

HILLBILLY

AN AMERICAN ICON

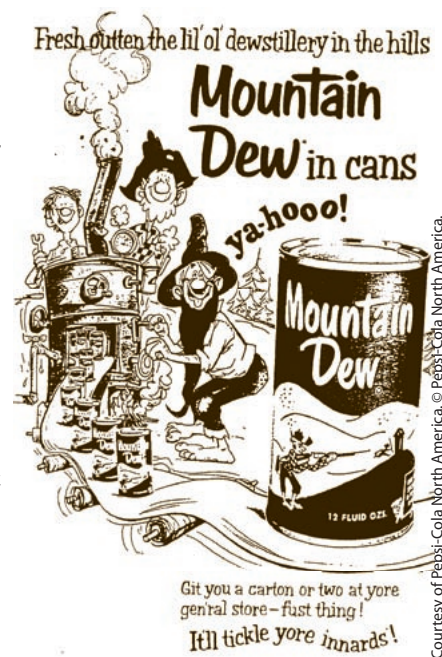


BY CAROL CUMMINGS

JETHRO, GRANNY, ELLY MAY, AND JED CLAMPETT. THE MERE MENTION OF THEIR NAMES BRINGS SMILES TO FACES AND MEMORIES TO MINDS. AND WHO CAN FORGET THE “CANTANKEROUS COMIC STRIP MOUNTAINEER,” THE LAZY SNUFFY SMITH?

Anthony Harkins, assistant professor of history at Western Kentucky University, has spent much of his career researching the concept and history of the hillbilly. He first became enthralled with the topic while conducting research on 1950s Cold War comic strips for his master’s thesis. “I thought about Snuffy Smith, and I realized that the image of the hillbilly remained completely unchanged from the 1950s to the 1990s,” he said. “I then started thinking about the places I had seen it from a national audience perspective.”

From these early musings, Dr. Harkins’s doctoral thesis and the book *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* were born. Published in 2004 by the Oxford University Press, the book traces the origin of the hillbilly from the early 1700s to contemporary America. “The hillbilly is an image — a media construction. It has no absolute clear parameters, but it is primarily used to describe people from rural America, generally the South, who are pretty universally white



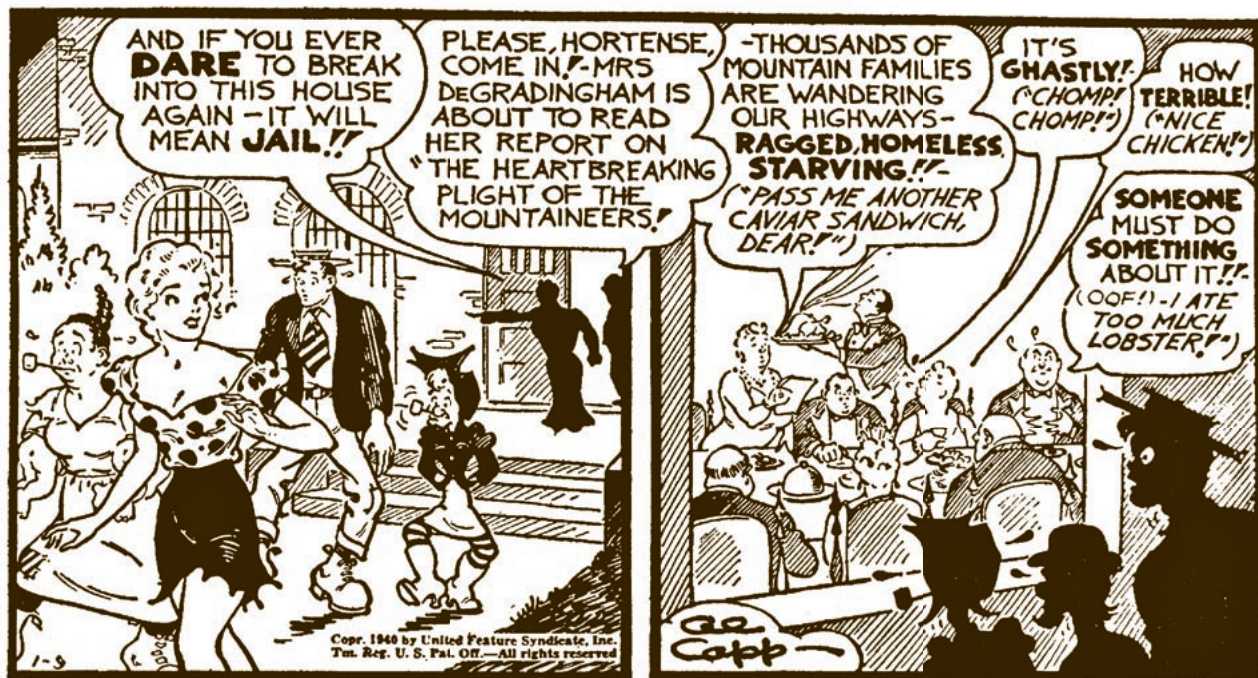
and who either culturally or ideologically have made themselves distinct from modern urban society,” Dr. Harkins said.

