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The hillbilly stereotype strikes again; 2008 campaign, and new movie, peddle bigotry

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THE movie, "The Express," has WVU fans all riled up. It tells the sad story of Ernie Davis, the first black Heisman winner, who died of leukemia before he could make it to the NFL.

Great story - "Brian's Song" for the 21st century.

Unfortunately, that is not the story that filmmakers apparently wanted to sell.

WVU fans are upset with a scene that depicts Davis fighting racism at a game in Morgantown in 1959.

It never happened.

There was no game in Morgantown between his team, Syracuse, and WVU that year. They played in New York. The next year, they played in Morgantown.

And from all accounts, WVU fans treated Davis in the 1960 game as well as they would treat any other star of an opposing team.

Syracuse's 1960 quarterback, Dick Easterly, told the Daily Mail, "I apologize to the people of West Virginia, because it never happened."

But hey, we're West Virginians. We all have "Kick me" signs on our backs.

Of course, what does one expect from Hollywood? The local newspaper, the Los Angeles Times, perpetuates this stereotype of the backward, uneducated, xenophobic bigot who lives in the hills with his wife and his shotgun.

The Times sent a reporter to Whiteville, Va., to find some racists, and he did. There are racists everywhere, of course, but racism in the hills is easier to report because it is so far from the newspaper's circulation area. Readers like to feel morally superior.

The report asserted that because Virginia is leaning Democratic in the Senate race, it should vote for Barack Obama.

Unmentioned in the story was that 68 percent of the people in Whiteville's county voted for President Bush in the last election.

West Virginia elected Democrats as governor in 2000 and 2004, but went for Bush both times. And the state went for Bill Clinton in 1996 but elected a Republican governor.

Perhaps this blue-state, red-state thing is a media myth.

If the L.A. Times is so concerned about racism, it should send a reporter to ask people in South Central L.A. why they won't vote for McCain.

I never agreed with Daily Mail columnist Dave Peyton's assertion that hillbillies were the last ethnic group it was OK to berate.

This year opened mine eyes. I publicly apologize to Dave.

The stereotype of an Appalachian as a backward, uneducated, xenophobic bigot is an insult that came from Obama himself when he told a gathering of well-heeled liberals in the San Francisco area that the people in rural Pennsylvania won't vote for him because they cling to guns and their religion.

Well, we Klings have taken heat ever since.

It does not help that in the May primary, 22 percent of the Democrats said race was a factor in their presidential vote.

But 78 percent said it was not a factor.

What likely was a bigger factor was Obama's decision to write off West Virginia. He spent more time on a vacation in the Virgin Islands than he spent in West Virginia.

Jack Kennedy and his clan spent about a month here in 1960.

The idea that white people won't vote for Obama because he is black is as stupid as saying black people won't vote for McCain because he is white.

In the last presidential election, 58 percent of white voters went Republican while 88 percent of black voters went Democratic.

I don't like to see this peddling of racial stereotypes. West Virginians aren't perfect. But they are Americans and they have the right to vote as they see fit without being called ugly names.

"The Express" apparently portrays as a racist a very real man, Ben Schwartzwalder, who was awarded the Silver Star and Bronze star while with the 82nd Airborne in World War II.

He also coached Jim Brown. I find it difficult to believe that Jim Brown would tolerate racism even in the 1950s.

And I also find it difficult to believe that a racist would recruit athletes such as Brown and Davis.

Those who think this is just a movie should read Ann Hornaday's review in the Washington Post, "But of course the best parts of 'The Express' (whose title derives from Davis's nickname the Elmira Express) are the football games, reenacted in the movie with

pulverizing accuracy.

"The two centerpiece games, with West Virginia and the University of Texas, bristle not only with physical action but also historical and political symbolism."

Ernie Davis deserved better historians. So does West Virginia.

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