

BILL ARP -- UNRECONSTRUCTED BUT DOMESTICATED

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When Georgia humorist Charles Henry Smith died on August 24, 1903, newspapers North and South paid homage to "the best loved man in all the Southland."¹ Thousands of readers of the Atlanta Constitution mourned the man whose last letter written under the pen name Bill Arp had appeared only two weeks earlier. Appreciative letters from all over the United States poured in to his Cartersville, Georgia, residence, and townspeople suspended activities as their "first citizen" was buried.² Tributes appeared in magazines and journals: Albert Shaw, editor of the Review of Reviews, praised Bill Arp as "one of the most worthy, as well as most notable, of our moulders of public opinion."³ Eighty years later, those few Georgians who know the name Bill Arp are likely to think of a tiny community in Douglas County, and fewer still know Smith's common sense advice written from the heart of the old Cherokee territory earned him the name "the Cherokee philosopher."⁴ An occasional mention by Celestine Sibley in the Constitution or Bill Kinney in the Marietta Daily Journal keep the name Bill Arp alive.⁵

Smith claimed he took that name from a North Georgia yeoman who had approved of a comic letter to Abe Lincoln that Smith read aloud for the entertainment of friends in April 1861.⁶ Posing as a Southerner sympathetic to the North, Smith responded to Lincoln's call for gathering Southern soldiers to disband. Using cracker dialect and comic misspellings, Bill Arp began:

Mr. Linkhorn, Sur: These are to inform you that we are all well and hope these lines may find you in statue ko. We received your proklamation, and as you have put us on very short notis, a few of us boys have concluded to write you and ax for a little more time. The fakt is, we are most obleeged to have a few more days, for the way things are happening, it is utterly onpossible for us to disperse in twenty days. Old Virginy and Tennessee, and North Callina, are continually aggravatin us into tumults and carousements, and a body can't disperse until you put a stop to sich onruly kondukt on their part. I tried my darndest yisterday to disperse and retire, but it was no go.⁷

The letter continued in this vein, asking Lincoln for more time, but slyly alluding to Southern resistance and early military victories. By the time Smith had written three more satiric letters to Lincoln, each openly rebellious, their reprinting in numerous Confederate newspapers had made the name Bill Arp synonymous with rebel wit.⁸

As he continued to write Bill Arp letters--narrating his family's flight from Rome, advising Governor Joe Brown on his wartime policies, taunting draft dodgers, and lightening the hearts of Southerners as the war became obviously unwinnable--Smith became identified with his pen name, so much

so that it even caused minor problems when he ran for the Georgia Senate in November 1865. The Rome Courier reported: "We learn that at Kingston yesterday 79 votes were polled for Bill Arp and only one vote for C.H. Smith. If Bill should beat Smith, wouldn't it be a joke?"⁹ During Reconstruction Smith continued writing his Bill Arp letters, reforming the dialect spellings, but not his ardent Southern patriotism. Writing one of his "spontanyous combustions"¹⁰ to Artemus Ward, a northern humorist who was one of Lincoln's favorites, he vented his feelings about early Federal abuses, which he felt would delay reconciliation between the two sections. Bill asserted:

I'm trying to harmonize....I'm a good Union man, so-called. I ain't agwine to fite any more. I shan't vote for the next war. I ain't no gurilla. I've dun tuk the oath, and I'm gwine to keep it, but as for my bein subjergated, and humilyated and amalgamated, and enervated....it ain't so--nary time.¹¹

