years ago, maybe I did, maybe I was just too pissed off to, maybe I was just too self righteous, maybe it was a function of age. I don't know.

Green: It seems all that you can do is take the position that you are given and use it to be best cause and terms you can possibly give it to, which obviously it seems like you are doing.

Baber: I can say this, even in my current position, I would not be hesitant to read my work, nor would I be hesitant to facilitate and help other political artists to make their statements, even if I thought it would cost me my job.

I got into a fight over a play I wrote down at UK; this Kraze Kwilt play that got me fired, that got censored. And I lost my job, that's what brought me here.

Green: At UK? Now, that's not surprising that that happened at UK because UK is a pretty staunch. . .I won't use any more descriptive terms, but you know what I'm talking about. What happened exactly?

Baber: I was teaching theater and they wanted me to do some productions I said

OK but the agreement was that I would write an original play called Krazee Kwilt. And it was a modern Appalachian play, had a couple of 'damns' in it, had the word nigger in it.

I didn't know Gurney had a novel in progress by that title when I wrote Krazee Kwilt and I sort of feel bad that we ended up with the same term. And frankly, I would change the name of my play if I could but I can't because it really is a crazy quilt and it's all wrapped around a poem called "Krazee Kwilt" which starts and ends the play. If I change the title I haven't got a play. But Gurney was cool about it, we took it up, we've been old buddies for a long time and he is smooth and he said no problem.

That's what I love about Gurney. Gurney, Jim Wayne Miller, those two men have set the tone for the whole Southern Appalachian Writers' Movement. The tone they have set is one of love and support, and that probably more than any single other thing that happened is what has moved the region forward. There is a feeling there that we are all off the beaten path--together in this Appalachian realm. We are part of the disenfranchised. It's caused incredible problems in terms of success, publication, recognition; but I'll tell one thing it has done--it's kept the poems just as clean and as pretty as any that you'll find in the country. You can put them up there with the best of the Hispanic stuff, the Black stuff, the Prison stuff, the Women's stuff, the Gay stuff. It's fueled by this feeling of being outside the system. It's not university writing. It's not apolitical, it's not chrome-poems. It's got heart. It may take a long long time for Appalachian poetry to get recognized but I think its day will come. Future literary historians, it might take 50 years, will examine the meaning of Appalachian poetry and writing in the context of American literature of that time. I think that will happen. There will be lessons to be gathered from it. What was going on in Appalachia? How did the country exploit the region? What was it about the people? I hope that happens.

Green: I hope that happens too, but I doubt it. Just looking back at the other poetry movements, who do we remember who was writing in the early 1900s? Pound. . . Eliot, it's a joke. Although they leveled tremendous influence, was it the life of the country?

Baber: But I see something a little different here. Just as Langston Hughes is probably read just as much today as he ever was in the Black community. See? I think these voices that have spoke for indigenous movements. Native American, Hispanic, Chicano, Gay, Women, these are the pioneers. And their voices will resonate. I hope. Maybe I'm pipe dreaming, maybe I'm being a poetic fool; but even if they don't resonate, even if they only resonate through the region even in their time. . .

Green: That's what they were meant to do!

Baber: And I think a lot of that has happened, and I think that is a good thing. You don't find many Appalachian people today who are that bummed out over the stereotype. Let me tell you a story that I like: when I was getting ready to do Krazee Kwilt we had some discussions about the play--by the way Jim was going to play the part of the poet in it before it got censored and I was heart broken that he didn't get to do it because he would have done a fantastic job as the main character-- but I was talking to one of the ladies who was in the play and we talking about stereotyping, the whole play is really about what it feels like to live in the mountains, it's sort of a love/hate piece in many ways. Anyway, she said, I don't really care what those people think

about us, it just doesn't matter, we know what we are. And that is how much things have moved forward.

