SAYING “HOWDY” TO THE MODERN DAY MINSTREL:
WHY THE HILLBILLY CHARACTER
IS A DOUBLE-STANDARD

by

Jonathon B. Peck

An Abstract
of a research paper presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department of Theatre and Dance
University of Central Missouri

December, 2011
ABSTRACT

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Jonathon B. Peck

Blackface, in which white actors applied black greasepaint and portrayed an often unflattering stereotype of black people, is taboo in modern times. In media there exists stage shows which portray white hillbillies in an equally unflattering light. Actors wear absurd costumes and portray hill people as “dumb hillbilly” stereotypes. The portrayals found in these characters can be equated to blackface portrayals in terms of cultural insensitivity. However, there seems to be no stigma attached to these characters, while blackface is nothing short of forbidden in today’s society. I propose that the taboo attached to blackface, without also being associated with the hillbilly portrayal, is a double-standard and I will proceed to ask why it is not widely viewed this way. The objective of the paper is not necessarily to put an end to hillbilly performances, but to make the viewer question why this is acceptable.
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I like would like to thank my wife, Imma, and my sons, Bryant and Benjamin, for their patience as I spent more time with this paper than I did with them. I’ll make it up to you soon, I promise!

I would also like to thank Dr. Julie Mollenkamp for her instruction and guidance and my fellow classmates in Introduction to Graduate Studies for their immeasurable support. We’re all in this together!
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Saying “Howdy” to the Modern Day Minstrel

In early America, a burgeoning theatrical culture was finding a voice through means of experimentation, borrowing from English practices, and by simply catering directly to the fresh demands of a hard-to-entertain audience. Many of these audience demands arose from the fact that the stage routines viewed each night had taken on the same form and over time had become stale. The standards of the time – Shakespeare, various song stylings, and variety entertainment – were no longer sufficient in keeping an audience pleased over the course of an evening. Audiences wanted more. In response, playhouses devised a new type of entertainment: the minstrel show, a musical variety act where popular white actors would wear black makeup and assume an African-American caricature. This became a mainstay of entertainment in the early nineteenth century as audiences flocked to see the antics of popular blackface performers of the day. In modern times, this type of performance is considered shocking and inappropriate in light of the racial issues inherent in the performance. Because of cultural and racial sensitivities blackface and minstrel shows are now frowned upon and seen as taboo because of their mockery of the African-American race. However in places like Branson, Missouri, the Dollywood theme park, and even the Disney entertainment parks, there are hillbilly shows which use many of the same “comedic” tools in a sendup of the hillbilly culture, without any apparent backlash. I propose that this is a double-standard.

Blackface performance was self-evident by virtue of its name: Performers would use burnt cork or black greasepaint as a skin foundation and would proceed to “black up” in order to achieve the look of the black servant class which they were mimicking. Minstrelsy simply took the blackface element and added music and variety sketches, and in so doing assimilated blackface. Minstrelsy at the height of its popularity consisted mainly of a semicircle of four, five
or sometimes more white male performers (there were rarely female performers in the antebellum minstrel show) made up with facial blacking of greasepaint or burnt cork and adorned in outrageously oversized and/or ragged “Negro” costumes. (Lott 5) It was the meeting of these ideas which rocketed minstrelsy, and therefore blackface, to newer heights.

Blackface allowed performers, by their own standards, to look more “African”. As blackface evolved, creating more jokes and sight gags, the performers were able to take these routines and join them with musical variety bits and form the early trappings of the minstrel show. From its beginnings in the early nineteenth century, blackface was the essential performance element of minstrelsy. However, minstrelsy and blackface must not be assumed to be one and the same, due mainly to the fact that blackface performances were occurring long before true Minstrel shows had made their arrival. Blackface was a theatrical genre in its own right which, one could say, parodied the African-American culture of the time. In an unflattering but fairly accurate analysis it has been said that blackface performers were “invoking the power of ‘blackness’ while deriding it, in an effort of cultural control, through the very convention that produced its power – the greasepaint and burnt cork of blackface. (Lott 26) Interestingly, it is this stated element of cultural control that seems to figure into many aspects of American performance today and shall be addressed at length at a later point in this writing.

