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Recommended Citation

"The Hillbilly in the American Imagination," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* (Jan./Feb., 2005): 4-7.

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THE HILLBILLY IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Anthony Harkins

Musicians today like Dwight Yoakam and Marty Stuart call their brand of “roots” country “hillbilly.” *Snuffy Smith* remains a popular comic strip seventy years after its creation. Nearly everyone can immediately identify the first few notes of the banjo song from the 1972 film *Deliverance*. And the Fox television show *The Simple Life* has garnered a huge audience partly by playing off of stereotypes about plain folk in the Arkansas hills. The hillbilly has been one of the most pervasive and enduring icons of American popular culture.

The hillbilly has served such a role because this image and identity is a fundamentally ambiguous one that includes both positive and negative features of the American past and present. Central to this ambiguity is its unique racial and cultural status. As a depiction of what I call a “white other”—impoverished, isolated, and primitive Americans who nevertheless possess a supposedly

pure Anglo-Saxon Protestant heritage—“hillbilly” signifies both rugged individualism and stubborn backwardness; strong family and kin networks but also inbreeding and bloody feuds; a closeness to nature and the land but also the potential for wild savagery; a clear sense of self and place but, at the same time, crippling geographic and cultural isolation.

The essential duality of the hillbilly persona is clear from the word’s first use in print in *The (New York) Journal* of April 23, 1900. “A Hill-Billie,” author Julian Hawthorne explained to his northern urban readers, “is a free and untrammelled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.” Clearly derogatory and accentuating poverty and improper social behavior, Hawthorne’s hillbilly also possesses the more admirable attributes of freedom and independence. This

definition matched the article’s focus on the political importance and autonomy of mountain folk who happily accepted free liquor and campaign payouts from one candidate only to vote for his rival.

Although this was the first appearance of the word in print, it was hardly the origin of the image and persona. The image stemmed from separate but overlapping 18th- and 19th-century representations of the New England rustic yokel “Brother Jonathan,” the poor white of the southern backcountry, and the mythic frontiersman of Appalachia and Arkansas. In the antebellum years, the hillbilly image was further solidified in the writings of “local color” authors who published travelogues in middle-class popular magazines such as *McClure’s* and *Harper’s* and, especially, in the newspaper accounts about the spate of interfamilial feuds in the southern Appalachian mountains. These papers as well as local elites in southern mountain towns

saw the hill folk as “white savages” opposed to industrial progress and on par with African- and Native-Americans and adversaries of European imperialism worldwide. A *Baltimore Sun* editorial of 1912, responding to a deadly shootout in the mountain town of Hillsville, Virginia, most explicitly expressed this argument. The paper thundered:

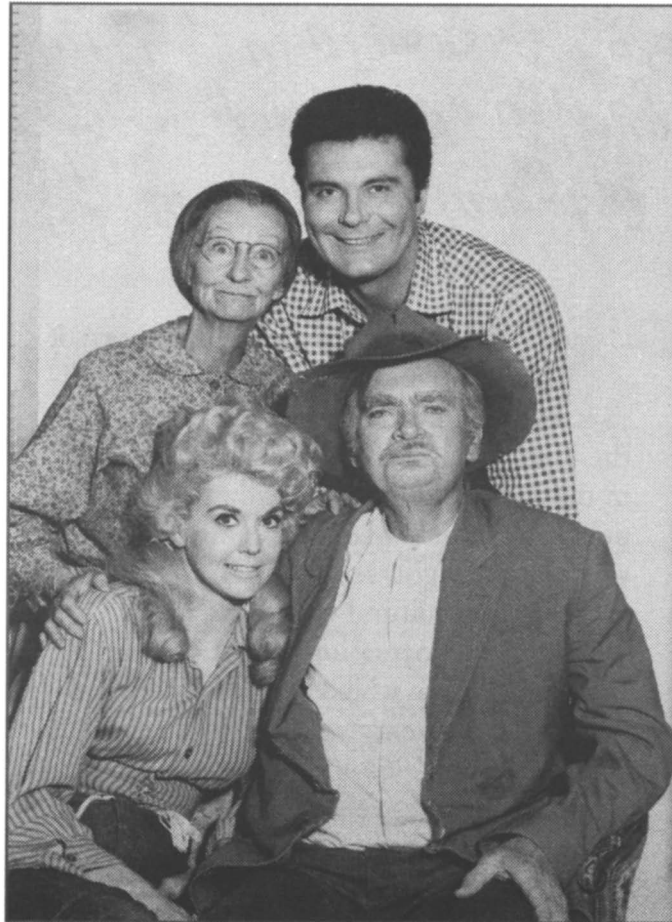
There are but two remedies for such a situation as this, and they are education and extermination. With many of the individuals, the latter is the only remedy. Men and races alike, when they defy civilization, must die. The mountaineers of Virginia and Kentucky and North Carolina, like the red Indians and the South African Boers, must learn this lesson.¹