See, for a while there everybody was measuring themselves by other's view of them. I think, by and large, we've passed that. We're no longer buying into that value system. We're not measuring ourselves by the eyes of the oppressor, we're still oppressed, we've still got problems, but we're not saying it's our fault. We're not victimizing ourselves any more. I don't think. And if I as an Appalachian poet or the Appalachian poetry movement garners national recognition that's gravy; but if some of us have been able to have been in the chorus of voices in the region we have helped and been part of a significant social change. And I think writing has been a part of it. I think we accomplished something.

If Bob Snyder was sitting here he'd probably say I was full of shit, that the writing hasn't changed a damn thing, basically. That no one could give a shit. And how many people have read the stuff? Mucked had a thousand copies, Strokes had a thousand. Spitting in the wind if you're calling the Appalachian region 15 million people, even the Southern Appalachian region.

Green: If the people who read them are the people who create the images of the culture, are the people who take thoughts of themselves and speak them out to other people, then you're talking about hundreds of thousands of people.

Baber: Well, look at Appaishop. Appaishop grew out of the same concerns: they've printed 60 record albums, 30 or 40 television shows, 60 films, Roadside Theater had made 5 plays. One of the early venues was Mountain Review: that was an important thing, sort of the Now and Then of that time.

I think things have changed, and what was so frustrating to me about Krazee Kwillt was that I got caught by an administrator who did not want to recognize that not only has the culture changed but that the people in the culture wouldn't have had any problem with that play, not any problem whatsoever. He had a problem with it because he thought they would. And he was unwilling to trust them.

Green: When was this?

Baber: About a year ago. We had a wonderful precedent in the Kentucky Papers: it broke 10 days behind Maplethorpe.

Green: It just amazes me that all this happened right underneath my nose and I didn't catch any wind of it.

Baber: It all happened down there in south-eastern Cumberland, that's why. It hit the Lexington and Louisville papers, and I had the papers take up for me pretty nicely: I won the battle but lost the war. So I'm still looking for a home for that play.

Green: We are now at 1980, the next step we need to go through is the Appalachian Poetry Project with George Ella Lyon and Gurney. You were field man, I understand, Action Marshal. I'm not exactly sure, so here's your chance to air your version of the story.

Baber: I remember on the letterhead we came up with these things, Gurney was the Director, George Ella was Executive Director and I was the Executive Coordinator. Gurney was throwing those names about, it really was funny. He wanted everyone to sound good, and I guess that we did sound pretty good.

That was a great project. I got to tell one funny story about it though.

When Gurney first called me up he said we got this grant from the Witter Bynner Poetry Foundation. I travelled all over the mountains, basically hooking into the old Southern Appalachian Writers' Network; otherwise, we would have never been able to do that piece of work because we did do workshops in six states. Huge piece of work, 11 or 12 of them were old SAWC hands so we tapped right back into those who were still around and doing it. They were happy to convene a workshop, they had their networks. We just fed this anthology, it was great.

But about halfway through we realized that everybody who was out in the field thought this: nobody knew who the Witter Bynner was at this stage, neither did I at this point, but he was a famous poetry translator who eventually landed in Santa Fe and had some money and left this foundation to give some money to poets. Gurney knew I guess. But anyhow, everyone thought it was the widow (the Witter) like w-i-d-d-e-r. The Witter Bynner is giving us this money. We'd think, o, the old Witter with pictures of this old lady up the holler who had this money and gave it to the poets. It was really cute in a way. I love that story--the Witter Bynner. I don't think anyone has ever heard that one in public but someone ought to tell it because it is funny.

So we did all the workshops. George Ella was new on the scene at that time, to me. Wonderful writer, great stuff, but she had come back from Indiana from doing her graduate work and was an Appalachian writer. But she stumbled on to the scene in 1980 about like I had in '74. O Wow, here's an Appalachian writing scene. We got along fine, I like them both, both sweet, loving, compassionate people--great folks to work with. We did the project, did all the workshops, gathered a phenomenal amount of poems together. A stack, if you'd put it next to you would come up to your waist in poems. There must of have been six hundred people who submitted to the anthology.