As stated previously, minstrelsy and blackface made their rise in American entertainment because of the demand for variety. In the America of the early nineteenth century it did not suffice simply to present a play, be it drama or comedy, *Twelfth Night* or *Hamlet*. What audiences of the time most preferred was an even mix: a little drama and a little comedy; a bit of tragedy and a bit of farce. Each play preferably included some sort of vibrant choreographed entr’acte with vocalists performing popular sentimental ballads of the day. It was in this variety
that the Negro impersonators found their niche. The “Tale Telling Yankee” and the “Frontiersman” with their tall tales of American life, had already made a mark on the American stage, and so it naturally stood that these characters could be adapted into something new and retain their popularity. So came the minstrel, taking the same title as the old English musician, with the name itself coming from *minister*, as in *minister to*. (Lhamon 12) Two main types of minstrel characters were thus borne out of audience cravings for different stylizations. One was patterned after the southern plantation hand: uncouth, ragged, and jolly; the other was a ludicrous black replica of the white dandy of Main Street or of New York’s Broadway. (Nathan 50)

As with all beginnings no matter the subject, the origins of minstrelsy are lost in a fog of dispute. It is known that as early as Shakespearian time white performers appeared in blackface for characters like Othello, and rudimentary forms of blackface performance had appeared at times since then. It was not until the early nineteenth century that minstrel shows became loosely organized. Early minstrel performers had begun plying their craft in response to audience demand. There is currently not a great deal of information concerning actors and their characters during the infancy of minstrel performances. There are stories and artifacts evidenced in posters and playbills of these performances, but investigative efforts beyond this have been difficult at best.

Whatever the early origins, it cannot be disputed that true minstrelsy did not arrive until there appeared innovations brought on by Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice (1806-60) and his creation of the “Jim Crow” character. To “Daddy” Rice or “Jim Crow” Rice, as he was often called, properly belongs the title of “father of American minstrelsy.” (Wittke 18) The true origin
of the Jim Crow character however, is lost to legend, but the most popular origin story involves Rice witnessing the behavior of a black worker:

“Between 1828 and 31 Rice, according to tradition, observed a crippled Black stableman (possibly in Louisville, Kentucky) sing a refrain and dance with a jerky jump - thus ‘Jump Jim Crow’, after the slave's name. From this single song and dance Rice developed full-length entertainments called ‘Ethiopian operas’.” (Banham 826)

Perhaps the dominating factor in Rice’s discovery was the song itself: “Weel about and turn about and do jus so;/Ebery time I weel about, I jump Jim Crow.” (Toll 28) Rice was keenly aware of the stage appeal this character possessed, and with the debut of Mr. Crow, Rice sealed his place in history. Jim Crow did nothing less than define Rice’s career, taking him on a world tour including cities like New York and London, and giving him a steady source of popularity and income through the remainder of his life.

Fig. 1, Unknown Artist. Picture from 1832 Playbill of Thomas D. Rice as "Jim Crow". 1832. Graphic. BlackPast.org, Seattle, Washington. Web. 3 Dec 2011.

Dan Emmett would expand on what Rice had started by establishing the minstrel format as a complete evening’s entertainment, as opposed to simply one or two characters providing stage vignettes. As a result of this expansion, the Virginia Minstrels were created. Opening 6 February 1843 at New York’s Bowery Ampitheatre, they stayed for a week, where “the minstrels presented, in the midst of the usual attractions of a circus, what they called a ‘Negro Concert,’ in which they played and sang together. They also performed two scenes: “Dan tucker on Horseback,” with (Dick) Pelham as a Negro riding master, (Frank) Brower as a Negro clown, and an equestrian; and “The Serenade,” enacted by a lover (probably [Bill] Whitlock) and a female impersonator.” (Nathan 118) More shows followed, with more sketches added or altered as Emmett gauged audience reaction.

Around the same time the Virginia Minstrels were perfecting their stage act, Edwin P. Christy was conceiving an act of his own. Christy’s Minstrels would be the brainchild of his planning, with Christy being responsible for the development of the minstrel show in three acts, the structure of which is considered by many historians to be the definitive format for the minstrel show. The first act usually began with a lively song and dance number, after which the cast was told to be seated by the host of the spectacle, known as “Mr. Interlocutor.” He would then engage in conversation with cast members who portrayed their characters as being somewhat less than intelligent, in the tradition of true blackface performance. Mr. Interlocutor would normally converse with actors known as the endmen, who took on the names “Mr. Tambo” and “Mr. Bones,” so named because of their respective musical instruments, the tambourine and the bones or spoons. Mr. Interlocutor was the comic foil for the antics of Tambo and Bones, and to emphasize this point he was vividly set apart from the endmen:

“The interlocutor usually was a big man, and he always was attired in a large, full dress suit, or in some very conspicuous uniform. To make the contrast with the endmen more vivid, he neither blacked up nor wore the kinky wig of the Negro imitators. He played ‘straight.’ The first requirement for a successful interlocutor was a big, booming voice, for the success of the endmen’s ‘gags’ depended largely on the former’s ability to make himself heard by the audience, and on his success in stringing out his questions and comments until the most stupid person among the listeners could not fail to grasp the point of the joke when it cracked at last from the big lips of the end man. The interlocutor was at once the announcer for the show and the ‘feeder to the comedians.’”