“From the positive aspect, the term hillbilly celebrates people who have a clear sense of self, a connection to the land, a strong sense of family, and a deep religiosity,” he continued. “On the negative side, the term hillbilly often brings to mind thoughts of primitive barbarians, inbreeding, moonshining, feuding, ignorance, and hostility to progress.”

Dr. Harkins writes that some of the earliest images came through stories of “mountain people” in Appalachia in the 1700s. “One of the earliest descriptions of the southern mountaineers comes from a 1780 announcement to the people of Virginia from British Major Patrick Ferguson about the dangers of the ‘Back Water men’ who had marched from eastern Tennessee to the South Carolina border and would defeat his troops a week later at the Battle of King’s Mountain in South Carolina. Ferguson warned urban Virginians that they should join Tory forces unless ‘you wish to be eat up by an inundation of barbarians . . . who by their shocking cruelties and irregularities, give the best proof of their cowardice and want of discipline.’”



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL HENNING COLLECTION



"Li'l Abner" was one of several syndicated cartoon strips that found humor in hillbilly characters.

Though closely related to this backwater persona, Daniel Boone and David Crockett brought a more heroic image as the "glorified backwoods frontiersman." Dr. Harkins writes that Boone, in particular, "became a leading symbol of American masculine prowess after leading settlers through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, fighting and killing Indians, and taming a savage wilderness." He adds that Crockett also became a more direct representation of the hillbilly persona. "Like Boone, he represented the heroic frontiersman, Indian fighter, and big game hunter. In his own day he also symbolized backwoods ignorance and rough humor. Elected repeatedly to the Tennessee state legislature and the U.S. House of Representatives, he was nonetheless ridiculed by more cosmopolitan legislators for his backcountry origins."

Of all the earliest tales of Appalachia, perhaps none is as well known as that of the Hatfield and McCoy feud of the 1880s. "Neither the first, longest, nor bloodiest interfamilial conflict in the southern Appalachians, the two families nonetheless rapidly became household names, a dubious distinction that has lasted for over 100 years," Dr. Harkins writes. "Countless articles and several books... 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' to whom family loyalty mattered above all else and who were ready, even eager, to use deadly violence against rivals and law enforcement officials."

Dr. Harkins writes that the actual conflict had more to do with interstate rivalry and economic disputes than

an actual "culture of violence," but most accounts took more artistic liberties and presented the feud as a "prime example of irrational violence and dangerous ignorance of all rural people of the region."

The term "hillbilly" was actually born at the turn of the twentieth century. Harkins writes that though its cultural origins are rather murky, the most credible theory is that Scottish highlanders linked two older Scottish expressions, "hillfolk" and "billie" (another word for "companion" or "fellow"). The term first appeared in print in a 1900 New York Journal article that stressed the allure of this persona to Americans who lived outside the region. Political correspondent Julian Hawthorne defined a "hill-billie" as a "free and untrammled 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."