Then George Ella and I basically edited it. It was a hard exhausting, incredible piece of work to distill all that stuff down. What we ended up with was probably the most inclusive grass roots anthology that ever was done and probably will be for a long time to come because it's hard to envision such a structure ever again coming into place, such an opportunity as that grant money. And also it was a function of the times. even into the early 80's there was still a little bit of that heat--the last throes and dissipation of it you could say. That's sort of "let's include everybody" type feeling.

We did the book and edited it down, I think we ended up with about 120 different writers from six different states, many of them from Kentucky and West Virginia, probably about two thirds. The rest of them came from North Carolina, Tennessee, Ohio, we might have had one or two from north Georgia. And then the sad tale that happened was that we started looking to publish the work. The Appalachian Consortium should have been a natural but they didn't take us up; the University of Kentucky, they were naturals too, they should have printed this book and it is forever for their shame that they have not done it--you know what they told us? We do not publish poetry. Period. Now imagine a university making a statement like that, that is an intellectual absurdity to me and it confounded all of us, gave us fits. And had they printed the books they would have had wonderful feathers in their caps and they would have made money, because there has been no contemporary anthology, at least of that flavor and stripe and inclusive nature. It was all safe stuff, good stuff, there was some political stuff but no curse words. It was the kind of book that could have gone in every college and university and even high school in the region. Would have sold like hotcakes.

Well, we couldn't find anyone in the region and we never had much in connections outside of the region. One thing that happened is that Orchard

Books has happened now for George Ella, Jim Wayne Miller, Joe Carson, and Anne Shelby and others. Finally someone else outside the system has gotten on to the Appalachian scene and league. So then we went looking in other places and ended up with Bill Ferris at the Institute for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Bill told us we will print your book by such and such a date. And if we get grant money we will print it sooner. So we celebrated and told everybody and got ready, and two years later it was well we haven't gotten any grant money and doesn't look to good and bla bla bla. That was it. The man screwed us. Bill Ferris screwed us and single handedly killed that book because we lost our momentum, we lost our drive.

So then it floundered around for another two or three years. I went to Santa Fe, New Mexico and did some stuff out there, stuff in prisons, wrote my novel Have a Nice Day based on my being shot in California. Then I came back and picked it up. I couldn't get much done for it out west and both Gurney and George Ella lost heart to, we all sort of had. When I came back I tried to pick it up and we did eventually land it in an outfit out in Charleston called Jallamap. I had an old buddy who was working at that time, Harry Lynch. And we got all ready to go to press, it was type set, we had a celebration party for it in Berea: its second celebration party. Harry then got fired.

The guy, David Bice, who ran it called me into his office one day and said we're going to put a binding on it, like one of those plastic bindings that you put on cookbooks and after seven or eight years of waiting I said, listen why can't our book have a regular binding like everyone else's? I mean we couldn't go back to all those poets. From an infrastructure point of view it was a complete disaster for George Ella and me, we had to keep going back to a hundred and twenty writers--it's out, it's not out. We really looked like royal assholes. So that's a really sad story. So I withdrew the book, never got the type set version of it back, don't even know where it is in the universe because Jellomap went belly up and all the stuff got held up in bankruptcy. There is a type set version of the book somewhere in Charleston, West Virginia that is ready to go to press.

Now, the book, of course, is eleven years old. It has never come out, it is an artifact. Most of the poets in it would shrug their shoulders about what they wrote eleven years ago as I would. I don't know if the book will ever come out.

Green: It's being circulated in manuscript form. I've seen several copies of it being passed from hand to hand.

