

Appalachian history gives new perspective of how workers view jobs

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A preacher addresses a group of men in a town church in eastern Kentucky, but this gathering is not to hear a sermon. Instead, it is a meeting of a coal miners' union. By studying coal miners and farmers during the early 20th century, a University of Missouri researcher has discovered that religion greatly influenced coal miners' and farmers' lives. The miners used religion to negotiate their surroundings, and many of the resulting traditions exist today.

Richard Callahan, assistant professor of religious studies in the MU College of Arts and Science, studied the transition that Appalachian families made from subsistence farming to industrial coal mining in the early 1900s and discovered the key role religion played in their development as a coal mining society. Many of the practices and attitudes of early miners persist today. For example, during the 2006 Sago Mine disaster, the families gathered in churches, not only to pray, but to determine a plan of action. Callahan's research provides a new historical context for modern habits.

"You can see how religion is so deeply intertwined with life," Callahan said. "You can't pull it out from the everyday lives of people. It's a case study of how work also has been about religion. This is a recovery of a history that is untold."

In his research, Callahan focused on how coal miners used religion to interpret their circumstances, particularly the unsafe work place. For instance, when coal companies underpaid miners or if a man was injured

in the mines, the miners were put in a difficult moral position. They were working hard to provide for their families, but the work conditions hindered their ability succeed in that goal. In some cases, they argued that the company was forcing them to steal to fulfill the religious obligation of providing for their families, Callahan said.

"In that society and time period, preaching wasn't a paid job, so the preachers were also coal miners," Callahan said. "So, you have coal miners who are preachers looking at the union with the same ideas. In the unions, they are using stories from Exodus and talking about being led out of slavery as a way of showing what the union can do for them. Unfair labor practices were defined in religious terms."

Nearly a century later, that perspective still exists. Callahan said that many of the same philosophies and religious reasoning are still used when developing work policies that have survived nearly 100 years later.

Source: University of Missouri-Columbia

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