(Wittke 139)
The first act would end with a “walkaround,” a large musical number. The second act would then have a truncated version of a play, usually Shakespeare or some popular theatrical piece of the day, followed by a songstress performing sentimental ballads. The third act would consist of a larger walkaround with a closing musical number including many of the performers for that evening, staged in the style of a grand finale.

When minstrelsy was firmly established as a popular (if not culturally refined) form of entertainment, it was within the structure devised by Christy that it occurred. Depending on the featured songs and routines, the show could be adapted to fit in more characters with a variety of jobs within the show. From there, it was simply a matter of meeting a voracious consumer demand which contributed to minstrel shows becoming a cross-continent phenomenon.

As is the case with all popular forms of entertainment, changes in public perception and taste contributed to the decline of minstrelsy. The American Civil War was essentially the catalyst for this widespread change. The nation had already become embroiled in heated debate in the years leading up to the war with issues of slavery and the rights of black people at the forefront. Emancipation during the war created a more open theatrical community with a greater number of black people finding acceptance, if not equality, on the American stage. Minstrelsy as it was known underwent drastic changes with various troupes adapting to the new times. They increased the size of their companies, added new specialty features, staged much more lavish production numbers, and featured more “refined” acts – guaranteed to offend no one. To avoid black competition, they even moved away from “Negro Subjects.” (Toll 135) It seemed then that the racial factor in minstrel shows had all but disappeared, with extravagant variety shows taking their place. Over time, these variety acts evolved into early forms of Vaudeville. While blackface performers and minstrel acts in their pure forms were still around, they relinquished
their popular status to Vaudeville, with the result being that either they were assimilated into new Vaudeville acts, or they were forced to take a back seat to other, more modern performances.

It is interesting to note that at the start of minstrelsy, the entertainment form was more popular in the North than the South, although given the negative portrayal of black people combined with the Southern mindset of the time, it would it seem the reverse would be so. It must be understood that not all minstrel shows portrayed a stereotypical black minstrel character in a negative way. Indeed, there came a point where minstrelsy was used as a political tool to portray the negative points of slavery, something which the South saw as a threat. It did work both ways however, with some minstrel shows portraying slaves as happy with their condition, thereby fostering the preposterous notion that slaves did not want to be free. It escalated with the release of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Minstrel shows seized this moment to make various stage versions of the book which were, depending on the production, for, against, or indifferent to slavery. “Onstage each sectional mode had its characteristic tone, politics, and regime of racial representation and these were visible in the competing productions of *Uncle Tom*, if not indeed in a single production . . . While the plays tried to tame down their material with melodrama, their political consequence was heated journalistic and street debate, sometimes conducted right outside the theater.” (Lott 212)

Although modern cultural sensitivities have caused blackface to become more of a taboo as time passes, it is hardly surprising to learn that blackface, whether in a performance capacity or in terms of simple bad taste, is extant. In the modern era blackface is considered a negative mark on America’s history and is very often a source of cultural friction. There have been countless incidents where blackface is used as a hurtful device, with reasons ranging from simple ignorance to outright hatred. Conversely, there have been a number of successful, sensitive
portrayals involving blackface. In 2004 at a club called the Marquee located in New York City’s Bowery district, a drag queen with the stage name of Shirley Q. Liquor performed a cabaret act. A drag queen is not necessarily controversial. However Chuck Knipp, the man who portrayed Shirley, and who also happens to be white, was performing in modern blackface:

“... his face, neck and hands were now coated a greasy chocolate brown, shiny and dark as shoe polish. His orange lips and eyes stood out garishly bright against the darkened skin, forming an old, yet instantly recognizable, icon: the blackface minstrel mask.”

(Strausbaugh 4)

Fig. 3. Charles (Chuck) Knipp is a blackface drag queen. 2006. Photograph. Bambizzoozled - The World's Blackface Database. Web. 3 Dec 2011.