Baber: George Ella and I have wept and gnashed teeth over this book, we've had absolute fits. George Ella has moved on but I have to say I never want to see the damn thing again; on the other hand, I can't really let go of it either. I just feel it is a book that should have happened. And it's been like a still birth, a baby we've lost. And not even been able to bury, and unfortunately, other than Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, that has been a metaphor for the lack of opportunity in the region. There was no literary center, none of the universities would take it on. The state's arts councils wouldn't take it on. When I approached West Virginia, who had 35 writers in it, West Virginia said we won't print it because it's got people who aren't west Virginian in it. Those kinds of things over and over. Blocked, boarded, stepped on for bad, stupid reasons. And now it's just so damned dated; George Ella's moved on to other things, I still stir around with doing something with it but hell, you'd have to go back to all the writers, get their permission. We did it once six years later, it was a nightmare, it took us months, and we never

did find everybody. We tried to redo their bios so we could say where they were, everybody wanted to change their poems, saying I don't want that in there it's old and musty. We said we can't do that, they got pissed off. Maybe someday someone could do it as an indication of where an interesting group of writers is at.

There is still a fair amount of political content in that book, some of it is just culture assertive. Before when we were talking about political assertion, one clear piece of it is just simply saying that--hey we are good people. It was a celebration of Grandpas and Grandmas and children. That needed to happen too because that is political just as you say. So to be honest with you I haven't read the book for four or five years. We put so much work into it it can't be that bad of a book.

Once Gurney showed up with it at a party all bundled up; I wasn't at that party. My daughter had just been born. It was 1981 in Lexington, we had just finished editing, at a party wrapped up in brown paper. He passed it around and it was really a thing, you know? It was this baby and nobody opened it up. We even had a big poster put out announcing it's publication. I don't know where those are now. We were literally six weeks away from doing it. Came so close.

Green: What were you doing from '83 to '87? It seems to me that every one in SAWC and Soup Bean goes and hibernates during those years. It really seems for this group of people that the Reagan plague had struck. There has to be some kind of correlation. Gurney denies a correlation but maybe.

Baber: In 1983 I was in Charleston. I guess the thing with Jallemap happened in 1985, so maybe part of what you are seeing may not be a lack of activity; there was a publication absence, but I don't think that is a reflection of Reagan. Activity was happening. Now the Co-op itself may have had a pretty weak period in there. The Co-op has had this problem, the organization is coming up on its sixteen or seventeenth year and it became more of a party for old timers than a bunch of unknowns coming together¹. The networks got established, people made friends and they didn't get to see them very often or at all. It was only at Co-op meetings, so people came together and read a poem or two, but mostly it was hey let's go drink a beer, hey how you doing.

Others may disagree with me, but in my mind what happened was those few people that did come to us during that period--it wasn't as if nobody wanted not to include them it was just that they were at a party that they didn't know anybody at. That's a tough place to be in.

I am trying to work with Mike Henson out of Cincinnati and this year we're trying to really stir things back up again. It is time to bring in the next generations. Explode things again, blow them open. It would be great to have some young writers come in and give us a shock--come on you old guys what is this shit, come on. It's like the old Duke Ellington thing Bob Snyder used to talk about where someone says let's do something totally advance guard and he says, no lets do something more modern. So that's what we'd like to do now.

There was a period in there, I'm not sure if it's a function of the Reagan years as much as it was a function of the age of the organization and the energy dissipated a little bit. A lot of those folks who had that great need in the beginning to get together and network because they felt isolated have

1. Recurring process also seen in CUSHLP, CUMI, and others.

matured and found themselves as writers whether they've found bigger success like Jim Wayne, George Ella and others, or maybe other writers like me who did not get success but knew what they were saying. I love getting together with my friends and buddies and hanging out but I don't really have a great burning artistic need to do that right now. I enjoy doing it, but I can continue to write without that. In the beginning we all had that, we felt like we were alone in the universe and asked, is this worth doing, is this worth reading, does it have value? It was a very young insecure scene. And in the middle of the eighties it wasn't there were people who were pretty confident about what they were saying and perfectly willing to go right on and say it whether they got together with other folks or not. The Co-op's initial function had changed.

