

## DAVY CROCKETT TO SUT LOVINGOOD THE FRONTIER HUMOR OF THE SOUTH AND SOUTHWEST

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The European settlement of the North American Continent offered many opportunities for the development of a new style of native wit, but it did not happen immediately. The earliest evidence of colonial humor was merely imitative of European models except in one area, contact with the frontier. The settlers often vented their feelings of inferiority by telling credulous European visitors tall tales about the unspoiled wilderness and its inhabitants. As a result, the European idea of what North America was really like fluctuated between a vision of paradise flowing with milk and honey, and a cruel and violent jungle inhabited by fierce monsters and rude peasants. Most of the settlers deliberately did little to clear up this confusion. The impact of this ongoing confrontation with the wilderness shaped their lives and would soon produce a distinct frontier humor for what would become the United States.

During the colonial period, the colonists' first attempt at humor produced only regional stereotypes based on European models. *The Yankee* was a North American version of the crafty and thrifty European peasant. The term Yankee originally referred to all settlers, but by the time of the Revolutionary War, it specifically defined a resident of New England. This type was also known in humorous tales as the Down Easter. The fictional Yankee was gawky, awkward, and shrewd--untutored yet witty, and an ingenious practical joker.<sup>1</sup> Yankees were materialistic and interested in profitable business deals, yet anti-authoritarian and egalitarian. Benjamin Franklin, the quintessential American, was himself a superior version of the Yankee stereotype. Many English colonists in North America, resentful of the superior attitudes of foreign visitors, deliberately rejected their European intellectual heritage and encouraged the Yankee myth. They seemed to prefer a society where learning and literature was based on ordinary events that the common man could understand.<sup>2</sup>

After the Revolutionary War, the Yankee picked up a country cousin, Brother Jonathan. Jonathan was a Yankee, but a distinctly rustic one. He was often portrayed as a comic figure wearing ill-fitting homespun. Despite his bucolic appearance, Jonathan produced a series of wry, understated, and homely witicisms which soon became known as Jonathanisms. Both the Yankee and Brother Jonathan outwitted their betters, played practical jokes, and had humorous problems courting females, but their humor was almost always understated in contrast to the deliberate exaggeration that would be an important part of frontier humor.

As settlers moved across the Appalachian mountains, their contact with

the frontier produced two distinctly new types of humorous character. The first to emerge, shortly after the War of 1812, was the frontiersman; a type that many historians have called the American Adam. He was a rugged individualist, superhumanly strong, and equipped with unbounded energy. Although the frontiersman was an innocent and naive child of nature, he thrived on conflict and aggression, and bent nature to his will. He would outfight any creature, man or beast.<sup>3</sup> All the frontier heroes and a considerably smaller number of frontier heroines shared these characteristics. In some ways, the mythic frontiersman was a direct descendent of the gods and heroes of Greek mythology and Celtic legend. But the "gods" of the United States were much closer to the dangerous reality of nature.

As the frontier advanced across the continent, more legendary heroes emerged.<sup>4</sup> Yet all the frontier heroes had one thing in common, they were larger than life, and in their unbounded optimism, uniquely representative of the United States. It is safe to say that the wilderness shaped the United States sense of humor just as Frederick Jackson Turner believed it had formed the nation's character.<sup>5</sup> Certainly nineteenth century Europe had nothing that compared to Davy Crockett, Nimrod Wildfire, Mike Fink, Paul Bunyan, or Pecos Bill.

