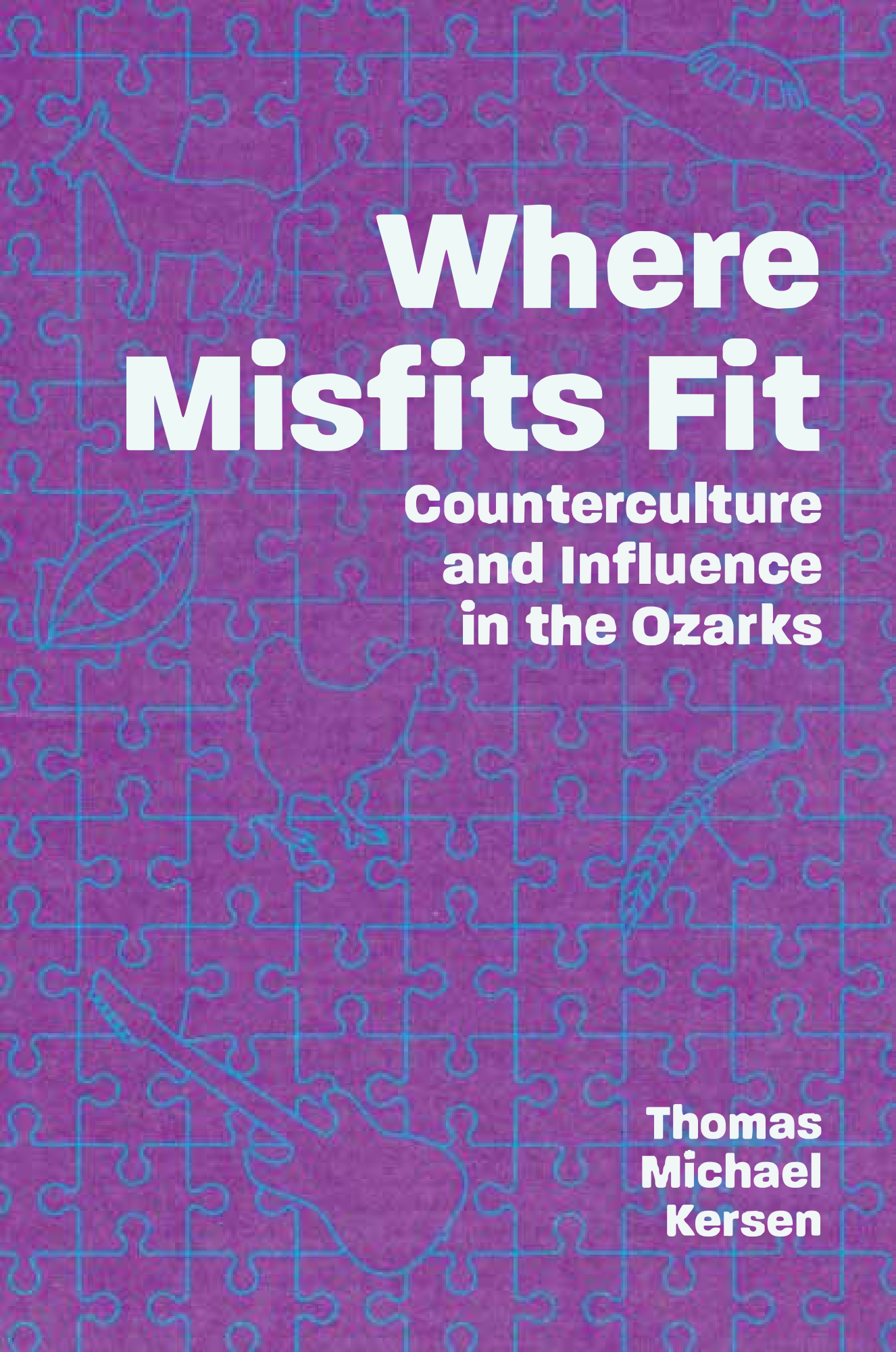

Where Misfits Fit

Counterculture and Influence in the Ozarks

Thomas Michael Kersen

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Li'l Abner the Trickster

Mythical Identity in the Ozarks

> Good old boy . . . A little bit of wit, a little bit of grit, and a whole lot of shit. He's funny and he's a trickster.
>
> **—Baxter Hall and Cecil Wood**

In the last chapter, I explored the way in which the identities of the South and the Ozarks are more nuanced than many people might realize. Identity is complex. One aspect of modernity is that identity or community is no longer tied to a location or even anything "real." The same modern ephemeral nature of collective identity is true for the southern identity. Reed, a sociologist who spent much of his career trying to understand the social-psychological boundaries rather than geographic ones of southerners, wrote, "The South is no longer geography—it is an attitude and a philosophy of government."[1] According to Hall and Wood, the South is unique because "the gateways to the South today are as metaphoric as they are geographic, for the South was born of myth."[2] Later, Anderson agreed with Reed that an "'imagined' south is replacing a geographic south," and in many ways, popular culture has filled the gap between the South's real and imagined worlds. Inge observed that, "It is no exaggeration to say that culture in the United States, high and low, had been obsessed with things Southern and Appalachia since the turn of the [twentieth] century."[3] Chief among the major cultural influences on the public's perception of the South for decades was Alfred Caplin's, later Al Capp's, *Li'l Abner* cartoon strip, which offered an imagined, mythical identity about mountain people, particularly those in the Ozarks.