Now, it seems like we're beginning to focus back in, like last year's theme was on censorship, this year we're cooking up some neat ideas, like Hillbilly Grotesque, something I want to take on. It's related to stuff that's come out. I'm real interested in Breeze Pancake, a fiction writer; and there is another guy with a novel out, I just did a workshop with him in Lewisburg, it's called Town Smokes by Pinkly Benidict. And I'm not too enamored with either one of these works. They both got wide recognition and play nationally; they're very well written. Pancake's book--gosh, its vision of Appalachia is just dismal. Its rain and rape and Jesus man. There ain't a reunion, there's no food in it, there's no love, it's sexist. And that's an issue I'd like us to look at: to what extent do we tell the truth about our culture and what is the truth? How much do we talk about what is real and what is not real, what are our values, and to what extent are people profiting from buying into the old hillbilly mentality but doing it in a real slick modern way that is palatable to that same public that bought John Fox's books years ago.

These books are the trial of the lonesome pines of our generation. We have a counter-balance to them with Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney, and Joe Carson so that is positive. It's not like it was in the old days where it was the only thing getting through. But the gap between those works is very interesting.

Other issues like that are interesting to explore, like censorship in Appalachia. Pat Arnow¹ had an issue she wanted to do on the gay in Appalachia and it got blocked. Now that's good stuff, someone needs to look at that. What does it mean to be gay in Appalachia? That's real stuff.

The other thing is that we need to recruit and pull in this younger generation. To find the black Appalachians, the oriental Appalachians, we need to find all those people and get them to come on in and we need to learn from them just as much as they're going to learn from us. We need to keep our ears close to the ground and not become complacent and back slapping. If the Co-op is going to survive, we need to do that; otherwise, we may as well call it a writers' reunion and come together and drink beer. I have no problem with that--I think that would be ok too--but if the coop's going to be a viable and vital organization we're going to have to grow and change.

Green: It seems you all have inheritance to pass on too; to raise a new crop of writers' and share with them some wisdom and expertise that wasn't there for you necessarily except through writers like Don West.

1. The editor of Now and Then, East Tenn. State University, TN

Baber: It cuts just as much the other way. It's for us to pick up on them and hear about how MTV has impacted Appalachia and talk about the malis of Appalachia and to realize that things have changed significantly. We need to hear about that, we need not to get stuck ourselves in our vision of Appalachia twenty years ago. That's what I hope for anyway, I don't want to get old, I don't want to write old.

Green: I hope to god that you don't have to go to the mall to stay young! I pray that's not true; otherwise let me age in an artificial manner.

When did the first Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel come out? The second is 1987.

Baber: I came back in 83. I saw Jim in New Mexico, he came and saw me too. So we did mix and I even came back to a SAWC meeting which got me the prize for coming the longest distance. I missed SAWC because when I got to Santa Fe there was a South Western writing scene and it was a lock. You couldn't get in, it was a closed system. That was frustrating for me, I was a little bit of a fish out of water too.

Jim and I got back together and decided to do another book. I fed stuff to Jim. We got our names out there as editors one way or another and this is stuff that came to me from Strokes, Mucked. Stuff I had saved and I sent it on to Jim. And then he got it to Jenny, Jenny Collins really did edit Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel. That's what my role was, Jim gathered poems, I sent him poems and he gave them to Jenny. She had a pretty significant role in this. I can't remember how Boyd Carr's art got in there. I sent it on or put him up to it one way or the other. Jim would have asked for Dick Hague's stuff; "Buzz Saws in the Rain", by Jim Webb, I love that piece.

Green: So how has the tone of the magazines been guided by Co-op connections? What kind of group of writers are represented?

Baber: This issue reflects the will to do it. It's got Jenny's feel and flavor in it. It's got somewhat softer and feminine feel to it, of course the first one, mine "The Truth Will Make You Whole" doesn't. Some of the others in there are relatively soft. Now this one, which one is this?

Green: That's number two.

Baber: Number two had Jenny's name on it, it doesn't have my name on it does it? Let me see this one (volume 2). If I remember rightly...Well, I don't specifically remember how much my involvement is in this. Basically, it fell to me to gather and hold stuff and make sure it didn't get lost to some extent or the other. My role, as much as anybody's, was just to keep the stuff in one folder.