Bill Arp appeared as the common man of the defeated south, willing to compromise but not to give up his integrity. Smith struck a common chord in the hearts of southern readers and a Democratic newspaper in New York issued his first collection, Bill Arp, So Called, in 1866. He reformed the spelling, perhaps to give a less illiterate portrait of southerners.¹² By 1873, however, spurred by personal financial losses, Smith returned to the dialect spellings of his original letters in a second collection--Bill Arp's Peace Papers--which he dedicated to "the unarm'd, unleg'd, uney'd, unpenshun'd, unwept, unhonor'd and unsung soldiers of the Confederit States, so called."¹³ In this collection Smith reprinted many of the letters from Bill Arp, So Called, and added letters in which Bill Arp satirically sketches Reconstruction hardships and the Federal officers who cause them: "The fakt is, it aint the war that our peepul is mad about no how. Its this confounded, everlastin, abominable peace--this tail to the comet--this rubbin the skab off before the sore gets well."¹⁴ Smith knew Federal restrictions firsthand, for he served in the Georgia Senate--yes, he did beat Bill Arp in that election--during the time when many Georgia officials and nominees were not legally sanctioned, and he also served a term as mayor of Rome, once having to negotiate the release of several youths who flew the prohibited Confederate flag to aid in a church benefit.¹⁵

As Smith continued to write, however, Bill Arp slowly evolved from the north Georgia cracker to an autobiographical projection of Smith himself. By 1878, when Bill Arp letters became a weekly column in the Atlanta Constitution, Bill was, like his creator, a middle-aged, middle-class farmer with a wife and ten children.¹⁶ In this new guise as a homespun philosopher, Bill Arp became more popular than ever, and by the time of his death Smith had written over 1350 pieces, adding three more collections to this original two.¹⁷

Ironically Bill Arp's creator was half-Yankee, son of the orphaned daughter of Irish immigrants and a New England merchant and teacher. Both displaced from home--he from Boston and she from Charleston, they met and married near Savannah. Their son Charles was born in 1826 in Lawrenceville, Georgia, where his father had moved to run a

general store. Educated at the Manual Labor Institute of Gwinnett County, where pupils worked on the farm three hours a day for board, Smith entered Franklin College (now the University of Georgia) as a sophomore. When his father became ill, Charles left college his senior year and never graduated. While helping with the store, Charles met Mary Octavia Hutchins, daughter of the owner of the largest plantation north of the Chattahoochee River. After their marriage in 1849, Judge Hutchins persuaded his son-in-law to study law and join him in riding the judicial circuit. But Charles soon got the "western fever" and in 1851 moved his family west--almost to the frontier--to Rome, Georgia, and spent the middle third of his life practicing law there¹⁸ and enjoying the company of the town wits, described by the young Henry Grady as "a nest of the raciest, keenest, and pleasantest wits chance ever threw together." According to Grady, to the lawyers "a new joke was of more importance than a new case."¹⁹ It was in this nest that Smith tried his fledgling Bill Arp letters.

Serving the Confederacy first as a supplier commandeering food and materials and then as an attorney in a military court, Smith ended the war a Major, a title he carried informally throughout his life. Though he returned to law practice, it eventually became unprofitable, and when his wife's inheritance was lost through bank failure, Smith turned to farming, buying a farm near Cartersville in 1877. On that farm, and later in town, he spent the last twenty-five years of his life. Though Bill Arp's letters praise farm life in spite of (and in some cases because of) its difficulties, Smith's private letters show he was short of cash, so he turned to his writings for additional income. He found a publisher for the Peace Papers collection, and five years later, perhaps from his acquaintance with Henry Grady, now part owner of the Atlanta Constitution, Smith was engaged to write one Bill Arp letter per week for the newspaper.²⁰ With few omissions he continued for the next twenty-five years.

Today Bill Arp's "unreconstructed views" seem provincial and prejudiced. Even into the 1880s and 90s he continued to extoll the virtues of the old white plantation aristocracy, and he defended slavery with the following equivocation: "There is some kind of slavery everywhere; there is slavery at sea among sailors, and slavery on land among the regular army. We are all of us under some kind of bondage."²¹ He saw Yankees as mostly money hungry, declaring, "The pure breed of Yankees never was a favorite stock with me."²² Even more troubling to modern readers, Smith never accepted racial equality. The October 1893 issue of Forum magazine published his article "Have American Negroes Too Much Liberty?"--a sentiment echoed in a number of his Bill Arp pieces.²³ His overt racism and states' rights views stirred even the author of the biographical preface to the only modern reprint of Bill Arp's Peace Papers to make this chilling assessment: "This is a rancid book which casts light upon the most disgraceful era in American history, an effusion of parochial ignorance barely concealed by a pretense of yokel humor."²⁴

