

The American Redneck

by Joyce Bennett

There ain't no shame in a job well done,
from driving a nail to driving a truck.
As a matter of fact, I'd like to set things straight,
A few more people should be pulling their weight.
If you want a cram course in reality,
You get yourself a working man's Ph.D.

—Aaron Tippin,
"Working Man's Ph.D."

The hyperactive shopping mall aficionados and franchise restaurant diners who populate the United States fail to understand the subtleties of character that mark the American redneck, a man who, surprisingly, tolerates and even calls himself by the nickname, confounding those who would mock him. And for years Hollywood and New York, through cinema and television, have obscured his true identity by portraying him as a knuckle-dragging misogynist who prowls backroads in search of fawns and members of minority groups to shoot. Informed by media propaganda, the public fears that all over the country, like rustic Caesars hot from Hell, bumpkin male revolutionaries seeking vengeance against the government are poised to murder and plunder. As we look toward a less than promising future, rather than dishonoring this heartlander by accepting the same old caricatures imposed upon us by unenlightened filmmakers and television producers, we should be celebrating the redneck's brand of diversity and learning from his example.

Ill-at-ease in a society ruled by hard-charging women and word-mincing liberals, the redneck struggles to adapt to a world less and less governed by horse

sense, and with each new generation, his personality traits are a little more subdued. If recalcitrant citizens of his kind fade from the landscape and are replaced by soft, easily policed proletarians not at all outraged by trespasses against civil liberties, then our end could be as certain as many predict. Before those of us who know his worth begin singing dirges for him prematurely, as we have been mourning America's final days perhaps too soon, we should first recognize who the redneck is and how he has safeguarded our system of self-government in the past and can now serve us as a paradigm for the free man inspiring us as we strive to keep our shaky republic. To define him more clearly, we need to take a closer look at how he is viewed by those who would belittle and seek to change him.

More and more, the modern redneck is coming into contact with the over-credentialed and undereducated hordes moving from urban to rural areas. Claiming intellectual superiority to the natives they encounter, these interlopers are maddeningly unaware of their own shortcomings. In my work in the area of career services during the last 12 years, I have met hundreds of dislocated megalopolitan Northerners. A New Jersey middle-school teacher who recently moved to my once agricultural county, had occasion to write something that I reviewed. In her writing, she spelled intact, "in tack." Another transplant was amazed at the apparent inability of us yokels to spell or say the word "indigo" properly. He was referring to the name of the local town that we call St. Inigoe's in honor of a celebrated theologian whose family's lineage can be traced back to Visigothic Spain. I didn't correct him because, at the time, I was trying to be less preachy and more charitable toward these city slickers who assume that an appreciation for both Dwight Yokum and Debussy cannot be found in the same individual and who believe that country people as a rule are ignorant and uncouth. To those living in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston who confuse mother wit with wisdom, rural and stupid have become synonymous over the years. And they seem to have a particular contempt for rural men, whom they consider pea-brained tyrants reigning over equally illiterate but appealingly downtrodden women and children.

Contrary to what urbanites might think, there are many well-educated good old boys and a few who are classical

scholars. One whom I know is a 1955 graduate of what was at the time considered an excellent liberal arts college. While attending school, he usually went hungry and, when no one was looking, would fish uneaten, still cellophane-wrapped sandwiches out of the cafeteria waste bins. On weekends he would hitchhike the 100 miles from Baltimore to his home and while there would take his shotgun out into the woods to kill squirrel and rabbit to help feed his estimable but impoverished family. They lived on a diet consisting largely of wild game and rice, but their table was impeccably set because a lack of resources had provided no excuse for the abandonment of good breeding.