Of all the conflicts in the southern mountains, of course, none fired the public imagination more than the Hatfield-McCoy feud of the 1880s. Countless articles and several books, most notably New York *World* journalist T.C. Crawford’s *An American Vendetta: A Story of Barbarism in the United States* (1889), presented a portrait of “Devil Anse” (William Anderson) Hatfield and “Old Ranel” (Randolph) McCoy and their relatives as savage and isolated mountain people living in “Murderland.” The frontispiece of Crawford’s book shows “Devil Anse” as a tough-as-nails, rifle-toting mountain patriarch with a flowing dark beard and a wide-brimmed hat. Although Hatfield may not have fully consented to this representation of himself, he did become quite a media celebrity and actively participated in contrived photographs taken long after the feud violence had ended. In 1897 he posed with his family with their guns prominently displayed. This image of the Hatfields as grim-faced desperadoes, widely reprinted in the ensuing decades, came to represent the image of all mountain folk to modern Americans.

The late 19th-century conception of a savage mountaineer quickly spread beyond the specific context of the Hatfield-McCoy conflict to fictional accounts of Appalachian life in novels and motion pictures. Astonishingly, more than 400 action shorts and melodramas with mountain settings and characters were released between 1904 and 1920. Featuring titles such as *The Mountaineer’s Honor*, *The Last of Their Race*, and *Forbidden Valley* (the promotional copy boasted that the

film portrayed “the last stand of primitive white men in America . . . in the heart of the Kentucky mountains”), these films showed mountaineers running moonshine and fighting each other and the law.

Despite the huge number of these films, only one prior to the mid-1920s explicitly used the term “hillbilly” in its title or script. It was the enormous success of commercially recorded rural white music, today commonly labeled country music, that put the word and image squarely on the national cultural map. Country music’s identity was so completely entwined with the “hillbilly” concept that between its commercial origins in the early



Cast of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. © Bettmann/CORBIS

1920s and its emergence as a major cultural force in the 1950s it was almost universally known as “hillbilly music.”

Both in practice and as a cultural category, hillbilly music was suffused with ambiguity. Officially promoted as white folk music and performed predominantly by and for rural and small town Southerners who looked back nostalgically to a simpler agrarian life, it was in fact an amalgam of African-American and Euro-American traditions and the product of a continuous interaction between folk and commercial cultural influences and

the steadily expanding influence of industry and technology into even the most remote reaches of the South.

Two examples that show the extraordinary range and malleability of hillbilly music are the Beverly Hill Billies in Los Angeles and the string bands of the Finger Lakes region of New York. The brainchild of Los Angeles radio station manager Glen Rice in 1930, the Beverly Hill Billies were supposedly members of an authentic hillbilly community discovered by Rice in the Malibu mountains. In reality, they were local musicians who were clandestinely recruited to portray genuine mountaineers. Dressed in hillbilly fashion and described by Rice as having just ridden into town on their mules, Zeke Craddock, Ezra Longnecker, and the other Hill Billies were an immediate local success.² The string bands of upstate New York such as Ott’s Woodchoppers and the Hornellsville Hillbillies who performed between the 1920s and 1950s also incorporated an explicitly hillbilly stage persona, from their rube comedian costumes of funny hats, loud flannel shirts, and fake beards to their use of props such as hay bales and whiskey jugs. But in contrast to the Beverly Hill Billies, they were not pushed into marketing themselves as hillbillies by radio and phonograph producers. Instead, in a world of ever-increasing migration from farm to factory, economic uncertainty and disruption, and the uncontrollable forces of cultural and technological modernity, “playing the hillbilly” helped these performers and their audience come to terms with the ambiguities in their own lives, simultaneously separating themselves from and connecting themselves to a rural, ethnic, and cultural tradition.