Such sweeping contempt, however, ignores the more genial side of even the "unreconstructed" Bill Arp. A thorough reading of the Peace Papers volume and a sampling of the Reconstruction era newspaper columns, many of which were too topical to be collected, show satire targeted at wrongdoing and hypocrisy wherever it was found. Even in the dark days of

early 1865, Bill Arp criticized his own side:

The Konfederit cavilry is ubikuitous and everlastin. I hav traveld a heep of late, and had okkashun to retire into sum very sequestered rejuns, but nary hill nor holler, nary vale nor valley, nary mounting gorge or inaksessible reveen hav I found, but what the cavilry had bin there, and jest left. And that is the reeson they can't be whipped, for they have always jest left, and took a odd hoss or two with 'em. For four years the konfederit hoss-stealing cavilry hav been pirootin aroun, preparin themselves for the friteful struggel that are to cum. By dodgin aroun they have kompleted their inspektshun of stock and tride all its bottum, and now it are reesunable to spouse they are reddy to fite. The fakt is, Mr. Editor, steeling from our side is most playd out, and I feel ashoored our enemies will suffer very soon.²⁵

Bill also satirizes the legislature, as he writes of the law,

We are engaged in manufakturin it by holesale, and atter a while it will be retaled out by the lawyers to any body that wants it. It's an esy business to make law, but the greatest diffikulty is in onderstanding it atter it is made. Among lawyers this diffikulty don't seam to lie so much in the hed as in the pocket.²⁶

Not only does Smith have Bill Arp attack Confederate abuses of power, but he writes with the authority of the common man whose humor is often the only weapon he has in his powerless situation and his only comfort as well.

But all this focus on Bill Arp's unreconstructed side diverts attention from an important but subtle change in traditional southern social values illustrated by Smith's Bill Arp pieces. For, in terms of his time, Bill Arp grants a level of equality to women seen in few of his male contemporaries. The same Bill Arp who philosophizes that the patriarchal "dominion" of one man over another breeds character and responsibility is shown to be far less than dominant in his own home.²⁷ In his dealings with Mrs. Arp, he is often put in his place by her superior common sense, practicality, and wit. Though unreconstructed, Bill Arp is clearly domesticated. In fact, Charles Henry Smith's characterization of Molly Arp ranks next to his creation of Bill Arp himself in importance. Though Bill philosophically adheres to many traditional views of Southern men and women, his own marriage is presented as a dynamic struggle with an obvious equal.

As early as the first collection, Mrs. Arp is called "an industrious and managing woman."²⁸ She appears infrequently, but when she does her firmness with Bill is evident. As the family flees Rome ahead of the advancing Northern army, Bill's seatmate on the crowded train, a "luxurious lady with some aggravatin' curls" falls asleep on his shoulder. Turning to Mrs. Arp for advice, he asks, "Do you think I can endure the

like of this?" "I do not William," she replies. "You had better stand up awhile, and when you get tired some of the children will relieve you." Bill continues, "I assure you, Mr. Editor, a man's wife is the best judge of such peculiar things; and as for me, I am always governed by it."²⁹ In less peculiar things, such as his views of Reconstruction, Bill Arp is at least partially governed by his regard for women. He sees Southern women's acceptance of Federal policies as crucial to building ties between North and South: "Didn't they know?" he asks, "the best way to harmonize a man, was to harmonize his wife first?"³⁰ And in Bill Arp's Peace Papers, he attributes his own lack of reconciliation with his "northern brethren, so called" to Mrs. Arp: "I want a new deal of the kards. Mrs. Arp don't like it, and as long as she don't, I don't, and I don't expect to."³¹

In that same volume Mrs. Arp's firm opposition to dishonesty in journalism quiets one of Bill's political tirades:

She sed sum remarks about papers lyin by the day and by the week and about self-respect and independence and the like and I grew meek like Moses in a few minutes. The fact is, I'm a meek man. I've laid awake of nights a ruminatin' how meek I was.