<http://bambizzoozled.blogspot.com/2006/04/shirley-q-liquor.html>

Needless to say, many were up in arms over “Shirley’s” performance. Protests took place outside the club, with groups representing organizations that included gays and lesbians of color.
As for a personal reaction, writer John Strausbaugh, whose book *Black Like You* is referenced for this viewpoint, states:

“As a White male, my response to the iconic and taboo blackface mask was instant and visceral. I was shocked, shamed and a little revolted.” (5)

Interestingly, the author goes on to state that as he watched the performance, he thought it was funny, extremely daring satire which transgressed accepted boundaries of public discourse. Essentially, the performer took a very large risk and left the audience with an appreciation of the biting cultural sendup they had just witnessed. From this viewpoint, Mr. Knipp’s blackface could be termed a success.

However for every individual success, there are multiple failures. In 1993 actor Ted Danson appeared at a Friars Club roast for then girlfriend Whoopi Goldberg made up in blackface. The firestorm of controversy that followed nearly ended his career.

Fig. 4. *Ted Danson in blackface at the Friar’s Club Roast of Whoopi Goldberg.* 1993. Picture. Photobucket, Web. 3 Dec 2011.
Other lesser controversies have appeared throughout the years. In 1986 the movie Soul Man featured actor C. Thomas Howell portraying a white student wearing blackface in order to gain a Harvard scholarship. The film was considered a box office success despite the negativity and lukewarm reception. Even when not intended as an insult against African-Americans, blackface is such a hair-trigger issue that it can haunt the instigator for many years down the road: in 1999, Missouri governor Mel Carnahan found himself in a public relations nightmare when evidence surfaced that as a young municipal judge in the mid-1960s he’d worn blackface in an amateur minstrel show. In 2004, a Louisiana judge was suspended for a year without pay for attending a Halloween party in blackface, wearing a prison outfit and handcuffs. He insisted that he’d not meant to insult or mock anyone. (Strausbaugh 22) The list goes on, and one can easily see from this the poisonous issue that blackface has become.

Offensive qualities aside, blackface will always be well-known for its history as a performance genre. Equally well-known are many rural, hillbilly type characters that have been seen on stage and screen throughout American theatrical history. The Oxford English dictionary defines a hillbilly as “A person from a remote rural or mountainous area, especially of the southeastern United States.” (“Hillbilly,” Oxford def.) The term is also used to describe much of the indigenous population in the Midwestern Ozarks. A more caustic definition from the Google website states “An unsophisticated country person, associated originally with the remote regions of the Appalachians.” (“Hillbilly,” Google def.) Over time the geographical reference for a hillbilly has come to mean a resident of most rural areas of America, including the Ozark Mountain area of Southern Missouri and Northern Arkansas. The unfortunate label of
“unsophisticated” referenced in the above definition has become somewhat universal, bringing about a negative stereotype of the hillbilly as someone who forsakes intelligence and culture in favor of a lazy and dull-minded lifestyle, with the result often being someone who was seen as a pushover or an easy target.

The people who would become known as hillbillies settled the American landscape in earnest around in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, coming in along with other Europeans who had begun emigrating to the new continent. The term “hillbilly” was coined during the Williamite War of 1689-91, where James II and William III fought for sovereignty over England, Scotland, and Ireland. Supporters of King William III were known as “Orangemen” or “Billy Boys” and their North American counterparts were soon referred to as “hillbillies”. (Wilkinson) According to Anthony Harkins in Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon, the term first appeared in print in a 1900 New York Journal article. (49) The majority of hill people were of Scotch-Irish heritage, choosing the remote regions of the eastern Appalachians as their new homes. This would prove key for certain battles in the American Revolution as many hill people who fought British encroachment held a distinct strategic advantage as they had a keen familiarity with an unforgiving terrain, something which British soldiers lacked. Soon after the end of the Revolution, the new America moved west, with hillbillies becoming part of that movement. Settlers began establishing roots in the Midwestern Ozarks of Southern Missouri and Northern Arkansas around the late eighteenth century, with their population growing throughout the early nineteenth century. At the time, the area was so isolated that travelers moving through the area in 1815 encountered people who had not yet heard of the War of 1812. (Watersheds.org) The Scotch-Irish demographic chose the Ozark area for much the same reasons they settled the
Appalachians, because of its similarity to their ancestral lands along with the need to flee the famines that had been plaguing their homeland throughout the years.