The term continued to evolve throughout the early twentieth century, until country music played an important role in promoting the term. "Country music's identity was so completely intertwined with the 'hillbilly' concept that between its commercial origins in the 1920s and its emergence as a major cultural force in the 1950s it was nearly universally known as 'hillbilly music,'" Dr. Harkins writes. "Beyond nationalizing the term, country music also replaced the term's dominant pre-World War I association with violence and threat with a new principal denotation of unpretentious humor, carefree frivolity, and grassroots authenticity."

In the November 1934 issue of Esquire magazine, Paul

Webb's cartoon series, later named "The Mountain Boys," premiered, beginning a more than twenty-three-year run finding humor in the hillbilly characters. This cartoon was one of three hillbilly comics that premiered that year, along with Billy DeBeck's "Barney Google" and Al Capp's "Li'l Abner." Barney Google was eventually replaced by the more outrageous "Hootin' Holler" character of Snuffy Smith, whom Dr. Harkins describes as a "stocky and ornery mountaineer... ignorant of all things modern, he makes his meager living by moonshining and stealing chickens and horses, and responds to all comers with the threat of his omnipresent squirrel rifle.

"These deliberately exaggerated portraits of impoverished, but basically content, southern hill folks also provided cheering reassurance that rural poverty was not as bleak as it appeared in news accounts," Dr. Harkins explains. "From a cynical perspective, these comics and cartoons offered the pleasure of laughing at the misfortune

as Ma and Pa Kettle achieved outstanding success through the 1950s.

"Despite the unusually absurd plots and outlandish actions and attitudes, the genuine humanity of the Kettles and their vast brood always shone through. Ma Kettle may have been capable of brandishing a shotgun to drive away local authorities trying to repossess her house... but she loved her husband and family and always lent a helping hand to a neighbor in need."

From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the hillbilly made its way to the living room in a steady stream of highly successful situation comedies, including "The Real McCoys," "The Andy Griffith Show," and "The Beverly Hillbillies," which was the most successful of the three. "The show became the top-rated show by the end of its first month, was the highest rated show of 1962 and 1963 television seasons, and never fell from the top twenty until its final years," Dr. Harkins writes. The show also moved

The term "hillbilly" was actually born at the turn of the twentieth century. Harkins writes that though its cultural origins are rather murky, the most credible theory is that Scottish highlanders linked two older Scottish expressions, "hillfolk" and "billie" (another word for "companion" or "fellow").

of others, and even confirmation of the belief that the poor deserved their poverty because of innate laziness and ignorance. But they could also at times reflect a more sanguine vision of the durability of the American people and the American spirit in the face of adversity."

Throughout the early- to mid-twentieth century, the hillbilly came to Hollywood on film, as these rural characters were depicted in numerous "cookie-cutter-feud-and-moonshine melodramas."

Dr. Harkins writes: "As the degraded cartoon hillbilly gradually lost favor with critics and audiences alike in the postwar years, however, the presentation of such primitive people in film transmogrified into the softer and more appealing conceptions of actors Percy Kilbride and Marjorie Main, who

dramatically away from the hillbilly stereotype, offering "escapism and security in an uncertain world" of the early 1960s.

Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon spans literature, film, and American pop culture in its entirety. The book is richly illustrated with photographs, drawings, and film and television stills.

Dr. Harkins maintains that he "will not be Mr. Hillbilly

forever," as his research interests are varied. He plans to move into more concrete research in the future, such as a study of Esquire Magazine and the mixing of cultural labels and boundaries. "I think my strength as a researcher is that I focus on national images and how audiences perceive them in combination with how they are portrayed," he said. "Pop culture is an important, legitimate field of history, and it can tell us a great deal about how we are in America and how we got that way."

PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST VIRGINIA ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Tales of "Devil Anse" Hatfield (bottom row, second from left) and his family contributed to the stereotype of mountain people as violent feuders.