Beginning in the 1930s, the South became a more commonplace geography in comic strips. It also was the "heyday of the hillbilly" according to historian Brooks Blevins.[4] *Li'l Abner* was so popular, especially in the 1940s-1950s, that the cartoon strip reached a worldwide audience.[5] It also was long-lived, and ran from 1934 to 1977. Thus, "Capp arguably had a profound influence on the way the world viewed the American South."[6] I would go further and argue that Capp's *Li'l Abner* and Billy DeBeck's *Snuffy Smith* shaped popular culture and opinion about the Ozarks and mountain people in general.

As a boy, Al Capp was an avid reader of southern and mountain stories, such as John Fox's *The Kentuckians* and Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills*.[7] As a young man, he read Charles Dickens, Bernard Shaw, Mark Twain, William Cowper Brann, and other social critics.[8] Quite a few of the books about mountains and the South were made into silent movies that Capp had an opportunity to watch as a boy, and a hitchhiking trip he made to the Appalachians when he was 16 was influential in *Li'l Abner*'s development. His brother wrote, "When 'Li'l Abner' became a success, Alfred would resolutely maintain that the trip to Memphis was but a preliminary tour of the hillbilly country so that the future cartoonist could research the characters who wound up populating his wildly successful comic strip."[9] Last, as an adult, Capp watched vaudeville shows, such as *The Hill Billies*, that were playing in New York City in the early 1930s and also inspired *Li'l Abner*.[10]

Li'l Abner was introduced to some Arkansas and Missouri newspapers in the late 1930s. Other cartoon strips that shared space with it in some Ozark newspapers at the time were *Diana Dane*, *Tarzan*, *Scorchy Smith*, and the *Gay Thirties*. In the 1940s, *Blondie*, *Alley Oop*, and *Red Ryder* appeared in a number of newspapers. However, *Li'l Abner* was offered consistently over time and was quite popular in a number of newspapers in the Ozarks.

Cartoonists, both in the past and today, use comics in a variety of ways, including to parody and satirize social issues. Satire is fundamental to political cartoons. However, many cartoons have a critical edge to them that may go unnoticed by many readers/viewers (e.g., *The Smurfs*). In many ways, cartoons became an ideal way to criticize power because the messages are hidden or conveyed as metaphors. More pragmatically, cartoons avoid censorship or public outcry precisely because the "real" message is hidden. Pop culturist James Black wrote, "Comic strips offered hidden transcripts and built-in alibis for the expression of dissent during the 1950s at a time when others [media] could not."[11]

Allegories provide a form or structure within which cultures operate. Myths, folklore, and other aspects of culture associated with a group of people is the content that fills in the form. The things with which we fill our daily lives tell a great deal about who we are and what we value. Comic strips grew in popularity after World War I and became a genre that people followed and talked about with their friends and family.[12] Thus, cartoons contribute as well to a people or region's myths and folklore.

Al Capp, Billy DeBeck, and other cartoonists recognized that folklore mirrors a particular culture.[13] Indeed, Ozark folklorist Vance Randolph inspired Capp, and the two corresponded. Such stories, or folklore, offer both insiders and outsiders a way of understanding a culture. According to anthropologist Alan Dundes, we are "seeing culture from inside out" through folklore.[14] Moreover, according to sociologist Emile Durkheim, shared folk beliefs and traditions provide a group a sense of social solidarity. The various contents of which folk life consists can help researchers understand cultural boundaries, like those of the Ozarks, even better.[15] Such stories exist at the national, regional (e.g., South), state, and even such specific locales as the Ozarks.

