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# Colonels, Hillbillies and Fightin': Twentieth-century Kentucky in the National Imagination

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# Colonels, Hillbillies, and Fightin': Twentieth-Century Kentucky in the National Imagination

By Anthony Harkins

When I announced in 2003 to my in-laws (born and bred in New York City) that I was going for an academic job interview in what to them was far off Bowling Green, Kentucky, they speculated about what the post-interview socializing might entail: "I guess you'll be sitting on the porch drinking mint juleps," suggested my mother-in-law. "Oh no," corrected my father-in-law, "it'll be fruit jars of moonshine!" Although speaking half in jest, their visions of, on the one hand, julep-sipping white-suited Kentucky colonels and southern belles luxuriating on a palatial estate with Thoroughbreds grazing in the distance and, on the other, unkempt, bearded, and barefoot rifle-toting hillbillies drinking homemade moonshine in front of a roughshod mountain cabin match the dominant public representations of the state and its people for much of the twentieth century. Although on the surface dramatically different cultural signifiers, these conceptions are united in that each encourages outsiders and, to some degree, Kentuckians themselves to envision the state and its people as existing in a persistent antebellum and pre-industrial past and sharing a culture defined by alcohol and the potential for gun

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violence. These dual identities are also closely tied to the two parts of the state that have been most associated with the name “Kentucky”: the north-central Bluegrass region surrounding Lexington and the eastern Cumberland Plateau.

Although strikingly different culturally and geographically, they have been conflated into a single cultural space in the national consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the twentieth century, there were other important elements of the national cultural identity of Kentucky: a land of natural beauty and historic significance; a place with an abiding commitment to the “sporting life,” be it horse racing, boxing, or basketball; the home of “coal country” and its (largely) physically and socially destructive consequences; and more recently, a space of political and social conservatism and libertarianism (often defined in news accounts as one of the reddest of the “red states”). Reviewing the major twentieth-century literary, visual, and musical texts about Kentucky, however, leads me to conclude that the “Bluegrass colonel” and, to an even greater extent, the mountain “hillbilly” have been remarkably central and constant conceptual markers of “Kentucky” across the century in novels, films and television, music, advertising, and the public imagination. Only in the years surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century has the former’s potency faded away and the latter’s cartoonish uniformity begun to wane as the national identity of the state has become increasingly indistinguishable from the rest of the vast interior of the country, a cultural territory both derided and defended as “flyover country.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A third region, Louisville and its environs, played a larger role in the conception of the state early in the century, but never as prominent a one as the Bluegrass and the mountains. The author wishes to sincerely thank Jonathan Jeffrey of the Kentucky Museum and Library, Carol Crowe-Carraco and Marion Lucas of the WKU Department of History, the issue editors Rob Weise and Tom Kiffmeyer, and the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their invaluable assistance and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> The term “flyover country” is an exceedingly malleable one that in different contexts can have topographical, economic, or cultural connotations. It is usually tied to the greater Midwest (the Great Lakes and Great Plains states) but at times has been used to indicate the literal territory commercial airliners fly over between lift off in New York and touchdown in Los Angeles or, even more broadly, as a reference to the supposed cultural and social monotony and sterility of all of “middle America” between the megalopolises of the eastern and western

By the start of the twentieth century, the public conception of Kentucky had been in the making for well over a century and was rooted in two dominant cultural touchstones: a highly mythologized perception of the frontier heritage of the state—personified by the larger-than-life figure of Daniel Boone—and a view of the commonwealth as an extraordinarily violent place. First coming into Kentucky in 1769 and departing for the greener pastures of Missouri thirty years later, Boone would become and remain through much of the twentieth century the historical persona most associated officially and popularly with the state. Perhaps only Abraham Lincoln, to whom both Indiana and Illinois also lay claim, was more famously thought of as a Kentuckian. As most historians have stressed, Boone was in actuality an often-unsuccessful land speculator repeatedly in debt to creditors. He was also a man who disliked bloodshed and told his son that he was certain of having killed only one Native American foe in battle. Regardless, he was immortalized as both a ruthless Indian fighter and an upstanding family man in countless literary reincarnations including *The Winning of the West* (1899) by Theodore Roosevelt, who described him as “a tall, spare, sinewy man with eyes like an eagle’s, and muscles that never tired.” Through these writings Boone became the embodiment of a national myth, “the man who made the wilderness safe for democracy.”<sup>3</sup> In this regard, as a mix

coasts of the United States. As I will discuss later, seen through this prism, anywhere (with the possible exception of Chicago) that is not a coastal metropole, including Kentucky, is part of this imagined “flyover country.”

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, Part 1: *The Spread of the English-Speaking Peoples* (New York, 1889), 161, 162 (first quotation), 163–69; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), 269 (second quotation). Other influential accounts include John Filson’s widely read “The Adventures of Col. Daniel Boon” (in his 1784 book *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*) and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Leatherstocking Tales* novels (Boone served as the major inspiration for Natty Bumppo). On the historical development of the Boone myth, see Slotkin, *Regeneration*, especially chs. 9–10, 12–13; John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York, 1992); and Michael A. Lofaro, *Daniel Boone: An American Life* (Lexington, Ky., 2003). The facts regarding the actual rather than the mythical Boone remain contested. For a recent counterperspective that argues Boone was a successful entrepreneur, see Neal O. Hammon and James Russell Harris, “Daniel Boone the Businessman: Revising the Myth of Failure,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*

of frontiersman and community leader who served multiple terms in the Virginia state legislature and at one point owned numerous slaves, he served as a cultural precursor to *both* the later hillbilly and colonel images/identities. Deep into the twentieth century, in comic strips, movies ranging from *In the Days of Daniel Boone* (1923) to *Daniel Boone, Trailblazer* (1937), and in the family-friendly television series *Daniel Boone* (NBC, 1964–1970), he was widely heralded as the epitome of the “natural man,” willing to fight Indian savages, wild animals, and restrictions on westward migration imposed by British and Virginia colonial governments alike.<sup>4</sup> In the process, the state of Kentucky became publically imagined as a realm of savage mountain men and a perpetual frontier. In 1867, an ostensibly humorous illustration portraying the typical male inhabitant of various states, for instance, depicted “the Kentuckian” as a buckskinned and coonskin-capped wild man, fully bearded and madly wielding over his head a blood-stained bowie knife in one hand and the scalp of a recent victim in the other.<sup>5</sup>

The identification of Kentucky with Boone and his fellow long hunters also encouraged the public association of the state with guns and gun violence, a reputation that was partly fabricated and partly fairly earned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kentucky had a long, but not-altogether exceptional, history of violence from the hardships of frontier life, to ritualized dueling, to a deeply divisive Civil War that literally pitted brother against brother, to widespread terror against newly freed blacks by the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations in the years of Reconstruction. In the late nineteenth century, “local-color” writers both from and beyond the

(hereinafter *Register*) 112 (Winter 2014): 5–50.

<sup>4</sup> Other films based on Boone, frontier, and early-national-era Kentucky include *Daniel Boone* (RKO, 1936), *Allegheny Uprising* (RKO, 1939), *The Fighting Kentuckian* (Republic Pictures, 1949), and *The Kentuckian* (United Artists, 1955). For a complete list and discussion, see J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains Did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 86–90, 279.