Mrs. Arp thinks that papers ought to take TRUTH for a motto and work up to it. I told her it would be a dangerous experiment, but she said it has never been tried yet.³²

In a few letters where she appears in the first two collections, Mrs. Arp sometimes seems only a stalking horse for Charles Henry Smith's ideas. With the combination of Bill's "spontaneous combustions" over Radical Reconstruction and Mrs. Arp's morality and good sense, Smith could portray the frustrations of the ordinary Southerner and also counsel moderation and acceptance of social change.

One must also consider that Bill Arp's confessed meekness occurs amid many other letters where his own moral determination and solid ethics are clearly present.³³ He does not thus appear as simply the henpecked husband, but rather an ordinary man of simple honesty and integrity, who is on some issues controlled by his wife's equally good sense.

The final selection in Bill Arp's Peace Papers is the most surprising in its view of women. "Bill Arp Visits Gotham" catalogues the North Georgian's visit to New York City, but ends with Bill's attending the trial of suffragist Susan B. Anthony. "When I heard they was tryin her for votin," he writes, "my feminine instincts carried me straight to the courthouse. I was on her side before I got there and I'm on her side yit." He vividly recounts Anthony's defense of women's suffrage with obvious approval: "She told [the judge] that if they would base the votin' bisness on morality, or property, or intelligence, or all three put together, the women would be satisfide; but they based it on wearin britches, and drinkin whiskey, and chawin tobakker, and keepin one wife at home and another sum where else."³⁴ Bill is traditional enough in his values to want to protect women from the rough aspects of electioneering; in fact, he suggests having their husbands, male friends, or fathers take

their votes to the polls. However, he is determined that women should vote: "I want the moral strength and influence of their votes bekaus they are better and purer and honester than the men."³⁵ Though Bill admits skepticism that women could make good doctors for men, the sketch continues with a history of the increase of women's legal rights and job opportunities and concludes with an assertion of the equality of the sexes: "Take it altogether it looks to me like the time has mity nigh come when the men hav got to admit that a woman is just as good as a man if not better in most everything that requires more sense than muscel."³⁶

Of course there is nothing nontraditional in Bill's moral idealization of women; the ideal of the Southern woman placed her in charge of the family's piety and morality. Yet that same ideal paradoxically was used to deny her the right to vote.³⁷ Even in the period 1880 to 1920, when white male intellectuals at southern universities challenged many other southern ideals and social values, few showed concern with women's suffrage.³⁸ Bill Arp's view at the end of Peace Papers thus represents a significant departure in its views of women.

Bill Arp's mixture of traditional southern views of women's place in the family, sympathy for their resulting burdens, and portrayal of their virtual equality with men, especially husbands, is most fully developed in Smith's 1884 collection, Bill Arp's Scrap Book, which reprints some of the popular earlier pieces but is mainly based on his Atlanta Constitution columns. Here Smith makes Bill's domestication even clearer, and Mrs. Arp becomes a major character, appearing in over one third of the eighty-six chapters. In the preliminary biographical sketch, which now openly identifies Bill Arp with Charles Henry Smith, Bill is mentioned getting dinner for his family. In the following chapters he does other domestic tasks in addition to fulfilling his traditional male role as farmer and breadwinner. Besides plowing, pulling fodder, raising stock, mending fences, etc., Bill is seen cleaning up the kitchen, scouring the pots and pans, dressing the children while Mrs. Arp takes her usual morning nap, running the household while she is away on errands and visits, and generally sharing the care of his children.³⁹ As he washes the children and puts them to bed, Bill indicates the blurring of the traditional parenting roles in his own household: "My wife, Mrs. Arp taught me a long time ago that a man could perform those little offices about as well as a woman, and if they are his children he ought to be willing to do it."⁴⁰ Here his acceptance of Molly Arp's influence is apparent. Bill's own domestication also seems to have made him understand the hardships women endure. In one chapter which begins with his denunciation of trying to keep up appearances with their neighbors, his tone shifts to one of approval of having nice things at home for the sake of women; "Mothers have to stay at home all the time, and home ought to be made as attractive as possible."⁴¹ Of course, despite Bill's generalization about women, Mrs. Arp is not portrayed as staying home all the time, and when she leaves Bill in charge, she often gives him a long list of instructions for maintaining the household. But running both the farm and home sometimes proves too great, and he longs for her quick return:

It takes a couple of parents to keep things

straight at my house. Yesterday the grey mule broke open the gate and let the cow and calf together. Carl left open another gate and the old sow got in the garden. Another boy has got a felon on his finger, and whines around and says his ma could cure it if she was here. He can't milk now, and so I thought I could try it, but old Bess wouldn't let nary drop down for me. I squeezed and pulled and tugged at her until she got mad and suddenly lifted her foot in my lap and set it down in the bucket, whereupon I forgot my equilibrium, and when I got up I gave old Bess a satisfactory kick in the side and departed those coasts in great humility. It's not my forte to milk a cow. The wind blew over more trees across my fences. The clock run down. Two lamp chimneys bursted. The fire popped out and burnt a hole in the carpet while we were at supper, and everything is going wrong just because Mrs. Arp is gone.⁴²

This comic catalogue of domestic disasters illustrates Bill's dependence on his wife and underscores his appreciation of her worth. Similarly he knows how the burden of childrearing mostly falls on the mother, writing in one chapter, "The pain and trouble, the nursing and night watching have all been hers."⁴³

Sensitive to the restrictions placed on women, Bill Arp tries to get men to appreciate their own freedom: "The men and boys can go about and see folks and talk and joke and have a good time, but woman is penned up at home."⁴⁴ And just as he satirized Southern conduct in the Civil War, he pokes fun at masculine pretensions:

Parents are very much like chickens. The old hen will set and set and starve, and when the brood comes will go to scratching for worms and bugs as hard as she can and be always clucking and looking out for hawks, but the old rooster will strut around and notice the little chickens with a big paternal pride, and when he scratches up a bug makes a big fuss over it and calls them with a flourish, and eats it himself just before they get there.⁴⁵

Even in those chapters where Bill Arp's philosophizing supports traditional Southern concepts of patriarchy, his stated views are often undercut or balanced by his own confessions of domestication or the events portrayed in his own household. He admits that he twisted his back trying to show off his prowess with the scythe:

You see some of my wife's female relations had come a long ways to see us and all the family paraded over the clover field like a general and his staff and as they stood around I put on as much style as possible in swinging my blade and could hear em admiring as how gracefully and easily we handled the instruments when the truth was we had mighty nigh mowed ourselves to death

and saved the king of terrors the job.⁴⁶

In another piece, a barrel of flour is delivered to the Arp farm in a wagon and Bill explains,

Mrs. Arp has wondered how we would get out the flour; I thought I would show her what a man could do. I rolled the barrel to me as I stood on the ground and gently eased it down on my manly knees. My opinion now is that there was a keg of lead in that barrel, for my knees gave way and I was falling backwards, and to keep from mashing me into a pancake or something else, I gave it a heave forward and let her go, and I fell on a pile of rocks that were laid around the cherry tree.⁴⁷

And in yet another ironic reversal of roles, it is Bill who faints at the sight of his resulting wounds while Mrs. Arp goes get the camphor. In these passages one sees Charles Henry Smith portray Bill Arp as a man who can laugh at masculine pretensions, a man who does not always play the traditional male role in his family, and yet one who appears not to take that role too seriously.

Of course, Bill Arp portrays female as well as male frailties. Molly Arp is shown to have many of the traditional female weaknesses: fear of snakes and rats, oversensitivity to noises in the dark, the female hysterics, and extreme concern over her children's minor ailments and injuries.⁴⁸ Yet, taken on balance, her weaknesses seem no worse than her husband's sentimentality about old times, his own outbursts about human weakness, his aforementioned male pretentiousness, and his own admitted foibles. As a couple, the Arps seem well matched equals in a marriage portrayed as a gently comic struggle.