Hillbillies have literally had front row seats for important times in American history. Especially notable is the period immediately before, during, and immediately after the American Civil War. The Civil War was an especially dangerous time for the Ozarks, as tensions began to rise Missouri-Kansas border, which was the site “Bleeding Kansas,” an effort by pro-slavery Missourians to coerce Kansas and its citizens into entering the Union as a slave state. Before the war, the guerilla warfare on the Missouri-Kansas border became some of the bloodiest fighting in American history. When secession was declared and war became imminent, Missouri elected to stay with the Union, while Arkansas placed its loyalties with the Confederacy. This set the stage for a great amount of lethal friction in the area, as border skirmishes in the Southern Ozarks played out strategically for both sides. With the Battle of Pea Ridge in Northwest Arkansas, the Confederacy was essentially driven out of the Ozark region. Unfortunately the absence of a Confederate presence only served to make things worse for Union loyalists. Almost immediately after the Confederate army had gone, bloody guerilla attacks only grew in intensity. These resulted in multiple massacres against both Union and Confederate groups. These attacks, while sealed in history, never officially became a record of war, partly because of their unorthodox nature and partly because the only thing really accomplished was bloodshed without resulting in any real wartime gain. As a result of the lawlessness immediately following the war, bushwackers, with loyalty only to themselves, would come across the state line to take advantage of the chaos for their own benefit. (Denny and Bradbury 3)

The devastation caused by the Civil War was soon offset by new industrial growth. Discoveries of mineral deposits in the Southwest Missouri area gave rise to the mining industry.
Lead and zinc became kings in an area that saw exponential growth as a result of the many jobs offered to anyone who wanted to wield a pick and a shovel. This gave birth to boom towns which quickly grew in support of the new official business. The citizens already living in the mining areas adapted accordingly: the man who had once been a backwoodsman, and then a farmer, was now a deep earth miner. It was a backbreaking, sweat-filled job in a long line of backbreaking, sweat-filled job that citizens in lower financial classes have had to endure through the years.

The Appalachian area also was able to turn its fortunes on mining, as numerous coal deposits brought about a mining industry that is present to this day. It was some of the most dangerous work in the nation, and it was placed on the backs of people who had no other means of income. Black lung, lead poisoning, mine explosions and cave-ins were only a small sampling of the dangers facing these people. I must confess that I take a personal interest in this fact, given that my great-grandfather was killed in a mine collapse in Miami, Oklahoma in the early twentieth century. It was this genealogical discovery that, in part, started my interest in the class perception of hillbillies.

In the mining areas of Southwest Missouri, the mining industry began to run dry, affecting the entire region in the process. In the mid nineteen-fifties, the last of the mining companies finally pulled out, leaving Southwest Missouri in economic straights from which they would not recover for twenty years or more. This closely relates to the financial hardships found in the Appalachian area, where although mining is still a thriving industry, it is difficult to eke out any sort of living. And the dangers remain: several times in the past decade there have been mine explosions and cave-ins; some have miraculously resulted in dramatic rescues, while others have ended tragically. In Southwestern Missouri, the population went back to what they knew:
farming and industry, which is prevalent in the area to this day. In both Appalachia and the
Ozarks, this type of work is often drastic and unforgiving, but it is exactly this type of work that
keeps the nation thriving, and through all this the citizens endured, providing the financial
backbone of the Ozarks and the Appalachians, if not the entire nation.

In modern times, the image of the hillbilly does not fairly portray the strength of this
culture. To counter this it is necessary at this point to present positive, non-stereotypical
examples of the hillbilly people. Notable examples include politicians Bill Clinton and Jimmy
Carter, who each became President of the United States while being portrayed as hillbilly
stereotypes in the media. After their respective presidencies, they have each gone on to become
noted humanitarian activists. Other significant successes in the hillbilly genre are comedians Jeff
Foxworthy, Bill Engvall, and Larry the Cable Guy (real name Daniel Whitney). They each
present a down-home, rustic take on rural culture. Foxworthy, with his “You Might Be a
Redneck” routine jokingly points out the foibles of the rural American population while at the
same time correlating these tendencies to society at large. Engvall does the same by relating
these characteristics to family life. They both serve to show a slice of humanity and the
hillbilly’s place in it. In addition, Foxworthy is currently the host of the popular television game
show Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?, thereby increasing the mainstream exposure of
what one might label the “intelligent” hillbilly character. The routines that Foxworthy and
Engvall present hearken back to the “Yankee” characters found on the American stage of the late
eighteenth century. These characters, much like Foxworthy and Engvall, would present simple
homespun philosophy and anecdotal events with a humorous bent. They were among the first
ture American stage characters, and today comedians like Foxworthy and Engvall continue this
legacy.
Hillbillies have become the “forgotten” element of American culture, with poverty and remoteness contributing to this mindset. As is the case with anyone who is financially disadvantaged, society tends not to see anyone who is faced with misfortune; any Dickens’ novel makes a case for that. If poverty were not bad enough, their very living area is seen as second class. People living on the East and West coasts, especially in metropolitan areas, derisively refer to the Midwest as “flyover country,” whereby they imply that the area is not even worth living in and thereby negating any worth the citizens of this area might have, while somehow seeing themselves as worthy of greater advantages in life by virtue of their geography.