This ambivalence is perfectly captured in the Hornellsville Hillbillies’ self-description in the 1930s: “A Modern Up-To-Date Old-Time Band.”³

By the mid-1930s country performers such as Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, and Gene Autry had produced million-selling records, the *National Barn Dance* and *Grand Ole Opry* were drawing overflow crowds and attracting millions of listeners nationwide, and Hollywood was churning out dozens of “Singing Cowboy” westerns. Yet to most outside commentators, the word “hillbilly” was simply a synonym for “debased,” and they eas-

ily fell back on long-established stereotypes of mountaineer ignorance, poverty, and slovenliness. If all the “hillbillies employed in radio in 1934 were laid end to end,” wrote radio industry reporter Harry Steele responding to the astounding success of country musicians, “. . . they would be in the position they were most accustomed to before the lure of easy radio money brought them out of their cow pastures.”⁴

As the success of the Beverly Hill Billies attests, the high watermark of the term’s popularity and impact was the Great Depression years of the 1930s when the image spread rapidly through country music, films, and perhaps above all, comic strips and cartoons. 1934 alone saw the appearance of three cartoons that would shape the graphic image of the hillbilly for decades to come: Billy DeBeck’s character Snuffy Smith in his *Barny Google* comic strip, Al Capp’s *Li’l Abner*, and Paul Webb’s *Mountain Boys* cartoon in *Esquire* magazine. This explosion of hillbilly imagery reflected not only the public fear of economic collapse and social disintegration but also the sudden fascination with all aspects of mountain ways of life. These works certainly crystallized long-developing conceptions of mountaineer backwardness and social degeneracy. This was especially true of Paul Webb’s work, which presented an absurd inversion of the proper social order, with barnyard animals eating and sleeping in cabins and menfolk lying in the front yard with a whiskey jug close at hand. Yet these same cartoons also presented a more upbeat vision of the calm resilience and durability of the American people and spirit (as the *Mountain Boys* placidly endure a seemingly endless series of floods, wind storms, fires, and man-made disasters) and celebrated traditional values and culture. Here, hillbilly represented a heartening symbol that the nation, too, could survive its current economic and social upheaval.

The next great moment of national hillbilly resonance was the mid-1960s, especially through the dominant medium of television. *The Real McCoys*, the *Andy Griffith Show* (particularly episodes starring crazy mountain man Ernest T. Bass and the string band the

Darlings), and, above all, the phenomenally successful *Beverly Hillbillies* all aired in the same years that Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* and Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty programs focused renewed attention on impoverished and isolated white mountain folk living in the midst of “the affluent society.” These shows reproduced many standard ideas about mountaineer poverty, traditionalism, and ignorance, but they also transformed the image, offering a “domesticated”

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version of this familiar persona, one shorn of much of its surface debasement and slovenliness. In so doing, they served as a palliative for the disturbing idea of widespread suffering in the midst of plenty, providing a far more upbeat portrait of plain but comfortable folk who were upright, self-assured, and imbued with a strong cultural tradition.

This transformation is best seen in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which gained a broad audience and top-twenty ranking for much of its eight-year run (1962–1970) on CBS. Creator Paul Henning actively tried to clean up and desexualize his characters so as to remove the stigma of filth and debasement that defined earlier hillbilly characterizations. Because of his show, he claimed, “the word [hillbilly] has a new meaning all over America. Now, it denotes charming, delightful, wonderful, clean, wholesome people.”⁵ Henning also bridged the standard cultural division between the noble mountaineer and the hillbilly buffoon by merging the two into the same family. While cousin Jethro’s absolute ignorance of modernity was little removed from portrayals of *Li’l Abner*, patriarch Jed Clampett, like Grampa McCoy before him, symbolized the rugged, independent, and commonsensical mountain man who had a clear sense of himself and his culture.

Initial press reaction was overwhelmingly negative. Most reviewers found the plots

inane, and the gags, mistaken interpretations, and corny wordplay embarrassing. But despite the well-worn jokes and absurd characters, the show’s deeper significance, and the key to its success, lay in the way it both upheld and challenged the American dream, blending a celebration of wealth and leisure with a sustained critique of affluence, modernity, and progress.

