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Anthony Harkins

*Western Kentucky University, [anthony.harkins@wku.edu](mailto:anthony.harkins@wku.edu)*

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## **From “Sweet Mamas” to “Bodacious” Hillbillies: Billy DeBeck’s Impact on American Culture**

by Anthony Harkins

Who’s the most important man this country ever knew?  
Who’s the man our Presidents tell all their troubles to?  
No it isn’t Mister Bryan and it isn’t Mister Hughes  
I’m mighty proud that I’m allowed a chance to introduce  
Barney Google with his goo-goo-googly eyes. (Rose)

As the creator of the inspiration for the hit-song “Barney Google” of 1923 whose refrain is still widely known today, Billy (William Morgan) DeBeck’s prominent place among American cartoonists has long been assured. In the 1920s and 1930s he gained international recognition for his striking drawing style, panoramic layouts, innovative continuities, and numerous contributions to the American lexicon including phrases such as “sweet mama,” “heebie jeebies,” “hotsy totsy,” “balls o’ fire,” and “times a’ wastin’.” The National Cartoonist Society prize for Cartoonist of the Year was originally named the “Billy DeBeck Award” (it was renamed the Reuben Award for Rube Goldberg in 1954), and he is among the elite twenty cartoonists to be included in the Postal Service’s 1995 “Comic Strip Classics” stamp series celebrating American comic strips and their creators.<sup>1</sup>

Yet DeBeck is important for more than just his enormously creative use of language or his mastery of both the daily gag and the suspensefully developed story line. Although not one of the pioneers of the comic strip such as Richard Outcault, Jimmy Swinnerton, or Winsor McCay, he was a central figure in the medium’s rise from an occasional pleasure in a few big city newspapers to a mainstay of American cultural life. In the nearly 23 years that he produced his famous strip *Barney Google* (later renamed *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* and finally just *Snuffy Smith*) he continuously reinvented his creation to a degree unmatched by any of his contemporaries, adding new characters and remaking his comic strip in a way that captured the radically different *zeitgeists* of three distinct eras – the “Roaring Twenties,” the Great Depression, and the World War II years. Nor is his significance limited only to the funny pages. As the United States became an ever more commercialized and consumerist-oriented society, the dramatic rise of the scope, influence, and legitimacy of the mass media led to the breakdown of formerly unquestioned cultural “brow level” distinctions. DeBeck’s personal



Billy De Beck, sketch of Snuffy Smith inside back cover on endpaper, George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood Yarns* (1867), De Beck library. Courtesy James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth

shift from an aspiring “fine arts” painter to a “debased” yet financially highly successful cartoonist perfectly reflected this broader transformation.

Born in Chicago in 1890, DeBeck initially dreamed of becoming a serious painter and attended the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts after graduating high school in 1908. Yet he had always been drawn to cartooning, copying the styles of *Chicago Tribune* editorial cartoonist John McCutcheon, “When a Feller Needs a Friend” creator Clare Briggs, and illustrator Charles Dana Gibson (Walker 9).<sup>2</sup> Although he later advised students of his correspondence course on cartooning “First learn how to draw—then go to a good art school and get a firm foundation in the arts,” his coursework at the Chicago Academy ended after only two years once he saw how big an impact his caricatures of models had on his fellow art students (Sheridan 36, 37). DeBeck thus made the fateful decision to become a newspaper illustrator and cartoonist, but success came only after years of slowly developing his craft. He got his first professional job as a staff artist with the Chicago *Show World* theatrical weekly, then a position with the *Youngstown* (PA) *Telegram* (1910-1912) as a political and sports illustrator, and finally a political cartoonist job with the *Pittsburgh Gazette-Times* that he held until 1914. Returning to Chicago, he began to teach cartooning through a correspondence course and at nights at the Fine Arts Academy. In these same years, he produced several short-lived cartoon series including *Finn an’ Haddie* for the Adams Syndicate and *Married Life* for the *Chicago Herald* (1915-1918), the latter featuring a theme to which he would repeatedly turn: a henpecked, diminutive husband desperately trying to escape the clutches of his controlling wife. DeBeck replaced *Married Life* for a short time with a new strip, *Olie Moses and O’Mara Inc.*, about clothing salesmen who relocate to glamorous Hollywood. Finally, in 1919, he launched in the *Chicago Herald & Examiner* the strip that would make him famous and wealthy — *Take Barney Google F’rinstance* (soon thereafter renamed simply *Barney Google*) that ran for several years on the sports pages before moving to the “funnies page” in most newspapers (Walker 10).