Weathering financial hardship, he finally succeeded in earning his diploma. In spite of his erudition, and his ability to speak and read ancient and modern languages and to translate French newspapers or the Latin inscriptions written on the tombstones he seeks out in old Episcopal churchyards, he remains a country boy who does not question why someone would be moved to tears as quickly by a bird dog on point at his master's command as by a reading of one of Swinburne's elegies. Speaking in an accent rich with an Elizabethan heritage, he'll tell you that his most prized possession is the Model 40 John Deere tractor he used for many years to work his land to earn extra money to supplement the income from a regular, full-time job. In connection with the latter, he had often been called on to testify as an expert witness during court proceedings. Assured, urbanized attorneys hearing a drawl and observing a Victorian courtesy, sized him up and usually underestimated him, but when they discovered that the self-effacing rube before them was in actuality a learned man, they quietly backed down.

While the country boy is mannerly, the aggressive err in assuming his polite behavior to be a manifestation of weakness. Like Allen Tate's "Good Soldier," he characteristically displays intelligence and courage on the battlefield, and he and his sort have been known to fight starving and barefoot yet triumphing over superior numbers, as the Army of Northern Virginia demonstrated repeatedly against vast arrays of smartly-appointed and well-fed Yankees. And getting down to basics, men who have always lived off the land are naturally good shots, and fortunately for those who love them, they are also survivors. My father,

who received the Purple Heart after taking shrapnel in the head in France during World War II, and my brother Charles, an ex-Marine sergeant who saw action in Vietnam, both came home. Unlike Daddy, Charles had to go to war knowing that he was despised by many of those for whom he fought, but his bred-in-the-bone convictions allowed him no other alternative and gave him the strength to perform his sad duty. Unlike today's new women who profess a desire to play G.I. Joe, I will admit that I do not own the grit to have faced what Charles and my father faced, but I am sure that ladies like these tough cookies have only intellectualized war and would quickly change their tune if they were confronted with the realities of a patrol in-country or of a landing at Normandy. The valor and fighting skill demonstrated by my kin is born of a culture which honors the tradition of men defending their own—a culture still found in places like Westmoreland County, Virginia, the boyhood home of Washington and Lee.

While duty-bound and strong-hearted Jarheads and Army grunts seem to spring from conservative communities, sometimes down-home milieus can pro-

duce atypical rednecks. I know one who breaks all the rules. He is also my brother—I was blessed with six. He is gay and refers to himself as Jem in the vernacular of Dupont Circle, but we, his family, still call him Jimmy, probably to his embarrassment. He is a political activist and is often seen on television and in the pages of the *Washington Post*. A cashmere-clad epicure, brunching at the Mayflower on Sundays, he gives dinner parties reminiscent of an older, more refined Washington. Jimmy by design is a million miles away from his country roots, but, affluent, citified, and somewhat condescending liberal that he is, if threatened by a predator on the streets of D.C., he reacts the way he learned to react as a boy and thrashes his opponent as well as any honky-tonk brawler. Jimmy will take a stand against a violent man when others might back down because his birthright will not allow him to be a victim. He remains, in spite of himself, just a country boy at heart.

The quintessential country boy, however, is my son. He is a tradesman, a hunter, a NASCAR fan, and he drives a half-ton Ford pickup truck. As you travel, you can see others like him talking among themselves of Parker Double Barel's, who's on the pole at Talladega, and the pheasant season in South Dakota as they buy half-smokes and beef jerky at roadside stores. Known by names such as Sissy Baby, Teeny Boy, and Possum, my son's friends seldom travel without their hound dogs, usually called Annie or Molly. These young men have been socialized to revere their elders, including those who are strangers to them. They will greet you and hold doors for you and call you ma'am, but they won't look through you as do most of today's solipsistic young, the natural products of anarchic, materialistic families.