In their delightful domestic skirmishes it is Molly Arp who often wins or has the last laugh on Bill. Much of the humor in the later collected Bill Arp pieces, as opposed to the rural philosophy and nostalgic sentiment, comes from the scenes Smith created where Bill tries to get the upper hand and fails. Trying to avoid a direct confrontation with Molly, he waits until she is away to cut little daughter Jesse's hair, but when Molly Arp's return brings her expected furious response, Bill advises his male readers, "Husbands! fathers! martyrs to wedded bliss, don't cut your little girl's hair off without permission--don't."⁴⁹ Once he tries to speed up the sausage making by putting in all the spices at once. Mrs. Arp hangs the extremely spicy result in bags around the kitchen and quips, "Now children, that's your pa's sausage. It's a pity he hadn't stayed away another day."⁵⁰ When she is really angry, as in an incident when Bill brazenly makes fun of her unrisen lightbread, he has to retreat to a safer location: "I retired prematurely to the piazza to ruminate on the rise of cotton and wheat, and iron, and everything else but bread."⁵¹

With few exceptions, the Arp's battles are genial ones, with little true bitterness. The two banter back and forth, often using pointed cliches or proverbs. Even after Molly had scored a direct hit on the small of Bill's back with pieces of the unrisen lightbread, he jokes, "when a man asks for bread will you give him a stone?"⁵² And Molly too can have the last

word; Bill explains that she has assured him she won't remarry if he dies: "There will be no stepfather to my children, for as Mrs. Arp says sometimes, 'a burnt child dreads the fire.'"⁵³ Her wit is yet another way she equals her husband.

Mrs. Arp's frequent victories at home, however, should not lead one to conclude she is the prototype of the "steel magnolia," the Southern woman who tyrannizes at home but appears fragile and ladylike elsewhere. Most of the chapters in Scrap Book simply demonstrate her competence and the balance she provides for Bill's excesses. Though she sometimes plays surrogate mother to him, watching his manners when company visits or regulating the sweets in the household,⁵⁴ she is the counterforce which keeps their household dynamic. Her mere presence enjoins Bills from telling tall tales and her frequent laughter at his foibles cheers him as often as it stings.⁵⁵ Generalizing from his own family, Bill admits, "Blessed is he who lets his women impose on him, for it's better to submit to a little family dictation than to be an austere man."⁵⁶

And whatever Bill Arp may say about female hysterics, it is Molly Arp who often saves him from effusiveness and sentimentality. On New Year's Eve, Bill brings her a mistletoe wreath and she quickly reminds him of his old promise of a diamond tiara, to which Bill responds,

"My dear, I have always desired to be able to purchase a diamond ring and breast-pin and a diamond tiara for you, not that you need any ornaments to make you beautiful and attractive, for all the gems of Golconda could add nothing to your natural loveliness." Ralph, said she, your father has got a fit, you better throw some water on him.⁵⁷

Unfortunately Mrs. Arp and Ralph are not always present in chapters where Bill becomes overly sentimental, but in those where Mrs. Arp is featured the realism and humor of the Arp's marriage usually outweighs the maudlin comments on the lost Southern past or Bill's philosophic pronouncements. Perhaps because the Arps are based on Charles Henry Smith's own marriage to Mary Hutchins, he is less likely to mythologize or romanticize domestic scenes. Ultimately Smith seems to regard Molly Arp favorably, as he has Bill comment, "no woman had sense and discretion like my Molly."⁵⁸