A minister summed up the themes of early nineteenth century United States humor as follows: "First, there is the shock between business and piety. Secondly the shock of contrast between the Aboriginal and the Yankee. Lastly the shock of contrast between the bigness of the American nature and the smallness of European nature, or, as for the matter of that, Human nature outside America."<sup>6</sup>

After a generation of contact with the wilderness, however, nature had taken its toll. The settlers and squatters who stayed behind faced years of struggle, isolation from civilization and religion, lack of an adequate diet, and constant bouts of sickness. As a result, the second character, the poor-white frontier weakling, was very different from the godlike frontiersman.<sup>7</sup> He was a shiftless, amoral fellow who delighted in causing mischief for others and held nothing sacred. Both his physique and his character had been stunted by deprivation and inbreeding. The boundless optimism and energy of the frontiersman had been replaced by laziness, ignorance, and the vicarious enjoyment of another's discomfort. Even the names of these characters gave away their character and status; Ransy Sniffle, Simon Suggs, and Sut Lovingood. These backwoods characters became the anti-heroes of many stories written about the frontier and provided a relatively realistic view of life in the backwoods, pine barrens, and swamps of the South and Southwest.

There were also several interesting developments in frontier humor during this period that indirectly related to the creation of these new character types. The first concerns the way the frontiersman regarded the animals of the



wilderness. In many of the early frontier hero tales, the hero himself took on the characteristics of an animal. The most common example was the frontiersman who bragged that he was "half horse and half alligator" and had the ferocity and strength of both. Yet this frontier bragging disappeared from real life by the Civil War. During the 1880s, however, humor magazines began to print comic panels or cartoons that showed animals taking on human characteristics. The frontier was civilized, the wilderness creatures, by then rarely visible except in zoos, took on human characteristics instead.

Another characteristic of United States humor which emerged by the early nineteenth century is the incidence of sectional humor. Before 1830, the Yankee was viewed with suspicion by the backwoodsman of the South, while the Yankee saw the ignorant frontiersmen of the region as victims ripe for the plucking. The sectional conflict that would precipitate the Civil War was already visible in the humor of the frontier three decades earlier.

Between 1830 and 1860, the southwestern frontier covered an area that included the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, and Georgia. During the antebellum years, writers from this region furnished much of the frontier humor that was printed in newspapers like the *New Orleans Picayune* and the *St. Louis Reville* as well as the sporting journal, *Spirit of the Times*. The *Spirit*, a male-oriented weekly that featured stories on hunting and fishing, was also the primary source for tall tales from the wilderness. Frontier stories were also found in comic almanacs based very loosely on the lives of popular heroes such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Mike Fink. These stories were often written by transient professionals; doctors, lawyers, and army officers. Such writers were educated men forced by circumstances to live in the relative isolation of the Southwestern frontier. For example, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870), the author of *Georgia Scenes*, published in both newspaper and book form, was a lawyer, legislator, judge, and editor in his Georgia community.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Clay Lewis (1825-1850), who wrote *Louisiana Swamp Doctor* under the pseudonym Madison Tensas, described himself at the age of sixteen as "a student of medicine and had been almost a printer, a cotton picker, a ploughboy, gin driver, gentleman of leisure, cabin boy, cook scullion, and runaway."<sup>9</sup> Lewis met an untimely end at the age of 25 when the overworked young physician drowned in a Louisiana bayou after calling on a patient.<sup>10</sup>

Johnson J. Hooper (1815-1863), an Alabamian, authored the *Adventures of Simon Suggs*. Hooper was a lawyer, had held political office, and edited several newspapers in his native state.<sup>11</sup> George Washington Harris (1814-1886), a Tennessean, although not a professional, served as a jeweler's apprentice, river boat captain, silversmith, political columnist, hunter, and inventor while he wrote the *Sut Lovingood Yarns*. Hooper was also a frequent

contributor to newspapers and the *Spirit of the Times*.<sup>12</sup>

Since the Southwest during this period contained pockets of civilization surrounded by wilderness, most of the frontier humorists had ample opportunity to observe all the types they wrote about at close quarters. They often deliberately hid their identities so that their neighbors would not wonder how they came to be so familiar with the low characters they depicted. Yet these frontier humorists seemed to find great enjoyment in sharing their frontier tales even though they were rarely paid for their efforts.

The most famous of these frontier tall tales were those told about the legendary woodsman, Davy Crockett. Although Crockett was a real person, the Davy Crockett of frontier legend had little resemblance to the original. Even before his death at the Alamo, fantastic stories about Davy Crockett and a strange and wonderful supporting cast circulated in a series of comic almanacs.<sup>13</sup> The Crockett stories are the best known example of the frontier humorists' use of the tall tale and exaggeration. The mythology that developed around a rather ordinary man turned him into the first superhero of the United States.