Because of a perceived lack of sophistication, hillbillies are now seemingly fair game for mockery in some forums. This was also the case with blackface: African-Americans were perceived as less than intelligent, with differences that could not be overcome, but simply
tolerated as one would tolerate a precocious child. Blackface mockery was born, in part, through a misguided attempt to understand more closely the African-American culture. Modern hillbilly characters came about from this same kind of culture gap along with distress concerning the economic climate of the 1930s. As people emigrated to urban areas, there was a knee-jerk response among society in terms of class warfare. Popular media soon contextualized this attitude:

In the November 1934 issue of *Esquire* magazine, amid advertisements featuring dapper young men in evening wear and columns on the latest New York theater offerings, three barefoot and disheveled men with oversized beards and hats slouched on a rustic cabin porch behind an unkempt front yard, whiskey jugs at their sides. “Wonder is Maw’s had her baby yet – I’m gettin’ mighty hungry,” one ponders as they languidly await the news. (Harkins 103)

This comic strip, entitled *The Mountain Boys*, was one of three cartoons, along with *Barney Google* and *Li’l Abner*, which featured hillbilly characters and all debuted that same year. According to Anthony Harkins in his book *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, these cartoons were all an outgrowth of the same general mood of economic distress and decades-long expansion in both academic and popular interest in the rural folk in general, and mountaineers in particular. The genre was very much reactionary, as it reflected the concerns of the entire nation, who saw in these hillbillies what they might become: an exaggeratedly impoverished caricature of their former selves. Much like minstrel shows, with their unrealistic positive outlook concerning slavery, these hillbilly cartoons presented a hopeful, albeit misguided, reassurance that poverty was not as bad as it seemed. There was also the implication that the poor deserved their plight because they were lazy and ignorant.
This image was perpetuated in American cinema. The hillbilly character found its niche on the big screen immediately following World War II. The public had by this time grown weary of the ignorant yokel stereotype, but in response Hollywood simply reinvented the character, this time in the guise of the “rustic but domesticated Ma and Pa Kettle. In the enormously popular Kettle films, the hillbilly persona represented a cracked mirror image of postwar attitudes about the sanctity of the child-focused nuclear family and the new, and for many, unsettling, suburban and consumerist American society.” (142) By the mid-1950s, these movies had run their course, and it seemed that there no longer existed a media outlet for the hillbilly character. But television was quickly gaining momentum as a new form of media, and this format would soon run with the baton.

Television was able to make the greatest use of the hillbilly character. One of the earliest television portrayals was on *The Bob Cummings Show* in the mid-1950s. Interestingly, the writer of this episode was Paul Henning, who had a hand in nearly all of the hillbilly television shows of the 1960s. Popular culture of the time saw television shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Gomer Pyle*, and *Green Acres*, and *The Real McCoys*, all of which had an element whereby the characters completely misunderstood their environment. The plot of *The Beverly Hillbillies* revolved around a hill family who suddenly gained a fortune through the discovery of oil on their property in the middle of the Ozarks (already a bit far-fetched – the Ozarks are not known for oil deposits). The family is then told by their own friends and family, according to the theme song, that since they are now rich, they must abandon their Ozark home and move to California, because after all that is where privileged few live. *Green Acres* took the exact opposite approach, with a woman of high social and financial standing marrying into a rural family and
finding herself having to move to her new family’s home. The show mainly concerns itself with the culture shock the woman must deal with as she tries to adapt to her new environment.

