

Life in the leatherwoods (a book by john quincy wolf) book review sample

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Book Review: John Quincy Wolf, Life in the Leatherwoods

Life in the Leatherwoods by John Quincy Wolf (originally published in 1974) is a very rare memoir about the lives, society and culture of the 'plain folk' of the Upper South during the late-19th Century, specifically the white small farmers of the Ozark Mountains in northern Arkansas. There are very few primary sources about this subject, such as diaries, letters or newspapers, especially from rural areas in this period, compared to the middle and upper classes, persons prominent in political and economic life or large slaveholders like Mary Chestnut. Those few records that may once have existed have largely been lost to history, particularly from the rural South. Wolf certainly does not idealize the rather difficult and narrow existence he experienced as a child and young man, and points out how limited his social world truly was compared to modern times. Many people today may find it difficult to imagine a time when electricity, running water, air conditioning, central heating, telephones and computers did not exist, epidemic diseases were common, medicine usually consisted of home remedies, and work generally consisted of drudgery and hard physical labor just to obtain the basic necessities of life. This was the norm in the childhoods of the grandparents and great-grandparents of those who are alive today, and as Wolf points out, it gave him an appreciation of the simpler pleasures in life and a certain sense of awe about how quickly science and technology changed the face of the entire society during the 20th Century. His narrative is definitely a tale of rural worlds that were lost in the revolutions in transportation, communications and other technological developments over the last century.

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Wolf was born 1864, which meant that he was too young to remember the terrible suffering during the Civil War, which affected the Ozarks as much as most other areas of the rural South. Northern Arkansas was a region with few slaves and many small farmers who were favorable to the Union (or at least 'neutral) which was not unusual in the backwoods and mountain regions of the South at the time. For the same reason, as he recalls it, Reconstruction in 1865-77 had very little effect on this area compared to the Deep South or the areas with large plantations and black labor forces. All Reconstruction meant to the small farmers of the Ozarks was burying the dead, "clearing farms of briars, rebuilding the ruined fences, and making a garden" (Wolf 18). Most of these farmers raised corn and hogs rather than cash crops like wheat, tobacco and cotton, and like many rural people in the past they were self-sufficient in food but had very little cash-money. There were very few blacks at all in this part of Arkansas, which is still the case today, and as a youth the only time that Wolf recalled seeing any was among the crews on the steamboats of the Arkansas River (Wolf 148). This was why the Civil War and Reconstruction issues of slavery, equal citizenship and black voting rights simply seemed remote and irrelevant to the whites in this isolated region.

Wolf makes it clear just how little the small farmers of the Ozarks really were aware of events in the outside world at this time, given the very slow and limited means of travel, information and communication available to them. Mail arrived at the local post office once a week on Saturday, "provided that the River was not too high, or the mud not too deep, or the weather not too cold" (Wolf 22). Except for school books and the Bible, very little reading

matter was available and he did not even see a newspaper until he was fourteen years old—and he never forget that it was an old copy of the Boston Globe (Wolf 161). Occasionally a stranger might arrive to offer classes in singing lessons, which were always well-attended because of the sheer novelty and break in routine. Church services were major events, along with immersion baptisms in the river, and because of the relatively small population “ weddings were so few in the Leatherwoods that they were big doin’s” (Wolf 128).

In general, Wolf remembers the hill people and their culture with great fondness and respect, despite their very limited educations and the many difficulties of their lives. Few of them ever had white bread or flour biscuits to eat, and any unlucky change in the weather or seasons could make their survival precarious, but they were generous with what little they had and there was “ no stranger or visitor who dropped in at mealtime but was fed” (Wolf 36). These were very honest people who took personal honor and insults with deadly seriousness, and “ in the backwoods folks spoke their minds freely” (Wolf 98). It was not a highly stratified or hierarchical society, given the absence of large capitalists, merchants or landowners, but more democratic and egalitarian. They were a superstitious folk who were always fascinated with dreams, signs and prophecies, particularly about death, disease or bad weather (Wolf 94). Doctors’ visits were rare and expensive luxuries, nor was their much that medicine could do for their illnesses. They often relied on patent medicines or home cures, and “ in most cases of illness the housewives were the doctors” (Wolf 99).

In many areas on the country, well into the 20th Century, the type of life that

Wolf describes in his memoir was the rule rather than the exception. When asked how they managed to survive this way at a subsistence level and without any modern luxuries, conveniences or consumer goods, older people would simply that it was all they ever knew. Indeed, until fairly recent times, this was the only life most people in the world ever knew, and it is still the case in many places today. A man like Wolf experienced radical changes in the United States during single lifetime, moving literally from the horse and buggy era to witnessing astronauts walking on the moon. He could appreciate that because even as a boy he recalled looking at the stars and planets through a burnt glass and wondering about them, although never dreaming that within a few decades spacecraft would be developed to explore the entire solar system (Wolf 80). In retrospect, he found that his childhood and youth had been very narrow and limited compared to the opportunities and experiences available to young people in the 1960s and 1970s, when he was composing his memoirs, but he concluded that it had “ increased many times my appreciation of the world that has unfolded for me during the ensuing years” (Wolf 162). At the same time, growing up as the child of small farmer also ensured that he was always able to value the simple pleasures in life, such as flowers, trees, spring water and sweet air.

WORKS CITED

Wolf, John Quincy. *Life in the Leatherwoods*. University of Arkansas Press, 2000.