Cultural historians have long argued that the era between the world wars marked a fundamental transformation in American culture, one that saw the rise of mass (or proto-mass) cultural forms such as motion pictures, radio programs and syndicated newspapers and a discernible shift from a citizenry that saw itself primarily as producers (whether farmers, factory workers, or bankers) to one increasingly self-identified as consumers (including of the media) (Kammen, Susman, Dumenil). *Olie Moses and O’Mara, Inc.* and the various incarnations of *Barney Google* reflected DeBeck’s innate understanding of the expanding place of commercialized



Justin Howard, "Sut Lovingood's Daddy Acting Horse," *Sut Lovingood Yarns* by George Washington Harris (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1867).

entertainment and the culture of celebrity worship in America. The former strip, after all, explicitly showed this transformation, as the two clothing proprietor protagonists suddenly relocate to Hollywood and move into the motion picture industry, with cameos by stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. Similarly, *Take Barney Google F'rinstance* initially centered on the title character's desire to escape his wife and watch the Jess Willard-Jack Dempsey training sessions for their big boxing match. Countless later episodes also featured boxing matches, horse races, and celebrity sightings (Walker 10, 20).

*Barney Google* (as it was soon renamed) quickly became a successful strip and King Features Syndicate, with typical hyperbole, trumpeted the new creation in 1920: "There are seven wonders of the world" the advertisement boasted, "—and 'Barney Google'" (Walker, 24). It was, however, DeBeck's July 17, 1922 introduction of Spark Plug, a bow-legged nag given to Barney by a grateful man after Barney breaks his fall out a window, that marked the beginning of DeBeck's rise to fame and fortune. Though nearly the complete opposite of what a race horse should look like — sagging and scruffy instead of svelte, and covered by a ragged horse blanket emblazoned with his name that it wears even when racing — Spark Plug improbably wins the Abadaba Stakes race and its \$50,000 prize. The relationship between Barney and Spark Plug was often a contentious one — Barney freely kicked his horse in the rear when he disappointed him or hired him out to raise money and "Sparky" (as Barney fondly called him) lost more races than he won. But DeBeck also was able to establish a genuine emotional bond between the two and this mixture of pathos, adventure, and "main chance" schemes made the strip a major success with all walks of American life (Walker, 35, 45; Goulart 21). A reporter sent to interview Judge Elbert Gary, the Chairman of United States Steel, for example, was amazed when Gary opened the session by asking, "Will Barney Google's Spark Plug win the International Derby?" Gary went on to inform the astonished newsman that the question had arisen at a recent Board of Directors meeting because everyone on the Board read the comics ("Funny Strips" 18).

As Brian Walker notes, DeBeck's creation of Spark Plug also proved to be a "merchandising bonanza" as DeBeck and his syndicate authorized all manner of commercial products from toys and games to knick knacks to popular songs from the eponymous smash hit to the far less successful tunes "Come On Spark Plug!" and "So I took the \$50,000" (Walker 35, 85). DeBeck himself in 1924 noted in amazement that "[a]ll over the United States you find stuffed Spark Plugs and Spark Plug games and Spark Plug drums

and Spark Plug balloons and Spark Plug tin pails. And there is a Spark Plug play on the road. The only thing that is lacking is a Spark Plug grand opera” (Walker 35). Spark Plug was so popular and became so synonymous with the Sunday funnies, that, according to one scholar, his name became a common nickname for children who were comic strip devotees – most famously in the case of Charles “Sparky” Schulz of *Peanuts* fame (Markstein). Clearly, Spark Plug’s merchandising was an important antecedent to future promotional product streams of games, toys, songs, and films tied to cartoon or animation characters from Schulz’s own Snoopy to *Garfield* to the Powerpuff Girls and Sponge Bob Square Pants of today.