These shows based themselves on a fish out of water premise that made for interesting comic twists, although at the expense of the hillbilly image. This hearkens back to the *Amos and Andy* radio show, which also contained a fish out of water premise concerning two black characters, and but for the fact that it was a radio broadcast could be considered blackface: the radio actors who portrayed Amos and Andy were both white. In each episode, Amos and Andy would try their best to understand the tricky situation they found themselves in, with the results giving way to memorable comedic moments. This can be directly compared to *The Beverly Hillbillies*, where the characters, stuck in the middle of the metropolitan Los Angeles area, consistently failed to fully grasp their predicaments. Perhaps the greatest offender within this style was *Gomer Pyle*. This show was a spinoff of the *Andy Griffith Show*. The character of Gomer Pyle was a simple-minded garage mechanic on *Andy Griffith*. For his own show, he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, where he was a constant source of frustration for his drill instructor and his fellow recruits. It must be emphasized that with all of these shows, the end of each episode would ultimately teach relevant life lessons brought about through the foibles of the characters, so essentially the episodes had good intentions. But as far as good intentions are concerned, what is it that is said about the road to Hell?

It is theorized that the hillbilly television craze of the 60s came as a response to what was perceived as a hillbilly “invasion” of sorts of urban areas that began with the Great Depression and Dustbowl Era of the 1930s and continued through the 60s. Rather than face poverty in their rural homesteads, people began an exodus of the impoverished areas of the nation and sought employment in urban areas. In what could be considered a form of class warfare, rural citizens
fleeing to big cities often found themselves on the wrong end of a classist persecution, which forced them to fight for their lives both on the streets and in the court of public opinion:

“The most infamous example of such fear mongering was Albert Votaw’s February 1958 Harper’s article ‘The Hillbillies Invade Chicago.’ ‘The cities’ toughest integration problem has nothing to do with Negroes’ reads the lead – rather ‘it involves a small army of white Protestant, Early American migrants from the South – who are usually proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife.’ What follows is a steady stream of negative, even vicious, characterizations of ‘Southern “hillbillies,”’ who Votaw contradictorily describes as ‘apathetic but bumptious.’ Relying on police sources, Votaw claims the newcomers are ‘clannish, proud, disorderly, [and] untamed to urban ways . . . their habits – with respect to such matters as incest and statutory rape – are clearly at variance with urban legal requirements.’” (Harkins 176)

It is interesting to note in this article that Votaw cites the integration “problem” of “Negroes” in an article concerning not African-Americans, but hillbillies.

Around the same time that hillbilly shows were solidifying their place on television, in Branson, Missouri shows like The Baldknobbers Jamboree show were becoming a popular form of entertainment. Beginning in 1959 and named after a regional vigilante group of the late nineteenth century, the Baldknobbers Jamboree featured music and variety acts interspersed with comedy routines by hillbilly characters who wore outlandish stereotypical costumes such as oversized hats, and ill-fitting overalls with perhaps a garishly colored tie to complete the ensemble. The actors portrayed the “dumb hillbilly” onstage for comedic purposes and made a sport out of “interrupting” the show for comedic purposes. The format continues to this day, and still includes all of the above visual features, plus for extra added effect goes so far as to include
characters with buckteeth or even characters with no teeth. You would not have to look very far to realize the similarity between this type of show and the minstrel shows of the 1800s.


The hillbilly character is not limited to the Branson theatre circuit. On television, for years the country music variety show HeeHaw featured many characters which were similar to “Yankee” characters mentioned previously. However, there were a few “goofball” hillbilly characters scattered throughout the cast. In Silver Dollar City, a popular amusement park located near Branson, there are many hillbilly characters or similar ilk which, while not necessarily portraying the “dumb” stereotype, present a less-than-flattering image of the Ozark mountain people. Other amusement parks do a sendup of these characters as well. In Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, in the heart of the Appalachian/Smoky Mountain range, sets Dollywood, which is named for its owner, country music entertainer Dolly Parton (and which coincidentally began as
an offshoot of Silver Dollar City). The Disney Corporation has its share of hillbilly characters, both at its amusement parks and in its movies. Of noted infamy is the movie *Song of the South*, a 1946 movie that took place during the Reconstruction and featured a virtual cornucopia of stereotypes, from hillbillies to negro slaves. This movie featured possibly one of the most politically incorrect characters in cinematic history in the form of Uncle Remus, a wise old black man who dispensed wisdom and helped his white family through all their travails. Remus was the epitome of the old black stereotype, with his “Yassuh” (yes sir) and “No suh” (no sir) language patterns making the viewer think that at any moment he could break out into the Jim Crow song and dance mentioned earlier in this writing. Walter White, executive secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, at the time of the film’s first release in 1946 telegraphed several major newspapers around the country with the following statement:

"The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People recognizes in 'Song of the South' remarkable artistic merit in the music and in the combination of living actors and the cartoon technique. It regrets, however, that in an effort neither to offend audiences in the north or south, the production helps to perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery. Making use of the beautiful Uncle Remus folklore, 'Song of the South' unfortunately gives the impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts." (Cohen 64)

So racially clichéd was this movie that Disney shelved it after a 1986 rerelease and has yet to bring it back into the public eye.