In the almanacs, the infant Crockett fed on whiskey and rattlesnake eggs and was rocked in a cradle made from a giant turtle shell. When he was eight, his head was used for a grindstone. When fully grown, he and his ninety foot pet alligator, "Mississippi," walked up Niagara Falls and later traveled to foreign lands. Crockett tamed panthers, killed bears, and was a devil in fighting with no holds barred.

In one of the almanacs, the mature Crockett bragged: "I'm fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with the snapping-turtle; can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride upon a streak of lightning and slip without a scratch down a honey locust; can whip my weight in wild cats . . . and hug a bear too close for comfort."<sup>14</sup>

The famed adventurer's children inherited his superhuman qualities. His youngest daughter was described as "a perfect infant prodigy, being only six years old; she had the biggest foot and widest mouth in all the west, and when she grins, she is splendifferous; she shows most beautiful internals and can scare a flock of wolves to totall terrifications."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the frontier women in the almanacs were the equal of their men. For example, "Colonel Coon's wife Judy . . . wore a bearskin petticoat, an alligator's hide for an over-coat, an eagle's nest for a hat, with a wild-cat's tail for a feather. When she was fourteen years old, she wrung off a snapping turtle's neck and made a comb of its shell . . . when she was sixteen years old, she run down a four year old colt and chased a bear three mile through the snow because she wanted his hair to make a tooth brush. She out-screamed a catamount . . . and sucked forty rattlesnakes' eggs to give her a sweet breath, the night she was married."<sup>16</sup>



Frontier attitudes and beliefs were also an important part of the almanacs. Davy Crockett often acted as a buckskin clad philosopher, providing homely wisdom for the masses. His personal motto, "Be sure you're right, then GO AHEAD," repeated dozens of times in the almanacs, became the battle cry of the frontier.<sup>17</sup> Its popularity undoubtedly reflected the true sentiments of most people in the United States during the heyday of Manifest Destiny.

The fantastic animals that were part of the frontier tales also deserve mention. Perhaps the most amazing was the Gyascutus, a bear-sized creature with a hard turtle-like shell complemented by huge teeth and claws. The beast was covered with foot-thick scales so that it could only be killed with a rifle if it was shot in the middle of the left forefoot which had a soft spot that led to the heart.<sup>18</sup> Another was Prock, a horse with short uphill and long downhill legs that enabled it to stand level on a steep mountain slope. Even the natural creatures of forests and swamps were abnormally large, fearsome, and intelligent. Arkansas mosquitoes, for example, were so large and powerful that an old man crawled under a large kettle to escape them, but the "gallinippers" punctured the metal shell with their bills. The man in desperation bent the bills over with a hammer like nails. The disgruntled and angry insects then flew away carrying the kettle with them.<sup>19</sup>

Not all the protagonists of frontier tales were supermen. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's famous story, "The Fight," was a more realistic and satiric portrait of a brutal confrontation, a common occurrence on the frontier at this time. What makes this story different is that a fight to the finish between two champions was actually instigated by a frontier weakling, Ransy Sniffle. Longstreet described him as

a little fellow who in his earlier days had fed copiously upon red clay and blackberries. This diet had given him a complexion that a corpse would have disdained to own . . . spells of the fever and ague . . . had conspired with clay and blackberries to throw him quite out of the order of nature. His shoulders were fleshless and elevated; his head large and flat; his neck slim and translucent . . . his height was just five feet nothing and his average weight in blackberry season, ninety-five.<sup>20</sup>

During the fight, instigated by the conniving weakling, the two heroes literally tore each other apart. One man lost his left ear and a large piece from his left cheek, while the other had a third of his nose bitten off, much to the delight of Ransy.<sup>21</sup>

The work of Madison Tensas does not fit neatly into any category.