<sup>5</sup> “Citizens of the United States according to Popular Impressions,” *Harper’s Weekly*, January 12, 1867, p. 29, reprinted in Maryjean Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern: A Tale of Outlaws, Horse Thieves, Gamblers, and Breeders* (Lexington, Ky., 2010), 4.

commonwealth, including Kentuckians William Wallace Harney, James Lane Allen, Charles Neville Buck, and, above all, John Fox Jr., introduced the notion of the “otherness” of mountain Kentucky to a national, largely urban middle-class, readership hungry for entertaining accounts of Americans as yet untouched (theoretically) by the twin forces of urbanity and industrialization. In the pages of periodicals such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper’s Weekly* and in their novels, these writers presented to their readers a picturesque landscape populated by colorful men and women oddly out of step with modern society.<sup>6</sup> This image, however, was soon superseded by a strikingly different conception of the state, especially its mountainous parts, as a land of lawlessness cursed by the twin “evils” of “moonshining” and “feuding” and a people for whom “the lust for human blood has become a malignant disease.”<sup>7</sup> Regional and national newspapers reported in highly sensationalistic ways on dozens of family-oriented conflicts, forty-one between 1874 and 1893 alone, including the Martin-Tolliver conflict, called the “Rowan County War,” and the famed “Hatfield-McCoy” feud that ran, in fits and starts, from 1882 to 1890. The feuding sides (which, contrary to common perceptions, were only partly based on interfamilial ties) became household names and made “Kentucky” synonymous with the idea of mountaineers who were ready, even eager, to use deadly violence against rivals and law enforcement officials.<sup>8</sup> The violence in the Cumberland Mountains

<sup>6</sup> On “local-color” literature on Kentucky and Appalachia more generally, see Henry Shapiro, *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1978); and Allen Batteau, *The Invention of Appalachia* (Tucson, Ariz., 1990). For a consideration of the perspectives of the readers of this literature, see Emily Satterwhite, *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction Since 1878* (Lexington, Ky., 2011), esp. chs. 1–2, 17–25.

<sup>7</sup> Hartley Davis and Clifford Smyth, “Land of Feuds,” *Munsey’s Magazine*, November 1903, p. 162, reprinted in Kathleen M. Blee and Dwight B. Billings, “Where ‘Bloodshed is a Pastime’: Mountain Feuds and Appalachian Stereotyping,” in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, and Katherine Ledford (Lexington, Ky., 1999), 124.

<sup>8</sup> The actual Hatfield-McCoy conflict had much more to do with economic disputes and interstate rivalry than a “culture of violence,” but most accounts eschewed any such political and economic analysis and instead presented it as a prime example of the irrational savagery and dangerous ignorance of all rural people of the region. On moonshining, see Wilbur R.

region persisted into the new century, most dramatically, perhaps, in Breathitt County, where the swath of shootouts and murders between 1902 and 1904 made “Bloody Breathitt,” in the words of a *Washington Post* reporter, the focus of more negative attention “than any other section of the world.”<sup>9</sup>

Feuding and battles with revenue agents were hardly the only dramatic acts of criminal aggression in the state in the early twentieth century. The shooting of gubernatorial candidate William Goebel just outside the state capitol building in 1900 (he died three days later, after having been deemed governor-elect, thus making him the only governor in U.S. history to be assassinated) and the “Black Patch War,” the widespread and deadly farmer-on-farmer violence in the western part of the state, cemented the violent reputation of the state. A postcard from the early 1900s depicting “The Things that made Kentucky Famous” featured a racehorse, a bottle of whiskey, an attractive woman in a large plumed hat, and a revolver.<sup>10</sup>

The perceived violence of Kentucky and its mountain folk also played a very prominent role in the new medium of silent motion pictures. The most influential American director in that genre, D. W.

Miller, *Revenuers and Moonshiners: Enforcing Federal Liquor Laws in the Mountain South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991). On mountain feuds and newspaper accounts, see Altina Waller, “Feuding in Appalachia: Evolution of a Cultural Stereotype,” in *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Dwight B. Billings, Mary Beth Pudup, and Altina L. Waller (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995), 347–76. On the Hatfield-McCoy and other feuds, see Altina Waller, *Feud: Hatfields, McCoy, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860–1900* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988); and John Ed Pearce, *Days of Darkness: The Feuds of Eastern Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1994).

<sup>9</sup> James C. Klotter, *Kentucky: Portrait in Paradox, 1900–1950* (Frankfort, Ky., 1996), 56. See also T. R. C. Hutton, *Bloody Breathitt: Politics and Violence in the Appalachian South* (Lexington, Ky., 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, ch. 2; “The Things that made Kentucky Famous,” picture postcard, 1906, Postcard Collection, Special Collections Library, Western Kentucky University (hereinafter SCL-WKU). For a similar example, see Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*, 94. The woman pictured is most likely Belle Brezing, a well-known Lexington prostitute and madam who was the inspiration for the character Belle Watling in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*. Jason Flahardy, “Belle Brezing: A Short Biography of Lexington’s Most Famous Lady,” University of Kentucky Audio/Visual Archives, [http://libraries.uky.edu/libpage.php?lweb\\_id=341&llib\\_id=13](http://libraries.uky.edu/libpage.php?lweb_id=341&llib_id=13); and Maryjean Wall, *Madam Bell: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel* (Lexington, Ky., 2014). I thank David Turpie and Mandy Higgins for this insight.

Griffith, was himself a Kentuckian, and he set a number of his earliest films in the state. The word “Kentucky” was featured in the title of an astounding twenty-eight films made between 1904 and 1938 (although, establishing a long-lasting practice, very few were actually filmed in the commonwealth).<sup>11</sup> Nearly all (and dozens more like them) featured highly melodramatic storylines and almost non-stop action including horse chases, characters falling or leaping from cliffs, and fighting of all forms, from fisticuffs to all-out gun battles. Often based on the stories of popular local-color novelists such as Kentucky natives Charles Neville Buck and especially John Fox Jr., whose best sellers *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908) were each repeatedly made into successful films, these plots involved feuding families, battles between moonshiners and revenueurs, and love triangles that pitted urbanites against mountaineers for the hand of a mountain girl, ensuring that nearly every film featured one or more killings or attacks.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, these films neglected the role of large-scale extractive industries, such as lumber and coal, in changing the socioeconomic terrain of the commonwealth. As such, they implied that mountaineers’ violence was rooted in blood and genetics. Moreover, the films suggested that the mountaineers, and the entire state of Kentucky by association, were exclusively white, proto-industrial, and occupied a cultural identity outside of actual time and space.

Interestingly, the image of Kentucky mountaineers was malleable enough that it could simultaneously take on significantly different

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Bernardi, “The Voice of Whiteness: D. W. Griffith’s Biograph Films (1908–1913),” in *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996), 103–28. For individual films, see *Biograph Bulletins, 1880–1912* (New York, 1973); and *Biograph Bulletins, 1896–1908* (Los Angeles, 1971). For a complete list of Kentucky and Appalachian mountain-set films, see J. W. Williamson, “Southern Mountaineers Filmography,” <http://www.collections.library.appstate.edu/southernmountaineersfilmography>.

<sup>12</sup> J. W. Williamson, *Southern Mountaineers in Silent Films: Plot Synopses of Movies About Moonshining, Feuding, and Other Mountain Topics, 1904–1929* (Jefferson, N.C., 1994), 7. For general introductions to silent film of this era, see Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago, 1983), ch. 6; Stephen J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), 11–33.

meanings. Thus, although silent films initially presented them as posing a deadly serious threat to civilized America, by the late 1910s, they began to parody the earlier mountaineer genre and feature more comedic representations of Kentucky hill folk. In *Miss Deception* (1917), for instance, a refined city woman deliberately plays upon her snobbish family's fears that an extended stay with her uncle in the Kentucky mountains will transform her into a primitive savage by returning from her visit in the guise of an egregiously uncouth yokel.<sup>13</sup> By the 1930s, these parodies became even more explicit. *Kentucky Kernels* (1934) offered a hackneyed plot of urban outsiders coming to "feud country" after they learn that the child they are guarding has recently inherited a Kentucky estate. Freely mixing southern and mountain stereotypes, it portrayed the leaders of the feuding Wakefield family as aristocratic southern planters, but the other men in the "clan" are dressed in a variety of rustic costumes from plaid shirts and slouch hats to cowboy hats and string ties.<sup>14</sup>

By *Kentucky Moonshine* (1938), the next comedy set in the Bluegrass State, the iconic lazy, over-bearded, and over-hatted hillbilly had been undeniably established. The film's plot fully exploited the newly iconized image, showing down-on-their-luck New York performers who try to cash in on the country-music craze by traveling to the Kentucky hill town of "Coma" to be "discovered" by a New York music radio-show host. Peppered with references to feuds, child brides, and the "shock" of wearing shoes, the film consistently presented Kentucky mountaineers as absurdly degenerate.<sup>15</sup> This new cultural currency of the Kentucky "hillbilly" was partly a response to the demand for "mountain music" on radio shows and in night clubs but mostly a reflection of the enormous popularity of hillbilly comics and cartoons, all first published in 1934: Billy DeBeck's "Barney Google and Snuffy Smith" and Al Capp's "Li'l Abner" that were soon

<sup>13</sup> See Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, 269–71; Williamson, "Southern Mountaineers Filmography."