Spark Plug’s popular success led DeBeck to transform the previously lower middle-class Barney Google (reminiscent of Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” persona) into an almost-respectable representative of the nouveau riche. With his silk top hat and tails and expensive cigars, Google now epitomized the stereotypical freewheeling lifestyle of “the Roaring Twenties.” DeBeck’s plot lines exploited popular fads of the day from flagpole sitting to swimming the English Channel (Spark Plug matched Gertrude Ederle’s 1926 feat that same year) (Walker 96). Unlike his comic strip contemporaries Walt Walley of *Gasoline Alley* and Andy Gump of *The Gumps* whose typical middle class lives focus on family and home, Barney skirts Prohibition restrictions, chases flappers, hangs out in disreputable locales such as sports bars and racetracks, and pursues countless “get rich quick” schemes, although usually with little success. Indeed, much of Barney’s appeal stems from his avoidance, if not outright repudiation, of the traditional commitment to family, marriage, and slow but steady economic advancement. As Gilbert Seldes simultaneously lamented and boasted in his 1924 essay, “The ‘Vulgar’ Comic Strip,” *Barney Google* (along with Mutt of *Mutt and Jeff*, Jiggs of *Bringing up Father*, and the title character in *Abie the Agent*), “ha[s] so little respect for law, order, the rights of property, the sanctity of money, the romance of marriage, and all the other foundations of American life, that if they were put into fiction the Society for the Suppression of Everything would hale them incontinently to court and our morals would be saved again” (201).

DeBeck’s social portrait in *Barney Google*, it hardly needs saying, represented almost exclusively the perspective of urban white male America (a view exhibited in nearly all the comic strips of that era). Barney not only hangs out at long-established male bastions such as boxing rings, racetracks, fraternal lodges, and saloons, he lives a bachelor existence despite remaining married to his wife. After the first few months of the strip, he “escapes” from her (she is described in the song “Barney Google” as being “three times his size” and DeBeck often depicted her bearing a rolling-pin as a potential cudgel)

and pursues an endless stream of flapper-like “sweet mamas.” Furthermore, though Google is at times the butt of jokes for his squat size and bulging eyes, he is always in a position of control over the minority characters that occasionally appeared in the strip, always as servants or hirelings of whites. DeBeck made his racially superior status most explicit in his relationship with his pint-sized and simple-minded but ever-loyal jockey, Sunshine, whose favorite expression, “You sho am a smaht man, mistah Google,” sums up the subservient comic foil role he played in the strip (Walker 86-7).<sup>3</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, his refusal to abide by social conventions and responsibilities, *Barney Google* became one of the era’s leading strips and DeBeck one of the busiest and wealthiest practitioners of his craft.<sup>4</sup> A 1933 *Fortune* article on the comics business estimated that DeBeck was then earning \$1200 a week at the heart of the Depression and a 1940 article reported that his strip was carried by 210 papers with a combined circulation of ten million (“The Funny Papers” 49; “Barney Google’s Birthday” 60). His lifestyle of a sports-crazed bon vivant reflected his newfound wealth and quasi-celebrity status. He rubbed shoulders and played golf with the likes of Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, and Gene Tunney as well as sports writers Damon Runyon and Grantland Rice. He married and divorced and remarried (once to the same woman), wintered in a 14-room estate in Florida, and lived in Paris in the late 1920s (Walker 77-81, 83; “Barney Google’s Birthday,” 60; Hartzell). And he was not alone among cartoonists. Though their tone was often one of incredulity, numerous press accounts reported on the astounding wealth of these daily “pen and pencil humorists” and the incredible influence they seemed to hold over all classes of the American public (“Sprightly Comics”). In 1933, *Fortune* listed fifteen cartoonists who made \$1000 or more a week for their art (“The Funny Papers”). That same year, writer William Berchtold marveled that the entire universe of syndicated cartoonists could fit into the chamber of the House of Representatives but would turn up their noses at the Congressmen’s paltry \$15,000 annual salary or even the President’s \$75,000 (35). Ten years later, in “Everybody Reads the Comics,” *Esquire* noted with a slightly disdainful edge that “[f]our out of every five of the 70,000,000 people who read the papers at all today, shamelessly and regularly read the comics” (Rodell). Though not the wealthiest (that status went to Ham Fisher with his far inferior strip *Joe Palooka*), DeBeck certainly was among the industry leaders and socialized accordingly.

