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The Voters of Appalachia ...

A - Are Hicks, B - Are Hillbillies, C - Are Rednecks, D - Don't appreciate where you're going with this

by [Steve Tuttle \(/contributors/steve-tuttle.html\)](/contributors/steve-tuttle.html) | June 28, 2008 1:38 PM EDT

"Hick." "Hillbilly." "Redneck." "Inbred." "Cracker." "Ridge Runner." I heard and self-effacingly used them all when I left the mountains of Appalachia to attend college in the great metropolis of Williamsburg, Va., in the '80s. I was mercilessly ribbed as a rube when I brought along my sky-blue JCPenney suit—with reversible vest—and my stack of Willie and Waylon albums, and entered a world that was as foreign to me as I must have seemed to my fancy William & Mary roommates from the private schools. Imagine my surprise at their surprise when, thinking nothing of it, I casually mentioned that I missed my mom's home-cooked squirrel.

Well, look who's laughing now. In this strangest of political seasons, Appalachia, the last forgotten place in America, suddenly matters. Never mind Florida and Michigan. In a close election come November, the difference between President McCain and President Obama could come down to me and my people: a bunch of ornery, racist, coal-minin', banjo-pickin', Scots-Irish hillbillies clinging to our guns and religion on the side of some Godforsaken, moonshine-soaked ridge in West Virginia. The Democrats comically pandered to all these stereotypes during this spring's primaries, when the 23 million people of Appalachia—that 1,000-mile mountainous stretch from southern New York to the middle of Alabama—briefly hijacked the presidential race. Scrounging for every last vote, the candidates went out of their way to look country. Hillary got all twangy. Barack tasted beer.

It was fun to watch them make fools of themselves. It was also a little depressing. Taking in the coverage, I was struck by how clueless people still are—and this goes double for presidential contenders—about this vast chunk of the country. If they think about it at all, it's not as a real place where actual people live actual lives. Instead, most Americans seem to see Appalachia through the twin stereotypes of tragedy (miners buried alive) and farce (Jed Clampett). It would do America good if we were forced to take a real look at a region without the distorted filter of prejudice and pop culture.

The "Beverly Hillbillies" parody of the place isn't just the invention of addled sitcom writers. It's a stereotype

that goes back to the settling of the country. "I remembered, too, strange stories told about these Ragged Hills, and of the uncouth and fierce races of men who tenanted their groves and caverns." Edgar Allan Poe wrote that about western Virginia in 1844. Through the years, this idea of Appalachians as inbred, borderline savages became so firmly stuck in the popular imagination that people on the outside don't even think about how corrosive it can be. Television and movies are soaked in cartoonish images of hill folk. As a kid, I remember watching Bugs Bunny mercilessly humiliate two dim, bearded mountain men. In the end, he got them to unwittingly beat each other half to death with fence posts while square dancing. Then there's Cletus Del Roy Spuckler, arguably the stupidest of all the characters on "The Simpsons." He eats skunk, makes moonshine and, in a running gag, may or not be married to a close relative. The most enduring modern version of Poe's dark, unforgiving vision of Appalachia: Ned Beatty getting raped by a gang of amped-up horror-movie hillbillies in "Deliverance."

A decade ago, John Waters (you know him as the director of "Hairspray") said that the expression "white trash" is "the last racist thing you can say and get away with." That sums it up, all right. You can't even make fun of fat people anymore—unless they're from Appalachia. Even the vice president of the United States didn't think twice about turning to the darkest of Appalachian slurs for laughs. Joking in a recent speech that there are Cheneys on both sides of his family, the vice president said, "And we don't even live in West Virginia." The state's representatives apparently didn't appreciate the veep's special brand of humor. Sen. Robert Byrd said Cheney displayed "contempt and astounding ignorance toward his own countrymen." To his credit, Cheney bravely stepped up and apologized—through a spokeswoman. Waters is right: would an elected official make a joke that coarse in public about any other group of Americans?