Granny, the family member who is most ill at ease with her new surroundings, finds Beverly Hills (in words long used to characterize hillbillies) a horrific place “full of the laziest, greasiest, unfriendliest mess o’ people I ever laid my eyes on!”⁶ Granny may be ignorant of all things modern, but she and Jed have a clear sense of who they are and of their rural heritage. In the pilot episode, for example, after an oil company has purchased Jed’s land for \$25 million dollars, he asks his cousin Pearl (Jethro’s mother) if he really should move to California. She responds incredulously:

Jed, how can you even ask? Look around you! You’re eight miles from the nearest neighbor! You’re overrun with skunks, possums, coons and bobcats! You got kerosene lamps for light . . . a wood stove to cook on winter and summer . . . and your bathroom is fifty feet from the house! And you ask should you move!

Jed ponders her words a minute and then replies: “Yeah—I guess you’re right. A man’d be a dang fool to leave all this!”⁷ The lines were clearly meant to be seen as comically absurd, reflecting a stunning isolation from and ignorance of modern conveniences. Yet in a world of ever-increasing social and individual disruption, they just as certainly reflect an unshakeable sense of home and belonging and self. In stark contrast to Jed’s loyalty, honesty, and integrity and Granny’s tenaciousness, the world beyond the Clampett household is peopled almost exclusively by money-grubbers, snobs, con artists, and sycophants. The program therefore presents modern America, at least superficially, as venal, boorish, materialistic, and, ultimately, ethically and spiritually hollow.

The Beverly Hillbillies lasted for a decade but its cultural centrality was shorter lived. By the end of the 1960s the “hillbilly vogue”

the show had spawned had seemingly reached its end. The country lost interest in Appalachia as a problem region, the War on Poverty was increasingly billed as a disastrous waste of money and resources, and rural poverty once again faded from public consciousness. In the spring of 1970 CBS purged the show and every other rural-based program from its lineup. Though one more spurt of fascination with the hillbilly surrounded the book and film *Deliverance* and its depraved mountain sodomites, by the turn of the 21st century the image's former prominence had indisputably waned, a result of the steady demise of a rural populace and a growing public unacceptability of broadly defined racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the image has steadfastly refused to go away, and has been embraced by a new generation of country musicians rebelling against contemporary "pop country," by dozens of individuals on Internet sites, and even once again by the mass media. Nothing better exhibits how the image's presentation and reception continue to evolve than the decision by CBS television in the fall of 2002 to bring back *The Beverly Hillbillies* as a "reality TV" program called *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*. Rather than having actors play the roles, the network planned to select a "multi-generational family of five or more"

from the "mountainous, rural areas of Arkansas, West Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky," pay all their expenses to relocate to a mansion in Southern California, and then document the results.⁸ Unlike in 1962 when the original show first aired, CBS ran into a firestorm of protest. Columnists, academics, political activists, Congressmen, and even the United Mine Workers of America all lined up to express their shock that such a program was even being considered. Stung by the vituperative criticism, CBS quietly dropped plans to air the show. Unperturbed, NBC did film a pilot episode of *The High Life*, based on an identical plot premise, but it too announced it would not air the program after it ran into an effective behind-the-scenes protest effort. Despite the network's decisions not to air the programs, however, these incidents reveal the remarkable longevity and persistence of this cultural identity and how, as it has for a century, it still resonates as an ambiguous marker of both social derision and regional pride.

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² Ken Griffis, "The Beverly Hill Billies," *JEMF Quarterly* 16 (1980): 7. See also Griffis, "The Charlie Quirk Story and the Beginning of the Beverly Hill Billies," *JEMF Quarterly* 8 (1972): 173–8.

³ Simon J. Bronner, *Old-Time Music Makers of New York State* (Syracuse University Press, 1987), 55, 88.

⁴ Harry Steele, "The Inside Story of the Hillbilly Business," *Radio Guide* (1936): 20–21. Reprinted *JEMF Quarterly* 10, part 2 (1974): 51–54.

⁵ Dick Hobson, "The Grandpappy of all Gushers," *TV Guide*, April 24, 1971, 16.

⁶ Cited in Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States from 1953* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 205.

⁷ Paul Henning, "The Beverly Hillbillies," (Pilot), dated December 7, 1961, Collection 081, Box TV-371, Television Series Scripts, Theater Arts Library/Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁸ Cited in Lisa de Moraes, "Gold in Them Thar 'Hillbillies'?" *Washington Post*, August 29, 2002, A1.