As the 1920s gave way to the 1930s, and the seemingly endless wealth and prosperity of the previous decade vanished into the worst economic



downturn of the century, DeBeck abruptly shifted the direction of his strip once more. His readers had become accustomed to his constantly changing exotic adventure continuities set everywhere from Florida to Paris to the fabled Sultanate of Sulu (in the Ooby Jooby Sea!) (Walker 74). Thus, when the audience learned in the June 14, 1934 episode that Barney Google had been named by “a hill-billy by the name of Google” the sole heir to an estate in the North Carolina mountains, little did they realize that this storyline would continue for the next decade or that Barney would eventually be supplanted almost entirely by the even more outrageous character Snuffy Smith. In the process, DeBeck would fundamentally reinvent his strip in a way that captured the new cultural ethos of the Depression years.<sup>5</sup>

Far from merely an attempt to cash in on the current craze for all things mountain, the change in the strip’s plot and setting revealed DeBeck’s passionate and abiding interest in literary portrayals of the people and culture of the Southern mountains. Unlike his fellow cartoonists of hillbillies, Paul Webb (creator of *The Mountain Boys* cartoon in *Esquire*) and Al Capp (who began *Li’l Abner* the same year DeBeck introduced Smith), DeBeck read dozens of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels and nonfiction books about the hill folk and his debt to earlier fabricators of southern Appalachia and the mountaineer is obvious. He was strongly influenced by the works of Mary Murfree and George Washington Harris, and his copy of Harris’s *Sut Lovingood* is heavily annotated and includes his preliminary sketches of Snuffy Smith. He also drew heavily on the language and spellings used by Harris and other southwestern humorists, freely mixing, as did they, genuine local expressions with ones he invented. Although DeBeck traveled through the mountains of Virginia and Kentucky and conversed with the local inhabitants, his fanciful plots and colorful phrasings show that he, like Webb, clearly based his imagery and humor primarily on these literary accounts rather than on the people and conditions themselves (Inge 74-5).

DeBeck also relied on many of the same tropes and themes as his literary predecessors. In the early months of the mountain episodes, he portrayed the mountaineers as impoverished (Google’s “estate” is nothing but a run down shack similar to other domiciles in the region); ignorant (Google expresses shock that there is no school or kindergarten); and culturally isolated (in a strip titled “Catching Up with History!,” a mountain woman who serves as Barney’s maid has never seen a movie but has heard that D.W. Griffith is planning to direct the new film *Birth of a Nation*). In his most dramatic panels, he presents his mountain man as an almost supernatural primitive force of potential violence that emerges spontaneously from the

surrounding woods.<sup>6</sup>

Snuffy Smith, the stocky and ornery mountaineer who would soon dominate the strip, epitomizes the qualities long associated in popular culture with Southern mountaineers. 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. He so threatens social decorum and stability that he is feared and despised even by his fellow mountaineers of Hootin' Holler who, DeBeck informs his readers, tarred and feathered him the last time he made an appearance. Smith is clearly drawn from earlier fictional and actual personages such as Davy Crockett, Sut Lovingood, and "Devil Anse" Hatfield. Warns his wife, Lowizie: "'twixt [his] drink an' deviltry, mos' folkses hev been keerful ter give him plenty elbow room . . . ." To this image of an insular, trigger-happy primitive, DeBeck added the Webbian vision of absolute laziness. Snuffy is constantly seen prone or asleep, his whisky jug clearly suggesting his constant state of inebriation. Like Webb's, DeBeck's jokes often revolve around Snuffy's sleeping for days at a time, despite the constant activity and noise around him.<sup>7</sup>