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York, 2004), 152–54.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–56.

featured in the comic sections of hundreds of newspapers, and Paul Webb's "The Mountain Boys" that ran in the pages of tony *Esquire* magazine. The near simultaneous appearance of these comic hillbillies at the height of the Great Depression suggests widespread public fear of systemic economic and social collapse but also a national fascination with the rural folk in general, and mountaineers in particular.

Because the cultural conception of the Kentucky (and, more broadly, southern mountain) hillbilly was fundamentally ambiguous, it included both negative and positive aspects of the American past and present. In the comics and throughout interwar popular culture, it signified social and economic backwardness, violence, and sexual promiscuity and even aberrance, but at the same time a supposedly pure Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage and a commitment to family, kin, and personal independence rather than monetary gain. The characters (and the real people they supposedly represented) could therefore be simultaneously ridiculed, condemned, and held up as models of traditional American values needed to rescue the nation from the twin dangers of industrial urbanism and unregulated capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Defined culturally more than geographically, the association of the hillbilly and the actual place Kentucky was not absolute and these cartoons and comic strips rarely identified a specific locale. Although Li'l Abner's hometown of Dogpatch, for instance, was ostensibly in the Kentucky hill country, there were few references to the state in the strip and the setting primarily served as an "exotic" backdrop for Capp's extended morality tales.<sup>17</sup> Still, by the eve of World War II, the correlation between Kentucky and the long-bearded and comically dangerous (or just plain dangerous) hillbilly had been firmly entrenched and would persist for much of the rest of the century. Even as late as the 1960s, standard picture postcard packets featuring the state's natural landmarks, famous personages, and historic build-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., ch. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Dogpatch's Kentucky identity was so minimal that Capp easily relocated the town to the Ozarks in 1968 as part of a business deal with a newly developed amusement park called "Dogpatch USA." See Brooks Blevins, *Arkansas/Arkansaw: How Bear Hunters, Hillbillies, & Good Ol' Boys Defined a State* (Fayetteville, Ark., 2009), 157–64.

ings also included a silhouette of a bearded and rifle-bearing hill man tending a moonshine still!<sup>18</sup>

At least through the civil rights era of the 1960s, a cultural association with “Kentucky” that was nearly as omnipresent was the perceived genteel life of the pre–Civil War South, supposedly best preserved in the central Bluegrass region. Such a vision was ahistorical and even ironic, for the state never seceded from the Union, had more residents who fought on the side of the Union than the Confederacy, and was deeply divided over the issue of the Civil War (the metaphor of “brother fighting against brother” was a reality in many Kentucky families). Yet once the war was over, most white Kentuckians chose to associate themselves explicitly with the South and the “Lost Cause” mythology. Monuments to Confederate heroes and war dead were erected all over the state, and many in the commonwealth and beyond its borders came to see it as the northernmost part of the distinct region known as “the South.”<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the emergence of media representations of white-suited “Kentucky colonels” attended to by cheerful and musical, but slow-witted, black servants, therefore, was central to the reimagining of Kentucky as unequivocally southern in culture and history. This, in turn, was part of the larger effort to forcefully establish a segregated society in Kentucky, the South, and (to a lesser extent) the nation as a whole by essentializing black inequality and cultural inferiority. An early and influential example was the melodrama *In Old Kentucky*, which premiered in 1893 and was staged in New York, Boston, Chicago, and elsewhere for the next twenty-seven years. It was adapted into a best-selling book in 1910 and four times as a motion picture between 1909 and 1935. The story incorporated nearly all the central motifs in the burgeoning Kentucky image. It featured not only a beautiful mountain girl who escapes her feuding family and falls in love with a wealthy young Bluegrass

<sup>18</sup> See folder “KyLib Postcards—KENTUCKY (Greetings from . . .),” Postcard Collection, SCL-WKU.

<sup>19</sup> See Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2013); and Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*.

gentleman but also horse racing—she eventually earns his hand in marriage by riding the winning horse in the “Ashland Oaks Derby,” and during the performance six Thoroughbreds galloped across the stage! Furthermore, secondary characters, including “Uncle Neb,” Layton’s loyal black servant, and “Colonel Sandusky Doolittle,” a mint julep–drinking, cigar-smoking stereotype of the timeless Kentucky planter, reinforced the theme of a land of benevolent but firm white patriarchy.<sup>20</sup>

Two years after the premiere of the play, the publication of Annie Fellows Johnston’s *The Little Colonel* further solidified the association of Kentucky with a romanticized pre–Civil War South. Raised in a comfortably middle-class Louisville family, Johnston wrote highly sentimentalized celebrations of Victorian ideas of “proper” racial, class, and gender hierarchies that promoted a life of relaxed leisure and a world populated by respectable white families and doting, but simple-minded, black house servants. She subsequently published eleven more “Little Colonel” children’s books between 1895 and 1912. Although deeply out of step with early-twenty-first-century sensibilities, the books were widely popular in their era with children and adults alike and reinforced perceptions of a highly mythical Kentucky for decades thereafter.<sup>21</sup>

In 1935 (the same year as the screening of the third film version of *In Old Kentucky*), Twentieth Century Fox released the film *The Little Colonel*, primarily as a vehicle for their new child sensation, Shirley Temple. The opening title frame identifies the setting as “Kentucky in the 70s,” the grandfatherly Colonel Lloyd (played by Lionel Barrymore) sports a white goatee and dresses in the classic “Kentucky colonel” outfit of white suit and string tie, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson hums “My Old Kentucky Home” during his famous stairway dance routine with Temple. The cultural and physical landscape,

<sup>20</sup> Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*, 166–68; James C. Nicholson, *The Kentucky Derby: How the Run for the Roses Became America’s Premier Sporting Event* (Lexington, Ky., 2012), 75; Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, 90.

<sup>21</sup> Sue Lynn McGuire, “The Little Colonel: A Phenomenon in Popular Literary Culture,” *Register* 89 (Spring 1991): 121–46; Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, 3–4.

however, in no way resembles Kentucky but rather a locale farther south (a *New York Times* reviewer even identified the setting as “the deep South in some vague period in the post–Civil War years”). The portrayal of blacks as adoring house servants and “pickaninny” bare-foot children (one of whom is named “Henry Clay”) hearken back further to the bygone slavery era.<sup>22</sup>

Nothing more tied the state to the “moonlight and magnolias” southern mystique in the national public mind than the Kentucky Derby. The Derby dates back to 1875, and the notion of Kentucky as fundamentally linked to Thoroughbred breeding and racing can be traced back even further. As recent historians have emphasized, however, the idea of Kentucky as the horse center of the country (or indeed the world) was not inevitable. In the aftermath of the Civil War, economic hardships in Kentucky led wealthy horse breeders to look to upstate New York as a competing space for horse breeding and racing. The systematic purging of black jockeys, trainers, and owners from the local racing industry in the decade surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, however, helped explicitly tie the state to the popularity of the antebellum South image. That the impetus for such segregation practices came from northeastern moneyed horsemen at a time of intensifying racism nationwide did not detract from the further solidification of this impression.<sup>23</sup>

The later association of the Derby with Stephen Foster’s melancholy paean to the world of the Lost Cause, “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night” (first published in 1853, first sung at the Derby in 1921, and named the official state song in 1928), further entrenched the idea of Kentucky as a land of benevolent white masters, genteel white mistresses, and simple and loyal blacks pining for the comforts and certainty of a land before the traumas of the war

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Seenwald, “Shirley Temple and Lionel Barrymore in ‘The Little Colonel,’ the New Film at the Music Hall,” *New York Times*, March 22, 1935, p. 26; see also Nicholson, *Kentucky Derby*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Wall, *How Kentucky Became Southern*, 111–13. See also Pellom McDaniels III, *The Prince of Jockeys: The Life of Isaac Burns Murphy* (Lexington, Ky., 2013); and Katherine C. Mooney, *Race Horse Men: How Slavery and Freedom Were Made at the Racetrack* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014).

