

Taking Up Serpents: Snake Handlers of Eastern Kentucky. By David L. Kimbrough. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. Pp. xvi, 232. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$34.95; paperbound, \$14.95.)

Snakes seldom fail to get one's attention. Snake handling, practiced by a small number of Appalachian Pentecostals since early in the century, has thus attracted much publicity though not much serious academic attention. Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain* (1995), for example, is a remarkably self-indulgent work that obtained a great deal of media attention for the author while failing to illuminate the religious dimensions of his subject very significantly.

David L. Kimbrough, an independent scholar with Appalachian roots and a doctorate in history from Indiana University, has done a much better job with snakes and their aficionados. Kimbrough makes the point initially that snake handling is a highly local practice, thus its study must be rooted in a very specific context. He therefore begins by gathering oral history as a participant-observer in a culture whose language he quite literally speaks. (The work contains many illustrations, including several of the author bedecked with serpents.) This initial description is readable and certainly gets the reader's attention.

From this contemporary beginning Kimbrough turns to the histories of George W. Hensley of Tennessee, the movement's probable founder, and of his disciple, Park Saylor. The often-married Hensley, a sometime moonshiner and chain-gang escapee, illustrates the picaresque character of snake-handling culture, in which the sacred and the sordid seem inseparable. (Kimbrough would have done well to cite Wayne Elzey's theoretical perspectives on the phenomenon.) The Saylor family history is traced back to the early nineteenth-century settlement of Appalachia by the Scots-Irish. Although his treatment is plausible, Kimbrough cuts back and forth between general treatments of the region and two cited family histories—of the "Saylors" and "Salyers"—without sufficient annotation to allow the reader to make firm judgments on the credibility of his sources.

Kimbrough's theoretical argument is stated briefly: snake handling is a symbolic acting out of the encounter between traditional, kinship-based Appalachian culture and the advent of destructive extractive industry from beyond the mountains late in the nineteenth century. The primordial serpent thus becomes associated with a much more recent and specific evil in the garden of Appalachia, an evil that introduced not simply poverty but powerlessness and familial dysfunction into the region. This argument is plausible but, again, not well enough developed. Much of the remainder of the book recounts clashes between snake handlers and the law and soon becomes repetitious.

Kimbrough seems happiest when most specific, especially when he is playing the role of interpreter of and advocate for mountain people now frequently in diaspora in the industrial cities of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. His book might have been hewn more carefully in places, but it is one of the best introductions to this perennially fascinating phenomenon.

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Nebraska: An Illustrated History. By Frederick C. Luebke. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Pp. xxiv, 405. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Most oversize picture histories stir little interest, ending their useful lives on dental office coffee tables and bookstore remainder tables. This book is a welcome exception to the norm, and for all the right reasons. It integrates well-chosen illustrations with intelligent text to tell an important story. Its author and editor has a command of the subject that reveals itself on every page. Both casual browsers and serious students of Nebraska history will appreciate it.

The book is part of a "Great Plains Photography" series offered by the publisher. Its more than four hundred pages are sturdily bound and handsomely designed, and the layout refrains from crowding too many illustrations on a single page. High-quality paper ensures that the photographic reproductions have sharp lines and good contrasts.

Frederick C. Luebke selected illustrations and wrote text for fifty-eight brief topical chapters grouped in five chronological sections. Each section has a brief narrative introduction, and each chapter has a 500- to 800-word essay linking that topic's illustrations. Chapter topics range from events (such as World War II), to places (the siting of the state capital), to distinct groups (Native Americans), to social history (farm life), and to important personalities (George W. Norris). For example, a chapter on nineteenth-century housing illustrates an early log cabin, various styles of "soddies" (sod houses), the "harvesting" of sod for home construction, and a later plains frame house.

The author taught history for many years at the University of Nebraska and is a recognized authority on the state, the Great Plains, and immigration history. For the book's principal themes and ideas Luebke acknowledged drawing heavily upon his stimulating earlier essay in *Heartland* (1988), a collection of middle western state histories. His introduction and the various short essays emphasize the key role of water and land transportation routes in the state's development, its ethnic variety, a special relationship between the people and their land, distinctive economic patterns, and an independent streak in its politics.