Although I do not consider myself to have been the perfect mother, I am happy to say that I somehow managed to raise a redneck. My Generation X good old boy is smart, ethical, and has a sense of history. He understands what happened at Sharpsburg and Wilderness and at Tarawa. He is industrious and fair and will give any good man his due. Every morning, wearing one of several ball caps emblazoned with logos like Richmond International Raceway or Boreking, he loads up esoteric tools and leaves the house before daybreak. A few years ago, when he first started working in the trades, he drove a rusted-out Fairmont

60 miles one way to earn \$7.00 an hour. When the great snowstorm of 1996 hit us and he had time off, he didn't head for the unemployment office, but rented a snowplow and cleared out parking lots and driveways all day. He is part of a social group that respects someone who, as Aaron Tippin says in his country song, pulls his weight. My son has a high regard for his more mature counterparts, and his role model is the owner of the company for which he works. Today a very successful businessman, while he was in the Army, this man almost lost one of his legs to North Vietnamese fire. Six weeks after he was shot, he was back home and down in a nasty ditch digging like one possessed even before the wound had healed and his pain had ceased.

The ditch-digger-turned-entrepreneur and the other men I've described here are part of an ever-shrinking number of smart, galvanized, hardworking, tax-paying men to whom we owe an enormous debt. We should stop discounting them and listen to what they have to say. They will tell us in plain English that God is the guarantor of our civil rights no matter how many constitutional shins are cut by the wheeler-dealers on Pennsylvania Avenue and Capitol Hill. They'll ask us to consider the dangers inherent in a busybody President's preoccupation with social minutia while nuclear-armed bits and pieces of an imploded Soviet Empire threaten our security. And applying simple logic, they will tell us that legal or illegal immigrants who come willingly to our shores or cross our Southern border, yearning to collect welfare while decrying our racism, neither belong here nor enrich our society.

Given a chance, country boys will also tell us that we are becoming a people too eager to bow down to the government; a people who are mean but not strong and who are forgetting how to live in freedom. By ignoring the voice of the rural man and by glorifying pseudo-education rather than a real knowledge of our cultural antecedents and of the democratic process, we encourage domestic and foreign transgressions. Last summer, ABC News reported that shortly before the Fourth of July, 1996, 40 New Yorkers were interviewed in Times Square. Out of those polled, only nine knew why we celebrate this day. Conduct the same survey at a church supper in Bushwood, Maryland, and I guarantee that all of the respondents will know the answer.

LIBERAL ARTS



MORE CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

"In La Crosse, Wisconsin, Judge Ramona Gonzalez, sentenced Sia Ye Vang, 32, who was found guilty of molesting his two young stepdaughters, to English lessons and community service instead of prison, explaining he wanted to give the Vietnamese immigrant 'the opportunity to continue his education and his assimilation into our culture.'"

—from the *Bloomington Voice*,
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While not necessarily the case in New York—or in New Jersey—in the sticks, it seems, America remains “in tack.”

Joyce Bennett writes from Leonardtown, Maryland.

American Names

by Larry Tritten

I have fallen in love with American names,
The sharp names that never get fat,
The snakeskin titles of mining claims,
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

—Stephen Vincent Benét,
American Names

My family used to live in a mountain valley near a mining community in the wilds of Northern Idaho, and our mailing address was Star Route, Smeltonville, Idaho. Before that we lived in a town called Coeur d'Alene, which indisputably is a sharp name, although Smeltonville is anything but sharp and isn't exactly a snakeskin title, either. In any case, I became acquainted early in life with the extreme possibility in the linguistic architecture of American names, which can range from ugly folk metaphor to foreign exoticism.

You cannot, I submit, have an address such as Smeltonville, Idaho, without having your stylistic sensibilities affected, and I remember how oddly self-conscious I used to feel as a boy when I ordered things through the mail from mythic metropolises such as Chicago and New York City and was forced to locate myself in so unglamorous-sounding a place as Smeltonville, which is probably only one stylistic millimeter less gauche than the Mudville of Ernest Lawrence Thayer's *Casey at the Bat*—and Mudville was a parody name! I did not know then that “Idaho” is an Indian word that means roughly “light on the mountains” and consequently is as pretty a name as Smeltonville is viscid and

gloomy. The name Smeltonville would seep from my pen with the same sluggish morbidity with which the wastes from the mines in the area infiltrated and obfuscated some of the local streams and rivers.