Now let me be the first to say that, yes, some of the stereotypes about Appalachia—like a lot of stereotypes—have, shall we say, a certain ring of truth. In the western Virginia county where I grew up, there wasn't a single traffic light. We were so isolated from the rest of the country that some of my relatives called the Civil War "the War of Northern Aggression." They were not being ironic. Hell, as soon as I finish writing this story I'm getting in my Jeep and driving with my brother and dad to a bluegrass festival in Summersville, W.Va., where I'll spend a solid week standing in a field playing songs with names like "Cripple Creek" and "Rabbit in the Log" on my banjo.

So it's OK to laugh at some of the jokes. We certainly laugh at ourselves. A T shirt popular at the festival even riffs off "Deliverance": PADDLE FASTER, I HEAR BANJOS. Here's another one: how do we know the toothbrush was invented in West Virginia? Answer: because what other state would call it a "tooth" brush?

I laughed the first time I heard that, and I admit to repeating it a few times myself throughout the years. But as I've gotten older, I've started to feel a little bit of shame for finding these jokes funny. Where I grew up, some people had to wait for the "mobile dentist" to come to town if they had a bad tooth. In many remote parts of Appalachia, it's still that way. Is it funny that a child has to go to a dentist in an RV along some dirt road because his parents can't afford any better?

What I see when I return from Washington, D.C., to my childhood home is beautiful and sad. I see postcard scenes of crystal-clear trout streams, indigo buntings and scarlet tanagers, and mountainsides lit with rosebuds and rhododendron blooms. But on that same drive, I'll see tumbledown shacks and trailers, a lumber treatment yard practically on top of a river where the creosote smells so strong it makes your eyes water, and people lining up at a rusty pipe coming out of the side of a ridge to get clean spring water, because it's better than what they have at home. Kids run around in the dirt yards amid the detritus of scraping out a life in this hard, isolated world. If the Great Depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange were alive today, she'd have

no shortage of material. Only it's 2008, and it says a lot about our country that so much hasn't changed.

Some things have. In fact, there's been quite a bit of progress in the 44 years since Lyndon Johnson declared a "War on Poverty" from a broken-down porch in Inez, Ky. In 1965, one third of Appalachians lived in poverty. The last U.S. Census showed that since then, the poverty rate has declined by more than half. Technology has helped make far-flung places less remote. I vividly remember watching television with my father. He'd shout out, "Boy, get up and see what's on the other channel." Our TV pulled in only two. Now satellites bloom on the hillsides, bringing hundreds of channels along with high-speed Internet.

In many of the remotest areas of Appalachia, though, life is as tough as ever. In the central part of the region, only 68 percent of kids graduate from high school. A generation ago, they'd find jobs in mines or factories or working tobacco farms. But those jobs are getting scarcer. To support their families, more people are commuting hundreds of miles to low-paying service-industry jobs in larger towns and cities. In April, when John McCain returned to the house where Johnson launched his poverty war, he found it padlocked with a NO TRESPASSING sign out front. A car was parked in the driveway, a broken window covered with a blanket. Despite LBJ's efforts, today about one third of the people in Martin County—where Inez is the county seat—still live below the poverty line.

In the coming months, McCain and Obama will, like the long line of candidates who came before them, descend on Appalachia bearing plenty of promises. The truth is, there's not much any president can do to change things in four or eight years. What they can do is simply take the place and its people seriously. Folks know when a politician is using them as stage props. John Kerry didn't sound believable last time around when he tried to pass himself off as a NASCAR fan. And no one in West Virginia thinks Obama actually kicks back with a bottle of Bud. If I could give advice to the candidates and their handlers, it would be this: don't pretend, don't condescend. (I made that rhyme so it would be easier to remember.) Andy Griffith, the patron saint of Southern culture whose mythical Mayberry sat on the edge of Appalachia, once said of his classic TV show: "We wanted them to laugh with us, not at us."

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