and Reconstruction.<sup>24</sup> As historian James Nicholson argues, a central reason for the ever-growing popularity of the Derby in the mid-twentieth century and its position as *the* representation of the state in the public imagination was that it provided Americans “a quasi-theme park version of a[n] [imagined] bygone era” and “a taste of the Old South without having to travel to the geographically and culturally distant Deep South” in a state that was supposedly racially more tolerant than the lower southern states. That image, of course, belied the reality of widespread discrimination, racial violence, and even lynching in Kentucky in the first decades of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

As the Derby grew in popularity and national attention, especially with the advent of live radio broadcasts in the 1920s, the vision of the state as perpetually occupying an exotic and romantic past far from the uncertainties and social fluidity of modern urban life solidified. Wrote one *New York Times* reporter in 1924: “No other of these United States has such individuality . . . distinct savor, the racy flavor, of what was once the dark and bloody ground. Kentucky is the only state that is an entity aside from its climate, geography, products or population.”<sup>26</sup>

Explicit associations between the Derby, the state, and the “Lost Cause” South persisted well into the 1950s, a time of the “golden age” of race horsing, when it surpassed even baseball as the premier spectator sport in the nation. Newspaper and magazine coverage of the Derby, as well as of related events such as the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels’ annual pre-race dinner that featured photographs of black

<sup>24</sup> Ironically, given how completely he and his music became associated with the state and the South, Foster was a native and longtime resident of Pittsburgh who died tragically young in New York City. He had lived briefly in Cincinnati but had only visited Kentucky towns along the Ohio River a few times and had traveled only once into the Deep South. See Ken Emerson, *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York, 1997); and the website for the documentary film *Stephen Foster* (Public Broadcasting Service, 2001), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/>.

<sup>25</sup> Additions in brackets are mine. Nicholson, *Kentucky Derby*, 64–65 (first quotation), 67 (second quotation). On racial violence in Kentucky, see Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, 65–70; and George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865–1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge, La., 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Nicholson, *Kentucky Derby*, 76.

waiters serving mint juleps while singing Stephen Foster melodies, did much to shape public perceptions of the state as a whole.<sup>27</sup> This close association, however, began to decline with the advent of television coverage in 1952, the increasingly raucous behavior in the 1960s and 1970s of the tens of thousands of fans in the track's infield, and, above all, the demonstrations of civil rights protestors in Louisville and nationwide. Mint Juleps and the singing of "My Old Kentucky Home" remain to this day closely identified with the Derby, and it continues to be the single most defining event associated with the state by Kentuckians and non-natives alike, but the connections with the "Old South" went into steep decline after the 1960s.<sup>28</sup>

As the earlier-discussed plot of *Kentucky Moonshine* reveals, along with "horse country," white-suited colonels, and mountain folks waxing and waning between nobility, degeneracy, and ridiculousness, by midcentury Kentucky had also come to signify the homeland of authentic roots music. By the 1930s, dozens of Kentuckians were performing on country-music radio shows or being recorded by leading record companies and some were becoming major stars. Kentucky performers were also a mainstay of folk festivals around the country, including the National Folk Festival, which was founded in 1934 by McCracken County native Sarah Gertrude Knott. Arguably the individual most responsible for nationally associating the state with a folk musical reputation, however, was radio personality John Lair. Born and raised in Rockcastle County, he was a driving force behind the Chicago-based WLS *National Barn Dance* from 1924 to the late 1930s.

In 1939, he returned to his home county, where he founded and

<sup>27</sup> The Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels (HOKC) dates to 1931 and is rooted in the tradition of establishing so-named military positions that began in 1813. Although the "commissions" are issued by the sitting governor and secretary of state of Kentucky, the HOKC is an independent non-profit charitable and social organization that promotes a Good Works Program of charitable giving within the state. Over the years, the honorary commissions have been very widely granted to celebrities, politicians, visiting dignitaries, business and professional leaders, and even some "everyday" Kentuckians. See "Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels," <http://kycolonels.org/>; and "Kentucky Colonels" <http://www.sos.ky.gov/admin/Executive/Pages/Kentucky-Colonels.aspx>.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholson, *Kentucky Derby*, 122–23.

managed the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* for the next nearly thirty years. Lair was responsible for establishing an entertainment pipeline between Kentucky and the *National Barn Dance*, encouraging a steady stream of musicians, including Doc Hopkins, Hartford (Harry) Connecticut Taylor, Carl Davis, Clyde “Red” Foley, and Lily May Ledford, to come up and perform on the show. There they joined folk singer Bradley Kincaid, self-dubbed “the Kentucky Mountain Boy with his Houn’ Dog Guitar.” The performers on the *National Barn Dance* were not the only Kentucky musicians to make a name for themselves in the interwar years. Others included comedic banjo pickers “Cousin Emmy” (Cynthia May Carver) and Louis M. “Grandpa” Jones and musician and songwriter Pee Wee King. Slightly later, folk ballad singers Jean Ritchie and John Jacob Niles brought their dulcimer playing and folk songs to a global audience eager to maintain a romanticized vision of Kentuckian cultural purity unsullied by crass commercial forces.<sup>29</sup>

Lair constructed a distinctly mountain, and at times even explicitly hillbilly, image for his performers and to a degree for the music as a whole, creating an explicit stage and on-air persona for his musicians that stressed their supposedly genuine mountain origins.<sup>30</sup> The radio copy Lair wrote for his band “The Cumberland Ridge Runners” emphasized the homespun mountain image he wished to project. A typical program of 1932 introduced the group with this folksy dialect:

The boys an girls you’re gonna hear durin these fifteen minits is  
the genuwine artickle—no frills and no furbelows—jest plain

<sup>29</sup> See Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1997), 337–39; Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, 178–81; Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 2009); Michael Ann Williams, *Staging Tradition: John Lair and Sarah Gertrude Knott* (Urbana, Ill., 2006). On the National Barn Dance, see Chad Berry, ed., *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana, Ill., 2008); and the associated documentary of the same name by Stephen Parry (Hayloft Gang Productions, 2011), <http://www.hayloftgang.com/>.

<sup>30</sup> Jack Hurst, “Barn Dance’ Days: Remembering the Stars of a Pioneering Chicago Radio Show,” *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine*, August 15, 1984, p. 11; Williams, *Staging Tradition*, 9–10; Kristine M. McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels: The Women of Barn Dance Radio* (Urbana, Ill., 2008), 22.

folks from the hills of Kintuck an Tennessee whur they bin livin purty much the same lives that their foreparents lived—an most of the songs they know ar purty much the same ez they wuz when these same foreparents whistled an sung ‘em while they wuz chop-pin Ameriky out of the Wilderness.<sup>31</sup>

As these lines suggest, Lair consistently sought to associate the musicians he managed, and country music in general, with a nostalgic portrait of the American past that emphasized a pure Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition and a rugged pioneer ancestry. To Lair, as to many others in the interwar years, this culture and its traditional values of independence and a strong sense of family and kin seemed most perfectly preserved in the southern Appalachians, perhaps especially in eastern Kentucky, where supposed physical and social isolation had purportedly allowed it to survive long after it had been washed away elsewhere by the forces of modernity, urbanism, and industrialization. These associations were also promoted in the writings of influential Kentucky authors Elizabeth Madox Roberts (*The Time of Man*, 1926), James Still (*River of Earth*, 1940), and especially Jesse Stuart (*Man with a Bull Tongue Plow*, 1934; *Taps for Private Tussie*, 1943).<sup>32</sup> Such signification of the racial and cultural purity of the Anglo-American folk-music tradition was also behind the decision by the Franklin Roosevelt administration to invite Lily May Ledford and her Lair-created group, the Coon Creek Girls, to sing mountain ballads at the White House in 1939 before an audience that included the visiting King and Queen of England.<sup>33</sup>

By the late 1930s, however, such views were increasingly hard for national audiences to sustain. Coal strikes in “Bloody Harlan” and elsewhere in the state and region added to the violent image of Kentucky. News accounts of aberrant social and religious practices from

<sup>31</sup> “NBC—Farm and Home—8/15/32—Cumberland Ridge Runners,” Folder: Cumberland Ridge Runners—Various Programs 1931–1932, Box 1, John Lair Papers, Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.