In the meantime, I thought typical Americans (i.e., the typical American families in all of the radio and television shows and movies and comic books) lived in towns with straightforward, idyllic names that could be gotten by mixing up any of a couple of dozen nouns and adjectives—for example, oak, palm, sun, wood, lake, view, green, dale, glen, hill, falls, grove, spring, and so forth. Archie Andrews lived in Riverdale, Henry Aldrich lived in Centerville, Pepper Young's family lived in Elmwood, etc. Typical Americans, it seemed, never lived in places such as Key West or Council Bluffs.

These formulaic stereotypes aside, there is, as Benét asserts, something special about American names, and I think the reason for that is that they are made up of words from so many different languages. Thus we have names that cover an exotic spectrum—Angola on the Lake, Ball Ground, Cinnamonson, Dreamland Villa, Encino, Frostproof, Germantown, Ho-Ho-Kus, Isla Vista, Kaawa, Lost Nation, Moscow, Neon, Oblong, Pend Oreille, Quapaw, Rome, Santa Claus, Tahitian Gardens, Urania, Vermilion, West Babylon, Xenia, Young America, Zilwaukee. American names fill the mouth with fascinating combinations of vowels and consonants and are full of soft utterance and hard articulation, bird song and verbal grapeshot.

The language is a mongrel, and while it may lack the precise grace and purity of a thoroughbred language, it is full of odd tricks and delightful quirks that give it a unique class of its own. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our place-names. And they can be complicated. Sioux (which French traders and trappers learned from the Dakotas and Lakotas and means “adders,” literally “little snakes,” i.e., the enemy—the name given them by their enemies the Ojibwas), for example, is a dulcet sound that must be altogether different for those who know what it really means. Consider the effect this has on a pleasant song like “Sioux City Sue.” And Coeur d'Alene, which sounds so lyrically romantic, means literally heart of the awl (a tool), an ungainly metaphor considering how many different things this French heart

might have been transplanted into—heart of the mountains, heart of the woods, and so on. Still, the sound is mellifluous—so if you can stash the translation in the back of your mind the name still shines.

Names are, to begin with, utilitarian; they are the labels that enable us to distinguish one person from another and one place from another. But beyond that they are entities of aesthetic and stylistic substance. Consider the many and varied moods and impressions evoked by them: Red, Vanessa, Crazy Horse, Algernon, Blackie, Jove, Silver City, Riverdale, Canal Street, Loon Lake, Wounded Knee, Salt Lake City.

Pick a state, any state, take a close look at the map of it and feast your eye and mind on the wealth of colorful, eccentric, and fascinating names your forefathers doled out to its streams, valleys, meadows, hills, towns, mountains, rivers, roads, and the like. Then multiply these thousands of names by 50 and consider that this heroic task of naming, hundreds of thousands of names, was for the most part performed in a few decades as men and women swarmed westward across the plains and over the mountains, filling the rivers of Colorado with bottles from New York and the wilderness of Wyoming with product wrappers from the stores of Ohio. Hundreds of thousands of names, summarily served up, ladled out, tacked on—just as, no doubt, will one day happen on Mars.

America is little more than 200 years old, and already much of the history of its names has been lost in the headwaters of the Rio Tempora, untraceable in the darkling reaches of the past. California, the name of our most high-profile state, has an uncertain etymology. One theory has it that the name can be traced back to the French epic *Chanson de Roland*, but the record is incomplete, a matter of speculation. No one knows who named California. And I've always wondered how Montana got a Spanish name so early when it took the taco and enchilada until just a few decades ago to migrate there commercially from California. Apparently language can predate cuisine by a century or so. In Idaho, in 1955, when Dean Martin's hit song “That's Amore” (“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore!”) reached our juke boxes, we thought the phrase was “piece of pie.” There were no pizza parlors in the panhandle of Idaho yet.

Some archaeologists in the far distant