For the most part this image of Mrs. Arp and the blend of traditional views of women with assertions of their equality are maintained in Smith's fourth collection. In 1891, The Farm and the Fireside, especially dedicated to mothers and children, mentions or features Mrs. Arp in nearly half the seventy pieces, but nearly two thirds of these are slightly revised reprints of those in Bill Arp's Scrap Book.⁵⁹ In the new chapters Bill praises women's moral strength, patience, and endurance as the central force in the family, and he even asserts a wife should have access to the family money or bank account, "for she will spend less of it foolishly than [her husband] will."⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Mrs. Arp continues to prod Bill, and on two occasions gets him to write of embarrassing incidents not recounted in previous columns. Her laughter at him cheers him out of "pouting melancholy" and she is there to

aid him as his spells of sickness become more frequent.⁶¹ Molly is pictured as the grandmotherly matriarch of the household, surrounded by her grandchildren.

Smith's last volume, the 1903 Bill Arp: From the Uncivil War to Date, adds few new pieces and offers no substantially new portrait of the Arps. It is condensed from the previous volume and leans toward the sentimental.⁶²

By creating a husband who would grant women virtual equality with men and creating a wife such man could respect, Charles Henry Smith demonstrated his own questioning of traditional Southern social values. Though he might long for many aspects of the Old South, Smith could no longer accept George Fitzhugh's 1854 pronouncement on women, children, and slaves: "the right to protection involves the obligation to obey."⁶³ Smith did not create a hero who was the complete master of his household. Though he did idealize the family as central to maintaining the best of man's virtues, Smith seemed aware that true equality for women would change the family. In one of his many lectures--where he was often advertised as Bill Arp--Smith openly wondered how the new college educated women would find compatible husbands and how they could accept the restrictions of domesticity. He hoped that they would, and yet seemed aware they might not.⁶⁴ The daughters of Molly Arp might accept even fewer restrictions than their mother.

It seems plausible to suggest that Smith's popularity was due not only to his unreconstructed views on race and his nostalgia for the Old South, but also due to his humorous portrayal of the beginnings of change in men's and women's roles in the southern family. His humor appealed to both men and women and through Mrs. Arp he evoked an image of women's strength which female readers certainly could acknowledge. As the Atlanta Constitution noted on March 5, 1899, she was "the heroine of his serial story."⁶⁵

Be there no misunderstanding--Charles Henry Smith was not a "feminist" in the modern sense. He rarely portrays women outside the home, and Mrs. Arp's main roles are those of wife and mother. Yet Smith's portrayal of her equality with her husband must have rung true with many a reader. Many Southern women gained self-confidence during and after the upheavals of Civil War as they found themselves taking their husband's place on farms and businesses. Smith's own daughter explained what happened to her mother, the model for Molly Arp, this way: "refugeeing almost made a man of her....'Charlie' was never the same in authority after that as he was 'befo the war.'" She gathered the reins of government in her hands and stood pat.⁶⁶

Similarly, Smith's ambivalence about women leaving the home and his focus on preserving the stability of the family may have matched his readers' ambivalence about the social changes of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Historian Thomas D. Clark has suggested that understanding the writings of Bill Arp can lead one "to grasp the fundamental knowledge of the intellectual development of the New South."⁶⁷

Hence this portrait of a husband and wife in a southern family presented in over twenty-five years of humorous weekly newspaper columns and five popular collections suggests that changes in thinking about the roles of men and women in post-Civil War South began even earlier than has been previously documented in male writers.

The humor of Charles Henry Smith's Bill Arp writings

leaven the threat which such changes created and perhaps even helped make such changes bearable. Bill Arp bears another look: he is an important source of popular attitudes and his humor, especially of the domestic sort, is still enjoyable.⁶⁸

NOTES

¹Dictionary of Literary Biography, 1982 ed., vol. 11, American Humorists, 1800-1950, s.v. "Charles Henry Smith," by William E. Lentz.

²James C. Austin, Bill Arp (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 29.