<sup>32</sup> Klotter, *Portrait in Paradox*, 173–78; Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 314–30.

<sup>33</sup> McCusker, *Lonesome Cowgirls and Honky-Tonk Angels*, 99–102.

child brides to snake handling to speaking in tongues contributed to notions of cultural backwardness. Regional New Deal program reports presented the southern mountains as a particularly economically depressed area within the hard-hit southern states. In a time of national labor militancy and ruthless struggles between operators and union supporters in the Kentucky coalfields, protest singers Aunt Molly Jackson and Florence Reece (whose 1931 song “Which Side Are You On?” about the “Bloody Harlan” labor wars became a staple of protest singers everywhere) gained national attention. Jackson was “discovered” in that same year during the investigation by the Dreiser Committee (a self-appointed group of leftist intellectuals named for writer Theodore Dreiser) into the working and living conditions of Harlan County miners. Brought back to Greenwich Village, she became the darling of left-wing activists and, as a genuine Kentucky mountaineer who at times dressed on stage in simple homespun and smoked a corncob pipe, the perceived personification of the “authentic” American folk.<sup>34</sup>

In the face of a seemingly endless number of negative stories about the region, however, the fascination with Kentucky and its mountains began to fade by the end of the decade, and country music and musicians looked westward for their public identities. Kentucky fiddler Clifford Gross’s career perfectly encapsulated this trend. In 1931, he moved to Fort Worth, Texas, and formed a string band called “The Kentucky Hillbillies.” The band soon broke up, but Gross found quick success, joining the very popular Light Crust Doughboys in 1933. In 1939, Gross returned to Louisville and formed yet another band, but, realizing the overwhelming trend in country music, he called his new group “Clifford Gross’s Texas Cowboys.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> On the fascinating life of Aunt Molly Jackson, see Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folk Song* (Urbana, Ill., 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002), 291–306; Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens, Ga., 1993), 94; Charles K. Wolfe, “Take Me Back to Renfro Valley,” *Journal of Country Music* 9 (1983): 23. Gross’s transformation is a prime example of just how pliable the country-music image was and its continual reinvention of “authenticity.” See Richard Peterson, *Creating Country Music* (Chicago, 1997).

In the decades surrounding World War II, the musical identity of Kentucky was transformed yet again. Drawing on a wide array of musical styles, including traditional Appalachian mountain ballads, African rhythms and spirituals, Victorian-era parlor songs, blues, jazz, and “hillbilly” music, William S. “Bill” Monroe of Rosine, Kentucky, nearly single-handedly created the string-band genre “Bluegrass.” The enormously influential new style combined up-tempo group strumming and picking, lightning fast solo playing, and “high lonesome” high-pitched singing. Along with his band, “The Blue Grass Boys,” Monroe gained international fame and was awarded both a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (in 1993) and the National Medal of Arts (in 1995). The Bluegrass style was often associated in the national consciousness with the region around Lexington and even the eastern Kentucky mountains despite the fact that Monroe was from the western part of the state. This confusion offers further evidence that the state signified a cultural, rather than a geographic, space in the public imagination. Monroe did little to dispel this idea, singing romanticized autobiographically inflected songs, such as “My Rose of Old Kentucky,” “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” “On the Old Kentucky Shore,” and “I’m On My Way Back to the Old Home,” that shaped a vision of the state as paradise lost, an idyllic rural world perpetually receding before the endless assault of industrial modernity. This sentiment was perhaps best captured in John Prine’s 1971 classic song “Paradise,” about the devastating impact of strip mining in Muhlenberg County in western Kentucky.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the broad appeal of Bluegrass music, especially after the so-called folk revival of the 1950s, Kentucky faded in the national consciousness in the decade and a half after World War II from the central place it had held in the Depression years. Kentucky-born musicians such as Merle Travis, the Osborne Brothers, and Don and Phil Everly (the Everly Brothers of rockabilly fame) continued to

<sup>36</sup> On Monroe and his influence, see Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana, Ill., 2003), esp. 226–48; Richard D. Smith, *Can’t You Hear Me Callin’: The Life of Bill Monroe, Father of Bluegrass* (Boston, 2000); and Neil V. Rosenberg and Charles K. Wolfe, *The Music of Bill Monroe* (Urbana, Ill., 2000).

perform in Nashville and across the country, and the Kentucky Derby continued to grow in national importance, but few other cultural texts featured the state and its current residents. More attention was paid to the large number of migrants from Kentucky and other Appalachian states who followed wartime factory work to midwestern and eastern industrial cities, as they had since the 1930s, or were pushed to these urban centers due to the steady mechanization of coal mining. Their exodus and difficult conditions were at times movingly and forcefully told, as in Kentucky author Harriette Simpson Arnow's best-selling masterpiece *The Dollmaker* (1954), but more often they were presented in national media stories as an inassimilable, unwanted, and undesirable population. In the words of Albert Votaw's now-infamous article "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," they were "proud, poor, primitive, and fast with a knife."<sup>37</sup>

Such press and public commentaries were precursors to the reemergence of Kentucky and Appalachia on the national radar in the early 1960s, first in the West Virginia Democratic presidential primary of 1960 in which candidate Senator John F. Kennedy made poverty and hunger in that state major themes of his campaign, and then a few years later with the publication of Michael Harrington's *The Other America* and Harry Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlandlands: A Biography of a Depressed Region*. Caudill centered his damning indictment on the debilitating overreliance on destructive coal-mining practices in eastern Kentucky and concluded "nowhere else have the forces of decay and demoralization advanced so far or so rapidly." Harrington, too, called for decisive action to respond to the forty to fifty million seemingly invisible Americans living in poverty in rural isolation and urban ghettos, "maimed in body and spirit" and experiencing "needless suffering in the most advanced society in the world." The year 1962 closed with the CBS News documentary

<sup>37</sup> Albert N. Votaw, "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1958, p. 64. See also William W. Philliber, Clyde B. McCoy, and Harry C. Dillingham, eds., *The Invisible Minority: Urban Appalachians* (Lexington, Ky., 1981); Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana, Ill., 2000); and Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 175–77.

“Christmas in Appalachia,” which movingly, if at times insensitively, contrasted the ideal of Yuletide plenty with the “wretched” poverty of the remote hollers of Letcher County.<sup>38</sup>

These works and images eventually led to President Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 declaration of an “unconditional war on poverty,” the formation of the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the establishment of the Appalachian Regional Commission. Kentucky hill folk played a central symbolic role in the media’s coverage of the war on poverty, offering proof that economic deprivation was a problem facing the entire nation, including communities of Anglo-Saxon whites, and not just inner-city blacks and other minorities. President Johnson even made a well-publicized trip to Inez in Martin County in April 1964, briefly visiting with local hard-luck resident Tom Fletcher and promoting his call for a “War on Poverty” from the front stoop of Fletcher’s humble home. Nearly every major general-circulation magazine and newspaper that year featured stories on “the plight of the hill people,” punctuated by the photographed faces of dirty, ill-clothed, and malnourished men, women, and children living in tarpaper shacks.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of this barrage of press coverage, the Appalachian mountaineer was reimagined not as primarily violent and dangerous, but as someone deserving empathy (or at least pity) and federal sup-

<sup>38</sup> Carl M. Brauer, “Kennedy, Johnson, and the War on Poverty,” *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 101; Batteau, *Invention*, 150; Harry M. Caudill, *Night Comes to the Cumberland: A Biography of a Depressed Area* (Boston, 1963), 380 (first quotation); Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York, 1962), 24 (second quotation), 186 (third quotation). See also Ian C. Hartman, “West Virginia Mountaineers and Kentucky Frontiersman: Race, Manliness, and the Rhetoric of Liberalism in the Early 1960s,” *Journal of Southern History* 80 (Aug. 2014): 651–78.

