POVERTY U.S.A. ★ ★ ★

Appalachian

MILLIONS of people live below the poverty line in the United States. In an urban environment, the roots of their problem are easily disguised: not so, in the countryside.

Twenty years ago, when the Kennedy Administration launched its "War on Poverty", a report said of life in the Appalachian mountains:

"People draw their water from dirty creeks. Rain turns unpaved roads into muddy ruts. Youngsters can't go to school because they have no shoes. The poverty of the people stands in brutal contrast to the wealth of the land".

Now, the people of the hills have documented the source of their problem: the failure of the taxing authorities to capture the value of natural resources for the benefit of their communities.

TOP 10 land/mineral owners – Kentucky

Owner	Acres	Taxes	Taxes per acre
Pochahantas Ky Corp. (N&W RR)	142,566	$18,632	13¢
Ky River Coal	132,304	15,872	12¢
Kenland Co.	102,811	11,327	11¢
Falcon Coal	68,402	3,436	5¢
General Electric	60,000	1,500	2.5¢
Virginia Iron, Coal & Coke Co.	53,000	5,296	10¢
West Pocahontas Corp.	47,820	13,283	28¢
J. M. Huber Corp.	47,748	7,238	15¢
U.S. Steel Corp.	41,880	39,633	95¢
National Steel Co.	40,265	6,399	16¢

A GROUND breaking study of rural life in 80 counties and six states in the Appalachian mountains has revealed "why the land is so rich and the people so poor..."

The momentum for change began after a series of disastrous rains and floods. Half the population was driven from their homes in towns near the Tug River in West Virginia. Some suspected that strip mining had caused the unprecedented havoc.

After groups all over the region began to gather to study their problems a unique coalition of citizen groups formed The Appalchian Alliance. It studied land ownership as just one of the myriad of problems, before it became convinced that this was not one of the problems but the *central* problem.

"This insight led to the largest rural land study done in America", reported John Goventa and Myles Horton, leaders in the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee.

Gaventa, a MacArthur Fellow, an author and professor, led the research study. He says: "We soon became convinced that land was not one of the problems of Appalachia but the seminal problem from which all the region's problems flowed."

As a result, the citizens embarked on the largest land study ever undertaken in American history. Only the Ralph Nader study of land ownership in California could compare with it. But as a textbook in citizen-inspired land reform it was unparalleled.

By Robert Scrofani in San Francisco

The results of the report are not new or unexpected. But now our documentation of land ownership and taxation in county after county establishes the pervasive pattern of inequity.

A handful of absentee corporations control "enormous portions of the region's land and minerals and yet pay a pittance in local taxes."

The study revealed:

- In the 80 Appalachian counties sampled, the top 1% own 53% of the land;
- Of the 13 million acres of surface land sampled, 72% is absentee owned;
- Over 75% of the mineral owners pay less than 25 cents per acre in property taxes;
- 80% of the mineral rights are owned by absentees.

The survey was funded by a federally-sponsored Appalachian Regional Commission (a War on Poverty project which has spent more than $15 billion in Appalachia). It trained local citizens to do much of the initial research, thus maximising its impact at the grass-roots level.

The Appalachian Regional Commission with Governor Jay Rockefeller of Virginia as its chairman declined to publish the results. Instead it hired a blue ribbon committee to study the validity of the results. So the people published the results county by county. The report was validated by the chairman of the review panel, who said in a memorandum:

"(The report) shows in intimate vivid and continuing detail what the Appalachian ownership patterns are and what they are doing to Appalachia... it far surpasses the Agricultural Department 1978 study of National Landownership and the 1973 Nader Report on land ownership in California in its documentation of land ownership social consequences".

The conclusion "that mineral ownership is more concentrated and its taxation more inequitable than that of surface ownership is original and striking."

As a result of the county by county detail, people could see that land reform was the solution to many of their problems.

Recognising the willingness of people to deal with their problems,

**Who Owns Appalachia?* The Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, The University Press of Kentucky, 1983.