³Quoted by Annie May Christie, "Charles Henry Smith, alias 'Bill Arp,'" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1952), p. 49. Unless otherwise indicated, all biographical information on Smith is taken from Christie. The most widely available biography is Austin, who cites Christie as his major source.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵Celestine Sibley, "Country Humor—Try Bill Arp," Atlanta Constitution, 15 July 1983, Sec. B, p.1; Bill Kinney, "'Ode to a Dining Room' Reveals Feeling About Meals on a Train Trip," Marietta Daily Journal, 12 June 1983, Sec. A, p. 4; see also Bob Harrell, "Georgia History: First Laughter," Atlanta Weekly in Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 19 December 1982, p. 23. Smith is also named as someone Lt. Gov. Zell Miller regretted omitting from his Great Georgians (Franklin Springs, Ga.: Advocate Press, 1983), preface.

⁶Charles Henry Smith, Bill Arp's Scrap Book (Atlanta: Jas. P. Harrison, 1884), pp. 7-8.

⁷Charles Henry Smith, Bill Arp's Peace Papers (New York: G.W. Carlton, 1873; reprinted., Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Literature House/Gregg Press, 1969), p. 19. This collection returns to the dialect spellings of the original letters.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 22-34.

⁹Quoted in Christie, p. 28.

¹⁰Smith, Peace Papers, p. 17.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 109, 111.

¹²Charles Henry Smith, Bill Arp, So Called (New York: Metropolitan Record Office, 1866), p. 6.

¹³Smith, Peace Papers, p. 5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵Christie, pp. 27-28, 30.

¹⁶The first letter of the weekly series appears 17 May 1878, p. 1. Beginning 2 June 1878 the letters appear every Sunday.

¹⁷Christie, p. 140. Christie had seen 1348 letters, but 2000 is the figure given by James E. Ginther in his "Charles Henry Smith, alias 'Bill Arp,'"

Georgia Review, 4 (Winter 1950): 317. Smith also wrote A School History of Georgia (Boston: Ginn, 1893), a public school Georgia history text.

18Christie, pp. 2-8.

19Quoted in Ginther, 314.

20Christie, pp. 30-34.

21Smith, Scrap Book, p. 386.

22Ibid., p. 287.

23Forum, 16 (October, 1893): 176-83. For the best discussion of Smith's racial attitudes, see David B. Parker, "Bill Arp and Blacks: The Forgotten Letters," The Georgia Historical Quarterly, 67 (Fall 1983): 336-349.

24Smith, Peace Papers, biographical preface in reprint.

25Ibid., p. 106.

26Ibid., p. 186.

27Smith, Scrap Book, p. 143.

28Smith, So Called, p. 32.

29Ibid., p. 29.

30Ibid., p. 141.

31Smith, Peace Papers, p. 205.

32Ibid., p. 207.

33This is even more the case when the letters in the Atlanta Constitution are read sequentially.

34Smith, Peace Papers, p. 267.

35Ibid., p. 270.

36Ibid.

37For a discussion of the expectations of behavior of Southern women, see Ann Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 3-21 and Anne Goodwyn Jones, Tomorrow is Another Day (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), chapter one.

38Jones, p. 19.

39Smith, Scrap Book, pp. iv, 138-39, 291, 352.

40Ibid., p. 307.

41Ibid., p. 157.

42Ibid., p. 111.

⁴³Ibid., p. 195.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 157.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 226.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 222.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 387.

⁴⁸Ibid., pp. 175, 213, 266.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 136.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 214.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 83.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid., p. 107.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 128, 292.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 86.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 168-69.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 97.

⁵⁹Charles Henry Smith, The Farm and the Fireside (Atlanta: The Constitution Publishing Company, 1891).

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 296.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 302.

⁶²Charles Henry Smith, Bill Arp: From the Uncivil War to Date (Atlanta: Byrd Publishing Company, 1903).

⁶³Quoted in Jones, p. 8.

⁶⁴Smith, Scrap Book, p. 374.

⁶⁵Quoted in Christie, p. 48.

⁶⁶Quoted in Austin, p. 21.

⁶⁷Thomas D. Clark, The Rural Press and the New South (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1948), p. 33, quoted in Parker, 339.

⁶⁸An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Georgia-South Carolina College English Association, 12 March 1983.