<sup>39</sup> Jerome Ellison, “The Plight of the Hill People,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 4, 1960, p. 43 (quotation). On the failures and successes of the War on Poverty in Appalachia, see Thomas Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty* (Lexington, Ky., 2008); David Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer: People, Power, and Planning in Appalachia* (Boone, N.C., 1980), chs. 4–6; and John M. Glen, “The War on Poverty in Appalachia: A Preliminary Report,” *Register* 87 (Winter 1989): 40–57. On media coverage of Appalachia in these years, see Batteau, *Invention*, chs. 8–9; and Betty Miller Bowler, “‘That Ribbon of Social Neglect’: Appalachia and the Media in 1964,” *Appalachian Journal* 12 (Spring 1985): 239–47.

port. Not only Appalachia but also Kentucky became and remained synonymous with poverty in the American imagination long after the War on Poverty had run its course. On the fiftieth anniversary of the launching of the War on Poverty, national press stories once again focused on economic conditions in Martin County as a means of measuring the success or failure of Johnson's ambitious program.<sup>40</sup> Unlike in the 1930s, the last period of national consciousness about Kentucky mountaineers, however, films and television programs of the 1960s and 1970s with "hillbilly" and mountaineer characters were not directly associated with or set in the state, primarily because the producers and stars of these shows hailed from other states in the Upper South. Such television shows included *The Real McCoys* (ABC, 1957–1962; CBS, 1962–1963), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962–1971), *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS, 1960–1968), and *The Waltons* (CBS, 1971–1981), featuring hill folks from West Virginia, Missouri, North Carolina, and Virginia, respectively. *The Dukes of Hazzard* (CBS, 1979–1985), whose title locale resembled the Kentucky town of Hazard, was actually set in mythical Hazzard County, Georgia.

Even through the years of the War on Poverty, college basketball prowess stood as a continuous signifier of the identity of the state to the rest of the country. Starting with the run of four national championships in ten years (between 1948 and 1958) by the University of Kentucky (UK) Wildcats under the leadership of Coach Adolph Rupp, college teams from Kentucky went on to win seven more NCAA titles—four more by UK and three by the University of Louisville—between 1978 and 2013, and other college teams from the state earned repeated appearances in the NCAA national

<sup>40</sup> Pam Fessler, "Kentucky County That Gave War on Poverty a Face Still Struggles," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, January 8, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/08/260151923/> (accessed January 23, 2015). To her credit, Fessler followed this story up ten days later with "In Appalachia, Poverty is in the Eye of the Beholder," which acknowledged the resentment many local residents felt in being "the poster child for the War on Poverty." See <http://www.npr.org/2014/01/18/263629452/> (accessed January 23, 2015).

tournament and the National Invitation Tournament (NIT). Two Kentucky coaches, Rupp and Edgar A. Diddle of Western Kentucky University, rank first and fourth in all-time wins, and dozens of Kentucky college players have gone on to have successful careers in the professional ranks.

The Wildcats' history, however, is marred by a 1951 point-shaving scandal and a reluctance to integrate. UK's tacit refusal to field African American players led to the now-infamous and nationally transformative 1966 NCAA championship game when all-white and heavily favored Kentucky was defeated by an all-black team from Texas Western (now the University of Texas–El Paso).<sup>41</sup> Under both national and local pressure, the team finally began to slowly integrate in 1970, but racial animosities persisted long after. Decades past his mid-1980s playing days at UK, for instance, star guard Rex Chapman recalled that he explicitly felt he was envisioned by fans as “the Great White Hope” and that numerous school officials pressured him to stop publically dating black women. The racist atmosphere was so pervasive, he argued, it led him to leave the school early and enter the NBA.<sup>42</sup> By the early twenty-first century, such overt racism was far less prominent and Kentuckians of all racial backgrounds seemed willing to openly embrace successful black star athletes, but this history reinforced a national perception of a basketball-obsessed state, and more significantly, of a state still mired in the past.

Although the identity of the basketball Wildcats did not particularly play off either the colonel or the hillbilly personas (even though Rupp was sometimes referred to as “the Baron of the Bluegrass”), other Kentucky sports teams have embraced and continue to use these labels. Most influential was the Kentucky Colonels, a found-

<sup>41</sup> See Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 428–30; Frank Fitzpatrick, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: Kentucky, Texas Western, and the Game that Changed American Sports* (New York, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Michael Smith, “Chapman: Racial taboos affected stay at UK,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 16, 2005; Jason Whitlock, “Race still can rock the vote,” *ESPN Page 2*, May 12, 2005, <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=whitlock/050512&num=0> (accessed January 23, 2015).

ing member of the American Basketball Association (ABA) in 1967 that played in the league until its merger with the NBA in 1976. Over its history, the team featured such stars as Artis Gilmore and former Kentucky college standouts Louie Dampier, Dan Issel, and Darel Carrier. Despite having the highest winning percentage of any team in the league over its nine-year history and winning the 1975 ABA championship, the team was not among those selected to join the newly expanded NBA. Beyond just its name, the team's highly localized logo in the late 1960s featured a basketball-dribbling, white-mustached, and goateed personage, the spitting image of the Kentucky colonel of lore, holding a horseshoe and being trailed by a small dog.<sup>43</sup> Currently, both the Centre College Colonels (originally known as the "Praying Colonels") and the Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) Colonels maintain the "colonel" association, as do nine high-school teams in the state. No commonwealth high-school or college team uses the hillbilly moniker, but the Oneida Baptist Institute sports teams are called the Mountaineers.<sup>44</sup>

The historic linkage of the state with "colonels" and violence was also central to the personas of the two individuals who rose in the 1960s to become lasting global celebrities and who stand out as strikingly contrasting representatives of the Bluegrass State. By far the one most directly associated with the state was "Colonel" Harland Sanders (often referred to simply as "the Colonel"), the founder and ubiquitous face of the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant chain. A remarkable story, Sanders grew up in near-poverty in Indiana and earned a living for the first forty years of his life mostly in the Indiana-Kentucky region as a farm hand, railroad fireman, insurance

<sup>43</sup> The dog represented "Ziggy," the Brussels Griffon terrier of owners Joe and Mamie Gregory that served as the team's unofficial mascot. For more on the history of the team, see Gary P. West, with Lloyd Gardner, *Kentucky Colonels of the American Basketball Association: The Real Story of a Team Left Behind* (Sikeston, Mo., 2011).

<sup>44</sup> For information on high-school mascots, see Leland Gordon, "MaxPreps Mascot Mondays: Kentucky High School Mascots," April 23, 2012, <http://www.maxpreps.com/news/5RFJxItsakmrxwsoAQow4w/maxpreps-mascot-mondays--kentucky-high-school-mascots.htm> (accessed Jan. 23, 2015).

salesman, ferryboat operator, and even a midwife before opening a restaurant for hungry travelers in Corbin in 1930. His fame in the state grew apace, helped along by a positive review by Bowling Green's Duncan Hines in his traveler's guide *Adventures in Good Eating*, and the governor named him an honorary Kentucky Colonel in 1935 (and then again in 1949).<sup>45</sup>

Shortly after his second colonelcy, based on a suggestion from his barber that he adopt the costume of the "old Kentucky colonel in the cartoons" and motivated by a desire to establish a definitive commercialized persona that would generate sales, he began dressing in a white suit and black string tie and carrying a cane. He even bleached his goatee white.<sup>46</sup> He would wear this outfit, summer and winter, every day for the next twenty years. The look would soon become the signature of his new company, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and he and his wife, dressed in a southern belle's crinoline hoop skirt, would make a point of greeting customers so attired at each of his franchises. Sanders would become nearly universally known by the late 1960s thanks to aggressive television marketing by the company's new owner, John Y. Brown Jr. (later, governor of Kentucky) and by 1976, a poll purportedly ranked him as the second most recognizable celebrity in the world. His corporate persona so engulfed his real life identity that many Americans in the early twenty-first century no longer believed "Colonel Sanders" had been a real person. Although in the wake of growing negative press about the unhealthiness of fried food the company dropped "Kentucky" from its moniker and officially renamed itself "KFC" in 1991, Harland Sanders's visage would continue to be the branded face of the company, and for good or ill, a worldwide representation of the commonwealth.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> On Sanders's early life and career see John Ed Pearce, *The Colonel: The Captivating Biography of the Dynamic Founder of a Fast-Food Empire* (Garden City, N.Y., 1982); John Ed Pearce, "Harland Sanders: The Man Who Would be Colonel," in *The Human Tradition in the New South*, ed. James C. Klotter (Lanham, Md., 2005), 129–56; and Josh Ozersky, *Colonel Sanders and the American Dream* (Austin, Tex., 2012).