The last Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel to come out, the grey one, was probably one of the most nice, but there are boxes of them languishing at Appalshop and at Jim's house where he literally had not responded to orders. That's really bad, it's sad because Jim got so involved with the Radio Station and we spent the most money and this is the prettiest book that we ever did. I really love it, I love to hold it. And we just simply didn't get it out the way we should have.

I feel frustration about Jim, because Jim has written some of the best Appalachian stuff that has ever been done: "Get in Jesus" comes to mind. Jim is an incredibly good poet who rarely writes. And has written even less since

he has become involved with WMMT. I would say this even if he was sitting here, I've talked to him about it many times, saying Jim, you know the radio station is great but what about your life's blood as a writer, your life's blood is seeping away and your not doing anything. And there was a point in Jim's life where his drive to write is much greater than it is now. And I feel a loss for Jim and for the region.

Organizationally, whenever Jim and my relationship was crossed, Mucked, Strokes which he helped with, all the Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel Jim had gotten important financial help from his brother which was a critical piece of the puzzle, he probably told you that. The push for organization has fallen a little bit more to me, and I just pick up the slack when I could, is probably a better way to put that. The whole editing process of people submitting is pretty haphazard and slipshod anyway.

One of these books, and it's not the one my name is on, I did a lot of editing in. What I think happened there is that I must have culled a huge pile of stuff down to a good pile and that got passed to Jenny and she did the final edit. I couldn't swear to that.

Green: That's as good a version as I've heard yet. And that's all that we're working on. Let's get theoretical: I've got lots of ideas about magazines and writer communities and one of these ideas is that a work along with its companion pieces, along with its brothers and sisters so to speak, grows up amongst those brothers and sisters. And standing alone is not an accurate measure of the piece of work as it is with its peers, as it is amongst the pieces that talk to itself, bring it to hold it responsible for itself and allow a dialogue to go between the pieces. Does that make sense to you-- that that is the heart of a magazine and a group of writers producing a piece like this?

Baber: That makes perfect sense. Actually if you look at the continuum, you look at New Ground as being the first salvo, a little rough, a little naive but very open. Then you look at the political happening that occurred which was taking the best of the political ideas from New Ground in a scene that had occurred, the flood in the heart of the Appalachian coal fields and doing Mucked. Then you come back later and now let's do something different, let's do a rowdy sexual thing. There are some poems in Strokes, like Jim Wayne Miller's "Rationale for Rubbers" which the women hated, sleazy and awful. I wrote Jim and said, send me something no one would print. He did and I printed it. Then the Anthology was really cooking along, it would have been the most solid and commercial, which is an interesting mix. That was the most viable product that was ever produced really. But it never came out, you could say it was the child that never got born. But if you are thinking in terms of how we were operating, it was there, we thought it was going to come to fruition for three years before we found out it wouldn't. Then Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel starts stirring.

Pine Mountain is a function of a need to do another book and also Jim had done Reck, which I'm sure he talked to you about. Jim always liked to do books. What we are talking about doing now, and I really haven't met with Jim and I need to, is doing the next Pine Mountain from censored work. We were going to do excerpts from my play, we were going to get the gay stuff from Pat, we were going to get the story that the Humanity's Council Foundation killed of George Ella Lyon's and throw this stuff out to every body and say give us the work that you yourself are not sure of. Not "Rationale for Rubbers" but work that you yourself are not really sure if this is what you want to say or if this is the right thing to say.

Green: Something you are on the edge of.

Baber: Something you feel is on the edge and let's put that in the book and see what that means. So every book has had its own motif, its own place. I like the siblings thing that you got, I think that's the best metaphor--I couldn't come up with one better than that, I couldn't come close. The idea that the children are shaped by their position in the family.