Although he satirized poor whites and blacks of the swamps, he also poked fun at himself, an upwardly mobile doctor. His stories moved away from the fantasy of the almanacs to a more modern style of black humor. One of his best known tales concerns himself as a young medical student who became so absorbed in his study of anatomy that he could think of nothing else. As Tensas wrote:

It (Anatomy) was a passion with me. Whenever I met persons extremely emaciated or finely developed, my anatomical eye would scan their proportions, and instead of paying them the usual courtesies of life, I would be thinking what glorious subjects they would be for museum preparations or dissection. Even when my audacious lips were stealing a kiss from the pulpy mouth of my ladylove, instead of floating into ecstasies of delight, my anatomical mind would wonder whether, even in death, electricity might not be able to continue their bewitching suction.<sup>22</sup>

The young medical student's passion with anatomy caused him to steal a dead black baby from the morgue for dissection. Hiding it under his cloak, he sat through the rest of his lecture to avoid detection and then walked slowly home. Unfortunately on the way, he met his girlfriend. Shortly afterwards, her angry father who hated Southerners appeared along with a policeman, when a large bulldog attacked the medical student. In trying to avoid the dog, he and his girlfriend slipped and fell while the baby's body rolled out from under his cloak. Needless to say the student lost his girl, was nearly expelled from school, and ended as "an old rusty swamp doctor."<sup>23</sup> While Tensas's character was not a weakling, neither was he a child of nature. Willing to bend the rules to feed his passion the student was closer to the shifty conniving rascal than the simple frontiersman.

Although Yankee peddlers were objects of scorn in the Southwest for their cheating tricks, the poor white settler was not above some double-dealing himself. Among the best examples of this frontier rascal type are Johnson J. Hooper's Captain Simon Suggs and George Washington Harris's Sut Lovingood.

Simon Suggs, the self-nominated captain of the Tallapoosa Volunteers, operated under the belief that "it is good to be shifty in a new country."<sup>24</sup> He lived by his wits rather than hard work whenever possible. In "Simon Suggs Attends a Camp Meeting," Hooper satirized both the gullible backwoods believers and the rascally minister who Suggs eventually cheated.<sup>25</sup> The tale described the actions of a number of amusingly homely and unlettered characters in the throes of the "jerks" and other forms of religious hysteria at an Alabama



camp meeting in the 1820s. After "getting religion," Suggs cleverly coerced the congregation into donating a substantial sum to build a church for the eager circuit rider. The preacher was ready to take the money and run when Suggs outwitted him by saying he had to pray over the money before he could give it up:

'You se that krick swamp?' asked Suggs--'I'm gwine down in that, and I'm gwine to lay this money down so,'--showing how he would place it on the ground--'and I'm gwine to git on these here knees,'--slapping the right one--'and I'm n-e-v-e-r gwoine to quit the grit ontwell I feel it's got the blessin! And nobody aint got to be thar but me!' . . . Captain Suggs 'struck for' the swamp sure enough, where his horse was already hitched. 'Ef them fellers aint done to a cracklin,' he muttered . . . 'I'll never bet on two pair agin! They're peart at the snap game, theyselves: but they're badly lewed this hitch! Well! Live and let live is a good old motter, and it's my sentiments adzacktly!' And giving the spur to his horse, off he cantered.<sup>26</sup>

Simon Suggs was a crafty and lazy rascal who preyed on the gullibility of others. Sut Lovingood was an illiterate and shiftless layabout who positively enjoyed their discomfort. There is quite a contrast between these characters and the innocence and vitality of the frontiersman.