<sup>46</sup> Pearce, *The Colonel*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> "On Colonel Sanders's 120th Birthday, Survey Reveals Young Americans Unclear if KFC

Not nearly as widely associated with Kentucky in the public mind as Sanders, Muhammad Ali was without a doubt the most recognized man from the commonwealth in the mid-twentieth century. For a time, he was the most recognizable celebrity in the world; indeed, he beat out Sanders in the same 1976 poll cited above. In more ways than one, he would build upon and redefine the common conception of “the Fighting Kentuckian.” Ali represented a dramatically different side of Kentucky: urban, African American, and fundamentally shaped by the daily humiliations and inequities of life in segregated Louisville. Both his birth name, Cassius Marcellus Clay—based on that of his father but also the famous Kentucky slaveholder-turned-abolitionist who had at one time owned and then emancipated his great-grandfather—and his original nickname, “the Louisville Lip”—based on his brash style and rhyming taunts—tied the young boxer’s public identity to the state. So too did the story told in his autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story*, that he dropped his recently won Gold Medal from the 1960 Rome Olympic Games into the Ohio River after being denied service in a segregated Louisville restaurant. Ali later reported that he had simply misplaced his medal. Nonetheless, the story remained widely believed for years after, and accurately represented the outrage he and many other blacks in Kentucky and across the country felt about being treated as second-class citizens in a nation purportedly committed to equality and justice. The boxer’s connection with the state in popular consciousness weakened after he joined the Nation of Islam and adopted the honorific name Muhammad Ali in 1964. He later became a figure of global renown and controversy after he refused military induction on moral grounds in 1966. Although his boxing matches spanned the globe and he became in later life an ambassador for international peace

Founder was Real Person,” September 9, 2010, <http://www.kfc.com/about/news/2010/090910.asp> (accessed January 23, 2015). The poll is widely cited by KFC and elsewhere, but I cannot find any details about its parameters. Although there is much speculation about the reasons for the name change to KFC, Ozersky argues it was simply a wrong-headed business decision motivated by the desire to draw a younger, more health-conscious clientele. See Ozersky, *Colonel Sanders*, 123–32.

and various humanitarian causes, his decision to maintain a house near Louisville and the founding of the Muhammad Ali Center in the city in 2005 both link Ali as a person and as a true global icon to the commonwealth.<sup>48</sup>

If Sanders, to a degree, updated the context of the “Kentucky colonel” and Ali’s fame made the meaning of “Kentucky” both somewhat more urban and racially pluralistic, other positive and negative long-standing aspects of its image persisted into the late twentieth century. Country music star Loretta Lynn’s hit song “Coal Miner’s Daughter” (1970) and the largely autobiographical movie of the same name in 1980 helped solidify the ideas of coal mining, rural poverty, and musical authenticity as synonymous with the commonwealth. Other country, rock, and roots music performers, including Tom T. Hall, the Judds (mother and daughter singing team Naomi and Wynonna), Ricky Skaggs, the Kentucky Headhunters, and Dwight Yoakam, also kept alive and updated long-standing Kentucky musical traditions.<sup>49</sup>

Yet the notion of the people of the state, especially its mountain inhabitants, as backwards, violent, and economically and spiritually impoverished remained strong as well and was presented yet again in the 1992 play, *The Kentucky Cycle*, by California-based playwright Robert Schenkkan. Earning the Pulitzer Prize, it was performed for big-city theater audiences on both coasts and garnered much national attention. Divided into nine sections and covering over two hundred years of time, *The Kentucky Cycle* tells the story of six generations of a Kentucky mountain family, a history marked by murders, rapes,

<sup>48</sup> Muhammad Ali, with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York, 1975). The autobiography was ghostwritten by a writer affiliated with the Nation of Islam. On Ali, see also Howard Bingham and Max Wallace, *Muhammad Ali’s Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America* (New York, 2000); David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of the American Hero* (New York, 1998); and Elliot J. Gorn, ed., *Muhammad Ali: The People’s Champ* (Urbana, Ill., 1995).

<sup>49</sup> Jason Howard’s *A Few Honest Words: The Kentucky Roots of Popular Music* (Lexington, Ky., 2012) provides a useful overview of the state’s musical heritage along with thoughtful interviews with Naomi Judd, Dwight Yoakam, and other (as yet) lesser-known Kentucky musicians.

feuds, deceitfulness, and the wanton destruction of people and land alike. To a far greater extent than in earlier periods, however, this portrait of mountaineers as genetically hardwired for violence and passively acquiescent to the forces of rapacious capitalism was met by a dramatic campaign by Kentucky journalists and writers to “talk back” against these stereotypes. In editorials and essays, they expressed outrage at what they saw as Schenkkan’s historical distortions and portrait of a people “so dumb, greedy, and shiftless that they have caused their fate.” Partly as a result of this reaction, as well as the length of the production, the play closed its run on Broadway after only three and a half weeks.<sup>50</sup>

So where is “Kentucky” in the public mind today? On the one hand, the Kentucky colonel and the idea of the state’s ties to the genteel Old South are mostly a thing of the past. The Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels still thrives, but it has been largely shorn of any racial or antebellum overtones. After an embarrassing 1986 incident when a visiting Japanese student group sang the line “the darkies are gay” to the General Assembly, the lyrics of “My Old Kentucky Home” were officially changed to “the people are gay” and verses referencing slavery were excised.<sup>51</sup> Even the recent effort by the independent marketing firm Kentucky for Kentucky to replace the staid tourism bureau marketing slogan “Kentucky—Unbridled Spirit” with the far-more provocative label “Kentucky Kicks Ass” marks a definitive repudiation of the older horse country view of the state. On the other hand, by celebrating colorful and controversial Kentuckians such as Muhammad Ali, Johnny Depp, and Hunter S. Thompson, the Kentucky for Kentucky campaign highlights almost exclusively masculine personalities (where, one wonders, is the feisty feminism of Loretta Lynn or the can-do spirit of Rose Will Monroe, the Pulaski County native who became the face of Rosie the Riveter?) and thus

<sup>50</sup> Gurney Norman, “Notes on *The Kentucky Cycle*,” in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, 328 (quotation). See also *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*, part 5.

<sup>51</sup> “My Old Kentucky Home,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My\\_Old\\_Kentucky\\_Home](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/My_Old_Kentucky_Home) (accessed January 22, 2015).

allies the image of the state with an updated hillbilly identity—a persona that has far from gone away.<sup>52</sup>

True, the ill-conceived 2002 effort sponsored by CBS television to recruit actual mountaineers from Kentucky and elsewhere in the South for a proposed new reality show, *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*, was met by a vitriolic protest by columnists, academics, politicians, and labor activists that stopped it dead in its tracks. Nonetheless, manifestations of the “Kentucky hillbilly” live on in myriad ways, from the annual “Hillbilly Days” festival in Pikeville, coordinated by local Shriner chapters and the Pike County Tourism Commission (“three days of outrageous fun, food, and frolic” according to their website) to reality television programs such as *The Call of the Wildman*, featuring proud Kentucky native Ernie Brown Jr., “The Turtleman,” who cheerfully wades bare-chested into ponds to pull up snapping turtles with his bare hands.<sup>53</sup> The show is representative of a whole genre of film and reality television, dubbed “hicksplotation” (or “hixploitation”), that features white working-class rural southerners acting outrageously outside the social norms of middle-class society in ways that, depending on one’s perspective, either celebrates or denigrates their downhome culture. Furthermore, the surprise television hit of the summer of 2012 was the History Channel’s six-hour miniseries, *Hatfields & McCoys*. Starring Kevin Costner, the show gained a remarkably broad audience and sparked a spike in sales of feud-related books. Even though it was filmed in Romania, it was praised by many for its degree of historical accuracy regarding the events of the feud. Still, a *New York Times* reviewer recognized the true basis for the timeless appeal of the hillbilly when he wryly noted that this backstory “distract[s] from the real business at hand, which is Hatfields and McCoys shooting at one another.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Kentucky for Kentucky, <http://www.kentuckyforkentucky.com/pages/projects> (accessed January 22, 2015).