What the future will hold. I still think Gurney's on the cutting edge of it. His new Crazy Quilt, his piece in this Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel¹. Well, what can you say about that piece? That piece is modern Appalachia, that's where we're going, where we are, and where we've been for the last ten years. It's only now that we are getting around to saying it. But even now when we say it we are being blocked, bottlenecked, thwarted by people who define Appalachia in other ways. People that are in power. But that is what it is, Appalachian's have been to town, most of us have been town now. We've been to California, we've been to New York. There are a number of people around like Gurney--he's a Kentuckian, an Appalachian but he's also part Californian, part new world, new age. I'm a New York boy who's had some roots in Appalachia, lived in California, Colorado, New Mexico, Kentucky and West Virginia. That tends to be the rule now more than anything else. And even those who were born and bred in the holler and come up the tough way have been to UK hung out for ten years, worked at IBM.

That to me is the true spot of where we are at right now. That's what excites me. That's what excited me about Krazee Kwilt, writing a piece that was very modern. And that's what I want to do. We had a period where we had to do the hound dog thing, we needed the grandma in the rocking chair, we needed the black culture Appalachia version which is the equivalent of Appalachia is beautiful. You needed to do that, we had to do that, and that happened. And we may have went a little over board with it and the flip side is this hillbilly grotesque stuff which is mining the stereotype in a new way. That is very disturbing to me, it has a very slick modern look to it, the same veritulant stereotyping, but it's done in such a way that it is very palatable to the larger culture. It has some truth, I'm not saying it doesn't, but they're imbalanced pieces and that disturbs me. And Steve Phesemyer, the film person here at the West Virginian Library Commission has always said as a critique of Appalshop, "When are they going to do something on the Appalachian middle class?"

Good point, and that is virtually uncharted territory for most of us. There have been some novelists that have just gotten on to it.

Green: And what is the Appalachian middle class? It is the middle class of America.

Baber: It is, but it has some Appalachian flavor to it. For me, that's been a tough question to answer; I've always said that gee I'm more interested in men that have black lung and end up in a black lung coal meeting and say something that stuns you. It is hard to get worked up about middle class culture.

Green: I deeply identify with this cultural crisis because it is a crisis that

¹ Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel, Volume 2, 'Star Gate'.

I have. The middle class has no voice, the complete silence, the complete unknowledge of what being middle class means. And that is the plight of the middle class itself.

Baber: I was born into Levittown which has real significant meaning for me as an Appalachian writer because it was the great grand-daddy of subdivisions. It was middle class, lower middle class, everybody was bailing out of New York City and into potato fields that were turning into houses. The first malls were in Nassau county, the county I was raised in is nothing but malls and houses and has been for twenty years. Fifty years ago they were potato fields, and that pattern has been mimiced throughout the nation now. I was lucky, I got to experience Appalachian culture and got to know that and got to feel that before I knew that I was a totally rootless person. When I came to that realization in my life, it came to me around the age of sixteen or seventeen, my parents were divorced, the hippie thing was happening big time in New York, the Vietnam culture was going on. I looked around at Long Island and said I hate this. This is awful. And at that point I came to West Virginia.

I needed that in my life. I was a very lucky person I own my grandparents' home place in West Virginia. I been in it my whole life, I can go in that house and remember looking up the stair case when I was two years old and how high it was. I can remember stepping out and looking at the ridges, those mountains which were first in my mind. Just home plate to me, I don't know what would have happened to me if I hadn't had it because I feel and continue to feel at times completely alienated from American life: truly disturbed by my participation in this culture. And all I really want to do is go back up on that mountain and live. I could very easily check out and it is a function of being very weary of being a consumer.

So part of the reason that I am an Appalachian writer, and I don't know what Appalachia if they ever want to deal with me as a writer will say or do with me. Gurney, George Ella, Joe Carson, Anne Shelby and others have moved on fine with Orchard books and I too have sent stuff to Jackson. He does not like my stuff. I To a certain extent I think I've been penalized for not being a native Appalachian. I'm not sure how that's gone: it hasn't mattered to people like Jim Webb or others but many people look at my work, and I hope the work succeeds or fails by itself as to whether the flavor of Appalachia is there or not, I have tried. I am so much like my daddy, I know I wasn't born and raised in the culture and I'm not going to try and pass myself off as a native but I've been influenced and reached for my Baber roots. I've immersed myself in that world.