George Washington Harris's work has fascinated numerous scholars because it is amazingly modern and original in style. However, *Sut Lovingood's Tales* are not as popular with the general public today because they are written in a thick and awkward dialect. Some might also be put off by the amorality and squalor of the setting. Harris described Sut as "a queer looking, long legged, short bodied, small headed, white haired, hog eyed, funny sort of a genius."<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the most representative of Harris's tales is "Sut Lovingood's Daddy, Actin Horse." To set the scene, the family's horse had died of old age. After several weeks of waiting for another to appear, Sut's daddy decided to act as a horse while Sut guided the plow so that the womenfolk could plant the crops. In the course of plowing, daddy stepped on a hornet's nest and jumped over a bluff into a creek. Sut followed after to enjoy his discomfort:

I crept up tu the aidge an' peep'd over. That wer Dad's bald hed for all the yeath like a peeled inyin, a bobbin up an' down an' aroun, an' the ho'nets sailin roun tuckey

buzzard fashun, an' every onst in a while one, an' som times ten, wud take a dip at dad's bald head. He kep' up a rite peart dodgin onder, sumtimes afore they hit im, an' sumtimes arterrard, an' the warter wer kivered wif drowned ball ho'nets. Tu look at hit frum the top ove the bluff, hit wer pow'ful inturestin, an' sorter funny: I wer on the bluff myse'f mine yu. Sez I, 'Dad, ef yu's dun washin yersef, an hes drunk enuff, less go back tu our plowin, hit will soon be powful hot.' Sut continued to taunt his angry dad from a safe position on the hill . . . 'Well, Dad, yu'l hev to stay thar till nite, an arter they goes to roos' you cum home. I'll hev yer feed in the troft redy: yu won't need eny curryin tu-nite will yu?'

Sut left his enraged parent fighting off hornets in the creek. The next afternoon he saw a traveler and asked:

What wer agwine on at the cabin, this side the crick? Oh nuthin much, only a pow'ful fat man wer a lyin in the yard onto his belly, wif no shut on, an' a 'oman wer a greasin ove his shoulders and arms outen a gourd. A pow'ful curious, vishus, skeery lookin cuss he is to b'shure. His head am as big es a wash pot, an' he hasent the fust durned sign ove an eye--jist two black slits. Do you know what ails that man back thar? 'Jist gittin over a vilent attack ove dam fool,' sez I. 'Well, who is he eny How?' 'Stranger, that's my dad.' He looked at my laigs an' pussonel feeters a moment, an' sez he, 'Yas, dam ef he aint.'<sup>28</sup>

Harris's original work quickly established him as a writer and storyteller of talent. No one has ever doubted his talent, but many have criticized the coarseness and cruelty of Sut's pranks, which in one story, caused a woman's death.<sup>29</sup>

The Civil War and the settling of the West brought an end to the work of the Frontier humorists. Soon after the end of the war, writers like Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, Bret Harte, and others developed a synthesis of Frontier and Yankee humor in their books, poems, and newspaper columns. Twain, who was born in the border state of Missouri, often used Southwestern themes in his work. The great popularity of the new humorists along with the growth of the publishing industry in the 1880s helped to merge sectional variations into a national humor. However, the style developed by Frontier humorists such as Lewis and Harris proved to be a dominant influence in the development of



twentieth-century humor. Their natural and earthy motif laced with a combination of cynicism and optimism had a broader appeal than the understatement of the Northeast. The democratic mindset of the Frontier produced a style of humor that combined rampant individualism with satire and irreverent anti-authoritarianism. These themes live on in the modern political cartoons and comic strips of the twentieth century.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Mark Lipper, "Comic Caricatures in Early American Newspapers as Indicators of the National Character" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University, 1971), 51.

<sup>2</sup>See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (London: Capó, 1964).

<sup>3</sup>Constance Rourke thought the frontiersman was a primitive version of the modern comic strip superhero. See Constance Rourke, *American Humor*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1931).

<sup>4</sup>"For James Fenimore Cooper he was Leatherstocking; for Owen Wister, the Virginian; on the Movie screen, Gary Cooper or Tom Mix; on television, Wyatt Earp; in the dime novel, Wild Bill Hickock; under the circus tent, Buffalo Bill; as a social rebel, Jesse James; as a woman, Annie Oakley; in oral tradition, Davy Crockett or Mike Fink; in the North, Paul Bunyan; in the Southwest, Pecos Bill; on the Great Plains, Febold Feboldson; for the Indian, Geronimo; for the black, Deadwood Dick; for the Mexican, Joaquin Murieta." See Robert V. Hine, *The American West, An Interpretive History* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984), 284-289.