<sup>53</sup> “Hillbilly Days,” <http://www.hillbillydays.com/> (accessed January 23, 2015); “Call of the Wildman,” <http://animal.discovery.com/tv-shows/call-of-the-wildman> (accessed January 23, 2015).

<sup>54</sup> Mike Hale, “Guns, Bad Blood and Something About a Dog: Inflaming a Family Feud,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2012. For a more critical view of the show’s historical inaccuracies,

Currently the most influential televised portrait of the state is the FX Network show *Justified*, based on the writings of Elmore Leonard and with settings that fluctuate primarily between Lexington (where the protagonist, U.S. marshal Raylan Givens, is based) and Harlan County (where Givens grew up and where most of the action takes place). Although it may seem odd to set such a “neo-Western” in the upland South, as one recent reviewer recognized, “Kentucky is an exceptionally apt venue” for it is “lodged in the popular imagination as a rural, lawless land of clans and feuds and meth and mine shafts and easy gunfire.”<sup>55</sup> The show breaks some new ground in its noirish storylines, original dialogue, and at-times complex character studies. However, it also traffics in many tried and true “eccentric Kentucky” personas from Pentecostal snake handlers to moonshine distillers (as well as racketeers of more recent intoxicants from marijuana to heroin to meth), to slow-witted rifle-bearing hillbillies (called “the hill family” in one episode), all punctuated with lots of shootings and grisly deaths. Although one season featured a groundbreaking (for televised drama) storyline regarding mountaintop removal and the way coal dependency divides a community, for the most part the show has not explored systemic social and economic issues and presents few “normal” middle-class citizens of the commonwealth.

Many viewers from Kentucky, as indicated by public comment sites for *Justified*, *Hatfields & McCoys*, and other state-based programs, seem thrilled simply to have made it onto the national radar and accept the many inaccuracies good-naturedly. But the portrait of the state on the show exposes a more significant truth that extends beyond this particular program. Except for a few carefully chosen references to local Kentucky products and places (Pappy Van Winkle’s bourbon, Ale 8 soda, and Chaney’s Dairy Barn in Bowling Green have all been mentioned), *Justified* mostly provides a generic vision of non-big city life that could apply to much of the country. The fact that the

see Altina Waller’s commentary, <http://uncpressblog.com/2012/06/11/altina-l-waller-the-hatfield-mccoy-feud/> (accessed January 23, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Orr, “The Elmore Leonard Paradox,” *The Atlantic*, Jan./Feb. 2014, pp. 38–40, 41(quotations).

producers apparently do not think it detracts from the credibility of the program that it is clearly not filmed in Kentucky (Eucalyptus trees are a dead giveaway) reflects a larger truth: for its creators and for much of the audience living in northern and western megalopolises, Kentucky, like many states in the mid-portion of the United States, is simply “flyover country.” In this regard, particularly to many coastal elites with only the vaguest sense of the differences between locations in the vast interior of the nation, it is culturally and geographically interchangeable with Tennessee or Indiana or even South Dakota. A line in the 2012 film *Promised Land* about the efforts of a natural gas company to persuade residents of a small-town community (the location is unstated) to allow fracking on their land captures this sentiment exactly. Driving down a country road and looking at the farms they are passing, one company employee says to her partner incredulously, “I can’t believe this is right outside the city . . . It looks like Kentucky.” “Two hours outside of any city looks like Kentucky,” he knowingly replies.<sup>56</sup>

The emergence of the idea of Kentucky as “flyover country” is also intertwined with the demise of the long-standing Kentucky stereotype of the “colonel” and the decline (or at least transformation) of the “hillbilly” over the past several decades. Although certainly positive developments in many respects, these changes have also led to the unique identity of Kentucky waning in the national consciousness. Besides the unspoken implication in the *Promised Land* dialogue above that Kentucky has no “real” cities and all looks identical, these lines also suggest that Kentucky has become a stand-in for “anywhere

<sup>56</sup> Thanks to Simone Becque’s commentary “‘It Looks Like Kentucky’: Representing the Midwest in *Promised Land*,” on the online forum *In Media Res*, for this insight. See <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2014/01/09/it-looks-kentucky-representing-midwest-promised-land> (accessed January 23, 2015). This connection between Pennsylvania (where *Promised Land* is likely set) and Kentucky and the sense that the greater Appalachian region signifies a space of, at best, cultural irrelevancy and, at worst, social degradation and aberrance is perfectly captured by the nickname of the born-again Christian ex-meth addict character in the influential 2013 Netflix women’s prison-based drama *Orange Is the New Black*: “Pennsatucky.”

USA”—and, therefore, for “nowhere USA” as well. Perhaps this is because of its geographic location on the edge of the South and the Midwest, or perhaps because it is perceived as a place lacking racial and cultural diversity in an increasingly racially majority-minority nation, or maybe because of its longstanding cultural identity as a place perpetually existing more in the past than the present at a time when that past is increasingly critiqued. Certainly, the reasons for the decline of the unique public identity of the state merits further research and consideration.

Regardless, it remains crucially important to recognize the cultural, historical, and geographic distinctiveness of the commonwealth and to explore it with honesty and care. Recent Kentucky novelists and essayists, including Bobbie Ann Mason, in *In Country* (1985); Silas House, in *Clay's Quilt* (2001) and *The Coal Tattoo* (2004); and Wendell Berry, in *Hannah Coulter* (2004), have done just this, providing nuanced portraits of the lives of rural Kentuckians and the ways their worlds intersect with and are transformed by national and corporate forces. Berry and House have also written powerfully and poignantly about the price of industrialized “progress” paid by both the land and the people, the efforts of Kentuckians to fight back against such calamitous practices as suburban sprawl and mountaintop removal, and the need, in Berry’s words, “to pursue an ethic and a way of life based upon devotion to a place and devotion to the land.”<sup>57</sup>

Such an ethic is only possible, of course, if land and place are recognized as actual living, breathing entities that are not interchangeable with other spaces vaguely conceived of as “rural/small town America.” One of the few Hollywood creators who seems to appreciate this fact is director Cameron Crowe. Discussing his reason for shooting his 2005 film  *Elizabethtown* on location in Kentucky and with many regional actors, Crowe well captured the need to defy such a mindset. “At the studio they will tell you that you don’t have to go all the way to Kentucky,” he explained to a reporter. “They will give you a

<sup>57</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (New York, 1975), 70.

list of places nearby that look like Kentucky. . . . but they don't look like Kentucky and they aren't Kentucky, and there's nothing like the people from the region." "The whole idea [of making the film]," he continued, "was always to tell a story that didn't originate in L.A. or New York. I think that hundreds of years from now they may look back at movies made during this time and wonder, 'Did anyone live in between these cities?'"<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, the movie did not do very well at the box office and Crowe's concerns do not seem to be widely shared among media producers. It matters greatly, however, that in the public mind "Kentucky" becomes Kentucky, an actual place with actual people, and refutations of the "hillbilly" and the "Kentucky colonel" are important steps in this process. But it will be an empty victory indeed if in the effort to rightly correct and repudiate distortions of past and contemporary portraits of the state and its people, its actual cultural identity becomes obliterated in the vast nothingness of conceptions like "flyover country."

<sup>58</sup> George M. Thomas, "Cameron Crowe weaves personal stories into films," *Bowling Green (Ky.) Daily News*, October 13, 2005. Ironically, most of the town scenes were filmed in Versailles and La Grange, Kentucky, because Elizabethtown's "historic buildings have been replaced by chain stores and sprawl." See "Elizabethtown (film)," [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethtown\\_film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabethtown_film)).