Snuffy Smith may be immoral, violent, lazy, and abusive, but he also represents the anti-elite attitudes, rugged independence, and physical prowess of the mythic frontiersmen epitomized by Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. DeBeck often portrayed Snuffy as a symbol of the common man who rejects any pretensions of cultural refinement and taste. On a visit to Chicago, he refuses to stay in the "Hotel Aristocrat" on the basis of its name alone. Instead, he goes to a flophouse by the stockyards, but still accuses the landlady of running a "ristercrat hotel" because she tries to change the sheets after two weeks. Clearly these episodes are overlaid with conceptions of mountaineer filth, but the theme of rebellion against class pretension is unmistakable. As a symbol and defender of frontier democracy, Snuffy refuses to kowtow to judges, military officers, and other authority figures and prizes personal independence and cultural tradition over money. His consistent flaunting of social rules also makes him something of a sex symbol to female characters who thrill at his coarse individuality. "I dream of you every night," writes one female admirer in the strip, "your mountain ruggedness — your forceful personality — your scorn of society."<sup>8</sup> In short, Snuffy is cut in the mold of the American folk hero, a point clearly understood by at least one contemporary writer, Lovell Thompson, who in 1937 called him "a hero with all of a hero's trappings." Although for Snuffy these trappings are "a broken-down Kentucky Colonel hat, a corn-cob pipe, and a rifle borrowed from James Fenimore Cooper" rather than "the owl and shield of Minerva," Thompson argued,

their meaning is nevertheless “Greek in their profundity and rigidity” (4). Simultaneously whimsical and serious, Thompson’s description of Snuffy as mythic hero recognizes how DeBeck constantly played upon and undercut the mountaineer myth, fully realizing the comic possibilities in the mutually supporting duality of noble mountaineer and semi-savage hillbilly.

A final component of Snuffy’s personification of the mythic frontier folk hero is his unquestioned Anglo-Saxon or, at least, Northern European racial lineage. As he had in Barney’s relationship with Sunshine, DeBeck continued his long-standing practice (mirroring that of many early-twentieth-century cartoonists) of showing black characters as servants of white America and even, in *Snuffy Smith*, of humble mountain folk. Whereas numerous characters in positions of status and authority (businessmen, bankers, judges, lawyers) commonly refer to Snuffy and his kin as “hill-billies,” “yokey(s),” and, even on one occasion, “back-woods trash,” black characters almost never call him anything other than “suh” or “boss.” As had been the case with his portrayal of Barney Google, DeBeck’s unequivocal assertion of Snuffy’s whiteness through his domination over African-American figures mitigates the degrading aspects of his character and reinforces Smith’s role as mythic hero.

Although DeBeck’s work partially reflected the “Benighted South” vision of H.L. Mencken and Erskine Caldwell in the 1920s and 1930s, a view of a society characterized by a degraded culture, oppressive economic and political institutions, staggering inequality, and widespread poverty, it perhaps better represented a more upbeat counter vision of rural Southerners, and mountaineers in particular, that celebrated their independence and traditional ways of life.<sup>9</sup> This viewpoint was advanced by a diverse group of observers who questioned the consequences of an increasingly mechanized, pre-fabricated, and centralized modern America. To these intellectuals, writers, artists, and even government administrators — characterized collectively as Regionalists — recovery of the original promise of America required the rediscovery and celebration of “the folk.” Whether defined as nineteenth-century pioneers who “broke the Plains” or present day American Indians, ex-slaves or Midwestern-farmers, to the Regionalists, “the folk,” embodied the cultural values and the simple but honest lifeways essential to saving the nation from what Walter Lippmann called “the acids of modernity” (qtd. in Dorman 24).<sup>10</sup>