The similarities between blackface/minstrel shows and hillbilly variety shows are too damning to ignore. The stage formats for minstrel shows and hillbilly shows bear striking
similarities. The characterizations are interchangeable in that they both present a “dumb” stereotype that makes the characters appear ignorant. The appearance of blackface and hillbilly characters is geared towards the same effect. Both character types wear oversized, ill-fitting clothes with poorly matched articles of clothing to complete the look. The makeup for both characters gives an unflattering appearance. Beyond the greasepaint used in blackface, the actors would sometimes wear buckteeth. As evidenced in the picture below, buckteeth seem to be the universal statement for a stereotypical lack of intelligence:

![Image](image.png)


Blackface and in part minstrel shows both showed a mockery of the African-American race with unflattering, stereotypical, and oftentimes mean-spirited portrayals of black people by
white actors. In the same vein, hillbilly characters show a cultural mockery, with actors portraying hill people in a stereotypical manner, using outlandish visuals and behavior to give the effect of a “dumb hick” who lacks any modicum of intelligence. While blackface is racist, “dumb hillbilly” characters must be considered classist.

Blackface is unacceptable in today’s society. For the reasons described above, blackface is no longer seen as an entertainment norm and indeed, people who in modern times have appeared publicly in blackface have ignited a firestorm of controversy, risking either severe backlash or being completely rejected by society for their antics. Society has an implied need for kindness and fairness, and this attitude is meant as inclusive towards all groups. Blackface is rejected based on this, but inexplicably hillbilly characters are still seen as an acceptable form of entertainment. We need to ask ourselves why this dichotomy exists.

Perhaps part of the problem lies in the celebrities at the forefront in public media. African-Americans have many positive cultural role models in media today. Tyler Perry has grown a virtual empire out of his initial artistic ventures, and in doing so has provided an outstanding example of success for African-Americans. And quite obviously Oprah Winfrey sets the bar in terms of African-American media. The list of role models goes on; entire books could be written about the subject and indeed there have been.

Hill people have positive role models. Foxworthy, Engvall, and Larry the Cable Guy mentioned above certainly set a high public standard. In the 1970s the television show *The Waltons* gave a positive portrayal of rural, backwoods family life. Prevalent in today’s media are portrayals of hill culture as mostly ignorant, or in extreme cases willing participants in inbreeding practices, which is almost farcical. Equally as bad is the image of backwoods people
as a driving force in the methamphetamine culture. Indeed, a recent popular movie entitled *Winter’s Bone*, which was coincidentally (or perhaps not) filmed near Branson, portrays the tragedy of the rural drug culture, and it can easily be perceived as yet another negative portrayal of the hill population.

There must be more positive role models for hill culture, so that a group that is seen by others as a sort of lower life form can be seen by themselves as worthwhile and significant. Where do we turn for these role models? Hollywood? Of course Hollywood is not the only place where changes need to occur. Live performances are another place where a reevaluation of ideals needs to take place. Branson, Dollywood, Disney, and others portray hillbilly characters that could be considered extremely offensive. Hillbilly performances cater to public perception, much like the minstrel shows attended to the audience demands of their time. The time it takes to change a perception, the road one must travel to teach an important lesson, is indeed a long and arduous one, but well worth it in the end.

It has always been a clever trick to present the negative to accentuate the positive, and teach a lesson in the process. Bob Cummings, who interestingly is from Southwest Missouri, attempted just that sort of bait-and-switch technique in his 1950s situational comedy show. In his show, Cummings played a suave, middle-class fashion photographer. In an episode entitled *Bob Goes Hillbilly*, Cummings and his sister dress as hillbilly yokels in order to teach his nephew (who is trying to impress his snobby date) a lesson about the unacceptability of social hierarchy:

> Laughing stupidly while milking a piglet, Cummings sends the debutante screaming from the house. In the end, Bob moralizes to Chuck and the viewing audience
that “any romance based on class distinctions doesn’t stand a chance.” “Not in a
democracy like this” pipes his sister. Thus, the show discredited class divisions and
upheld the widely shared belief in American “classlessness” by reinforcing long-
established stereotypes of the poverty, stupidity, and slovenliness of hill folk. (Harkins
175)

With this in mind, perhaps the joke is on us after all.
WORKS CITED