<sup>5</sup>Max Eastman wrote in the thirties that "native humor became the core of a new popular culture acknowledged to be American. Newspaper caricatures evolved into folk heroes. Because America was too young as a nation to have serious mythic heroes, her demi-gods were born in laughter. They were consciously preposterous . . . cockalorum demi-gods." See Max Eastman, "Humor and America" *Scribners* (July 1936): 10-12.

<sup>6</sup>See H. R. Haweis, *American Humorist* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1882).

<sup>7</sup>Bernard de Voto stated that the average well person living that supposedly idyllic pastoral life in the wilderness must have run a constant temperature of one degree. See Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain's America* (1932; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Oxford University Press, 1960), 55-57. (CMS, 17.47, 17.48]

<sup>8</sup>See John Donald Wade, *Augustus Baldwin Longstreet* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

<sup>9</sup>From Madison Tensas, *Odd Leaves of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1850), 2.

<sup>10</sup>Little had been known about Tensas until John Q. Anderson discovered Lewis was actually the author of the swamp doctor tales. See John Q. Anderson, *Louisiana Swamp Doctor, The Life and Writings of Henry Clay Lewis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1962), i-iv.

<sup>11</sup>See Marion Kelley, "Life and Writings of Johnson Jones Hooper," Masters thesis, Alabama Polytechnic Institute, 1934.

<sup>12</sup>See M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* by George Washington Harris (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966), i-iii.

<sup>13</sup>The almanacs were published from 1835 to 1856, first in Nashville, but shortly afterwards in New York and Boston, and later in Philadelphia, Albany, Baltimore and Louisville.

<sup>14</sup>The half-horse half-alligator frontier brag dates back to the song "Hunters of Kentucky," first performed in New Orleans in 1822. It was later used by James Paulding in his play, *Lion of the West*. The almanac authors were familiar with these works and cheerfully plagiarized them. See *Sketches and Eccentricities of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 164. See also Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 23.

<sup>15</sup>Dorson, ed., *Davy Crockett*, 23.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>17</sup>The "GO AHEAD" motto belonged to the real David Crockett as well as the legendary Davy.

<sup>18</sup>"Forest Scenes and Sketches, Adventure with a Guyascutus," by "A Strecher, U.S.A.," *Spirit*, 17 (1857): 278.

<sup>19</sup>See "Random Shots from a Western Fort," by "an Officer of the U.S. Army," *Spirit*, 18 (1848): 55.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1960), 290-98.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.* Frontier fighting was of the "anything goes" style. Since eye-gouging was acceptable, some fighters kept their fingernails long and sharpened.

<sup>22</sup>Anderson, *Louisiana Swamp Doctor*, 155-57.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>See Hooper, *Simon Speculates* (1853).

<sup>25</sup>Hooper was afraid that he had been too zealous in his satire of a Christian camp meeting so he added a footnote stating that no disrespect was intended towards any denomination of Christians. See "Simon Suggs Goes to a Camp Meeting" reprinted in Blair, *Native American Humor*, 319.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 316-25.



<sup>27</sup>Blair calls Sut "simply the genuine naive roughneck mountaineer riotously bent on raising hell," "that the squalor in which the Lovingoods live-squalor without alleviation, without shame, somehow becomes very jolly" and that "in Sut Lovingood, the ante-bellum humor of the South reaches its highest level of achievement before Mark Twain. However, at the same time, he admits that "its artistry has never been sufficiently appreciated partly because its faults have been overemphasized by over-squeamish critics." Ibid., 96-101.

<sup>28</sup>Sut Lovingood's Daddy Actin' Horse," *Spirit*, 24 (November 4, 1854): 448. This is the only one of Harris's tales about Sut and his family to appear in the *Spirit*.

<sup>29</sup>See "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting" in *Sut Lovingood, Yarns Spun by a 'Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool*," 135-48.