Mountaineers played a central role in this cultural movement that emphasized the importance of oneness with the land and escape from the confinements of industrialized and urbanized life. Writing for an urbane middle-class readership in 1924, playwright Percy MacKaye articulated this

conception of the promise of mountain society:

Over there in the mountains are men who do not live in cages; a million Americans, who do not chase the dollar, who do not time-serve machines, who do not learn their manners from the movies or their culture from the beauty parlors. Shall we not then, hasten to civilize them — convert their dirty log-cabins into clean cement cages? Or shall we inquire whether they may have something to contribute to our brand-new civilization— something which of old we cherished but now perhaps have forgotten? (327).

Indeed, in an era of resurgent nativism and immigration restriction, the idea of the uniqueness and importance of mountain society and culture extended well beyond the Regionalist movement. Endlessly trumpeted as “100 percent Americans” of “pure Anglo-Saxon stock” who continued to live as had their ancestors centuries earlier, the people of the mountains were presented across the cultural spectrum as a sort of “Ur-folk.” Yet, although all these cultural formats purported to present the “real mountaineers,” nearly all portrayed their subjects as romantic primitives utterly isolated from broader economic and social forces. To better define their subject as a people caught forever in the past, they underplayed or, more often, simply ignored the racial, social, and economic heterogeneity of the region and the impact of market forces on present-day mountain folk (Shapiro; Batteau; Harkins).

DeBeck’s art reflected this same mix of celebration and distortion of mountaineers and mountain culture. On the one hand, he portrayed a more full-bodied and naturalistic vision of mountain society than did any of his peers. Unlike Webb and Capp, who based their texts on standard stereotypes of Southern (as opposed to mountain) dialect from vaudeville and motion pictures, DeBeck used dozens of mountain expressions such as “plime-blank” (meaning “exactly”) and “a lavish of” (meaning “a lot of”) in his work. He even introduced his audience to unfamiliar mountain expressions by incorporating brief definitions of the terms in the text itself. He was far from a stickler for absolute accuracy in the use of dialect and freely blended his own expressions with authentic mountain sayings, inventing such famous neologisms as “discombooberated” (which has evolved into “discombobulated”), “time’s-a-wastin’,” “a leetle tetched in the haid,” “bodacious,” and “balls o’ fire” (Inge 75). Nonetheless, even the phrases he coined had the ring of truth to many readers who could not distinguish

between the actual and invented phrases. A reporter in 1940, for example, introduced a list of DeBeck's famous phrases from the strip as "hillbilly lingo (authentic and otherwise)" ("Barney Google's Birthday" 60).

DeBeck's depictions of mountain society were also somewhat more accurate and sympathetic than either of his cartoonist peers. His cabins, spinning wheels, and costumes were based on photographs and descriptions in texts on the southern mountains and were designed primarily to be illustrative of a plain but honorable lifestyle rather than distorted to present a demeaning portrait of a savage society. In stark contrast to Webb, whose figures barely communicate, DeBeck's panels overflow with colorful dialogue and his characters seem to be genuinely listening to one another rather than merely delivering gag lines. Further, DeBeck conveys genuine emotion and pathos in the budding relationships between his teenage mountain sweethearts, between Snuffy and Barney, and even between Snuffy and Lowizie.

