

Pack Horse Librarians

I mean no disrespect when I say, during the Great Depression Eastern Kentucky was a sundered area. Surrounded by mountains and waterways, no easy access in or out, nor any proper education, until the WPA employed our grandmothers to packsaddle literacy to the underserved.

This would be the only good thing coal would do for Kentucky, coal and the Presbyterians, donating books and endowment, twenty-eight dollars a month to any woman with a horse or mule, and the spunk to stand up for progress, brave the weather, backwaters and hollers, to deliver emancipation by means of bound dissertation.

You need to understand, this was Appalachia, just before the war to end all wars. Only women of disrepute were considered working women by the church. Christian women labored in the kitchen and fields, birthed, prayed, died in them, albeit many Christian women were taught to read, if for no other reason than the Lord's word could be used to hold her back.

But this was the New Deal and all bets were off. Imagine my grandmother, top of her head barely level with the saddle's front rigging dee, flaming red hair, a brand of sass all her own. Packing up at the Pine Mountain Settlement School, Harlan County, creek beds as roads, on foot, single file, across crag and clifftop,

sleeping in barns or lean-tos against the cold.
Deliberate as any lineman or mail carrier,
every treatise she carried, a nugget
of gold inside her saddlebags.