Yet the verisimilitude of his vision of mountain life should not be overstated. DeBeck's primary focus as a cartoonist was always amusement rather than cultural edification and he played a leading role in constructing a broad-based public conception of Southern hill folk as cartoonish figures. He also was instrumental in freely blending Ozark and Appalachian settings into a single mythical geographic location. Although the strip was initially set in the North Carolina mountains, characters in an early episode refer to ordering store-bought clothes from the nearby big city of "Little Rock" — in reality, 600 plus miles to the west. Such geographic confusion suggests the willingness of both DeBeck (and other creators of the hillbilly image) and his reading public to accept the conflation of hundreds of miles of distance and two diverse cultures into a homogenous fantasy mountain South — a process that would only accelerate in the work of Al Capp.<sup>11</sup>

Nor did DeBeck ever even hint at the large-scale economic and social changes in actual mountaineers' lives. Like Webb's and Capp's hillbillies, DeBeck's characters remained largely outside of the larger economic nexus beyond the immediate borders of their "hollers." He did not acknowledge the presence of extractive industries such as coal mining or lumbering or the rise of textile mills that collectively were displacing thousands of people and radically transforming the lives of men and women throughout the southern mountains. Nor would the strip's readers gain any sense of the wave of wildcat strikes that were spreading throughout the region's mill towns in the 1930s. Nonetheless, unlike his peers, he did present (at least initially) an at least plausible mountain community where both men and women work the land, raise families, and are socially and economically attached to one another.<sup>12</sup>

DeBeck's more fully developed portrayal of Southern mountain life and society, however, did not translate into increased popularity with audiences. To the contrary, his employer, King Features Syndicate, urged that the "atmosphere [he portrayed] so faithfully be 'toned down'" (Scheinfeld 142-3). Fred Lasswell, who assisted DeBeck beginning in 1934 and replaced him after his death from cancer on November 11, 1942, recalled later that the "authentic mountain dialect" was "rather difficult for the average flatlander to read and understand." Even though DeBeck made concerted efforts to move away from mountain settings and dialect, having both Barney Google and Snuffy Smith join the armed forces (Navy and Army, respectively) at the start of the United States' involvement in World War II, the strip's popularity continued to decline. When Lasswell took over the strip in the early 1940s, Joe Connolly, head of the King Features Syndicate, told him: "Billy lost a lot of client papers and if the trend continues, we'll have to drop it." Connolly urged Lasswell to "[k]eep the same general look and flavor" initially and then "gradually inject your own ideas and your own characters." Lasswell did just this, dropping Barney Google almost entirely and adding new members of Snuffy's family and community. He also abandoned the authentic dialect, instead working to broaden his audience by following the dictum: "keep it folksy, with a country twang" (Lasswell 17, 21). And he largely gave up on long-running stories in favor of daily sight gags and one-liners. Ironically, although the strip increasingly focused on Snuffy Smith and his mountain environs, it said less and less about the hillbilly and his place in society, becoming instead a homespun vision of generic rustic America.

What then is DeBeck's lasting legacy? Certainly he was an inspiration to a generation of cartoonists who devoured his work and named their highest honor in his memory. *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*, too, thrived for the half century after his death as Fred Lasswell rebuilt a substantial circulation for *Snuffy Smith* over the following decades (from 206 newspapers in 1946 to 542 in 1964 to 900 in 21 countries by 1989) (Walker 167). At the same time, though, along with *Li'l Abner*, the strip became the focus of much opposition, especially within the southern mountains. Country music star Roy Acuff, for instance, refused to participate in the 1940 Hollywood film *Grand Ole Opry* if the studio "put in a 'Snuffy Smith—sloshwacker' background" — a condition the studio eventually accepted ("Roy Acuff "). Although many Southern mountaineers took the strip's characters as clearly fictional caricatures meant to satirize human, not regional, foibles, to others the name Snuffy Smith was synonymous with a demeaning portrait of hill folks for the amusement of urbanites. Regardless of how the strip was received, DeBeck, along with Capp

and Webb, solidified an instantly recognizable graphic image of the hillbilly that has survived into the twenty-first century, one that unified derogatory conceptions of backwardness, ignorance, and savagery and positive ideas of ruggedness, independence, and devotion to family and home.

More broadly significant, perhaps, is the way DeBeck's creativity and artistry helped not just popularize but also culturally legitimate the American comic strip. As Seldes famously wrote in 1924 in "The 'Vulgar' Comic Strip," "of all the lively arts the Comic Strip is the most despised, and with the exception of the movies it is the most popular." Seldes's defense of the medium against critics who deemed it as "a symptom of crass vulgarity, of dulness [sic], and, for all I know, of defeated and inhibited lives" was almost unique for its time and an opening salvo in the breaking down of the notion of distinct hierarchically constructed levels of culture (213). Yet such distinctions faded to such a degree that by the 1960s comic strips themselves could be the subject and inspiration for artists in the previously categorized "high art" field of painting, including Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and others of the "Pop Art" school (Kammen, *American Culture* 121-122). Such a dramatic transformation was rooted in larger social and cultural changes including the rise of a "middle class" consumerist society and the steady decline in the distinction between advertised commerce and art, but it was also a response to the growth of comics (and mass culture in general) into a multi-million dollar industry that deeply penetrated all aspects of American society. With his move from beaux-arts painter to cartoonist, pioneering forays into the commodification of his characters, innovative wordplay, and constant reinvention of his work to match the changing social and cultural landscape, Billy DeBeck was certainly an instrumental player in this process.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>DeBeck also coined such once popular but now largely forgotten expressions as "So I took the \$50,000," "the guy with the green gloves," and "OKMNX" (the last, a take off on the joke about an immigrant diner who says to his waiter with a thick accent "okay, ham and eggs.") (Walker 90).

<sup>2</sup>Walker's book offers the best concise biographical overview of DeBeck.

<sup>3</sup>For a fuller discussion of the nature and role of African-American stereotypes in comic strips and American and Western popular culture, see Jones, Lott, and Pieterse.

<sup>4</sup>In the same years DeBeck was producing *Barney Google*, he also developed two other strips, the short-lived *Bughouse Fables* and the Sunday topper cartoon (that was printed above his regular comic strip) *Parlor, Bedroom and Sink* that he later renamed *Bunky*. DeBeck produced the latter from 1926 to 1942, and it was continued by new artist Fred Lasswell until 1948 (Walker, 65).

<sup>5</sup>Snuffy's usurpation was so complete that even the title of the comic strip changed from *Barney Google* to *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* (on 24 October 1938) to *Snuffy Smith* (on 11 May 1942). Currently, the strip is entitled *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith* although the former character almost never appears. All references to the text and artwork of this comic strip come from the episodes published six days a week in the *Capital Times* (Madison, Wisconsin) between 1 June 1934 and 1 February 1946.

<sup>6</sup>*Barney Google*, 17 June 1934: n.p.; "Beyond his Knowledge!," 21 June 1934: 17; "Catching Up with History!," 23 July 1934: 11.

<sup>7</sup>In a 1940 interview, DeBeck described his character as a "moonshining, horse- and chicken-thieving illiterate who does what he damn pleases," but added, "you can't help liking the little cuss" ("*Barney Google's Birthday*," 59-60; *Barney Google*, "An Unpleasant Encounter!," 28 Nov. 1934: 13).

<sup>8</sup>*Barney Google*, "Snuffy Loses Count!," 26 Nov. 1935: 17; "Under His Own Steam!," 16 Dec. 1935: 13; "Too Close for Comfort," 12 Apr. 1938: 15.

<sup>9</sup>The term "benighted South" comes from Tindall. See also Hobson, Jr. A representative sample of Mencken's viewpoint is his "The Sahara of the Bozart."

<sup>10</sup>Dorman's book offers the best overview of the entire movement. For an analysis of the competing approaches of advocates of a regionally distinct folk culture and those touting a unified national culture, see Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, ch. 13.

<sup>11</sup>*Barney Google*, "Surprise Packages!," 8 Aug. 1934: 13.



<sup>12</sup>For overviews of the dramatic changes in Appalachia in the twentieth century, see Eller and Williams.

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