To some extent, the state of Missouri and northern Arkansas form a distinct north-south cultural dichotomy.[16] This "middle landscape" caught the imagination of all manner of people[17] and, as a place, has inspired many of the popular cultural myths outsiders generated. Fazio wrote, "The South was seen from the outside not only as a holdover from simpler times but also as a mysterious, special entity, a repository of ancient virtues and of regional identity."[18] Perhaps this is why nonsoutherners created so many comic strips, such as *Li'l Abner*, *Snuffy Smith*, and *Pogo*. As historian Karen Cox noted, "This geography of production represents an important opportunity for historians [and other humanities scholars] to consider how perceptions of southern identity have been shaped from *outside* the region."[19]

Commercial interests also use myths to exploit regional stereotypes, such as the hillbilly, in the Ozarks and Appalachia.[20] Beverages such as Kickapoo Joy Juice or Mountain Dew, create and convey a commercial folklore through comics such as *Li'l Abner* and *Snuffy Smith*. These products' creators found it lucrative and suffered few repercussions when they depicted Ozark and Appalachian people to sell their products. Indeed, people living in the region often "bought into" the commercialized stereotypes by selling all sorts of knick-knacks to tourists. Altogether, the material culture commercial folklore created then feeds into people's collective identity even if people outside the region produced it.[21]

One of the largest commercial enterprises involving the hillbilly motif is the theme park Dogpatch, which was located near Harrison, Arkansas. In the late 1960s, Little Rock entrepreneur Jess P. Odom approached Al Capp with the idea of building a theme park in the Ozarks based on *Li'l Abner's* town of Dogpatch. Capp agreed enthusiastically, and the park opened in short order in 1968. However, some people were worried that the hillbilly-themed park would damage the work the state had done to promote its image of progress and development.[22]

The park encompassed 825 acres and included 75 buildings, a number of parks and lakes, a tram, and a number of other elements to made it on par with other theme parks, such as Six Flags. There was even a 1,500-foot ski slope and 30 alpine chalets at the associated Marble Falls Resort. In addition to the rides and other attractions, there were plans for an annual Dogpatch festival, Sadie Hawkins Day races, and other events.[23]

The California firms in charge of Dogpatch's economic plan predicted 400 thousand visitors in 1968, 800 thousand in 1972, and over 1,000,000 in 1978. The planners argued that all of these potential visitors would be a boon to the region and the state's economy. However, the visitation numbers were never as high as predicted and the park went through a number of owners before it closed in 1993.[24]

Myth of the South and Hillbillies

One of the most enduring myths in the South is the Lost Cause.[25] This particular myth is founded on the notion that there was a very old, chivalrous system in the South that was destroyed as a result of the Civil War and Reconstruction. In broader terms, the Lost Cause is a variant of the lost community theme used often to address modernity and social change.[26] Hall and Wood noted that much of what is called the "Old South" is not very old in historical terms. Indeed, much of the South was frontier until a few decades before the Civil War. Instead, what was lost and is yearned for is a rather ambiguous and ephemeral sliver of history.[27]

Part of the desire to find that Lost South was attributable to its frontier spirit. Frederick Jackson Turner focused on frontiers, which he regarded as places that lead and shape American culture. Turner's thesis has met controversy, as there is little empirical evidence to support it; however, according to

cultural geographer Wilbur Zelinsky, more generally, the thesis and frontiers affected the American mythos profoundly.[28]

Folklore and mythic traditions offer insights into the way groups cope with such dilemmas and paradoxes as community and modernity.[29] Myths reified often lead to nostalgia for a false past and can feed ethnocentrism.[30] The actual term is "anemoia," which means being nostalgic for an imagined past. Anemoia focuses on the feeling that many people have that modernity is alienating, and thus they imagine a past that never existed. Many people in business, politics, and religion have capitalized on this form of nostalgia—a past imagined and often at odds with what actually *did* happen in the past. Nostalgia also can be dangerous because too many people want to "return" to that imagined past. The common American myth of the rugged individualist has done much harm to the way we regard each other and extends into various facets of government policy. In the case of the South, Hall and Wood's warning "Beware of a Southerner with something to prove" undergirds the pernicious myth of the Lost Cause.[31] Capp, who was sensitive to race and religion, was able to portray the Abners as patriots rather than Confederate sympathizers, and thereby shone light on the myth of the Lost Cause.

Often, what people understand about the South involves an interplay between myth, reality, and kinship. We even reshape our lives according to accepted myths.[32] Notions about origins, history, and mission accepted commonly may or may not be consistent with historical realities and family stories. Frequently, authors characterized these facets of mythical southern identity in various ways. For example, Hall and Wood argued that there was a southern trinity that involved three archetypal groups. The first was the well-heeled blowhards of the political and business world. Next, what would the South be without the religious rabble-rousers?[33] However, in addition to southern politicians and the rabble-rousers, a third face emerged during the Jacksonian period in American history, a common country person to whom Hall and Woods referred as the "good old boy," otherwise known as the "mean sumbitch."[34] The good ol' boy can be a trickster too. In more colorful terms, the good ol' boy trickster is "a little bit of wit/a little bit of grit/and a whole lot of shit."[35] Perhaps this is the good ol' boy to whom Robert Morris referred when he described a type of Arkansan who exhibits "saucy dialog . . . [and] crooked answers."[36]

Sometimes the good ol' boy had little wit, but made people laugh nonetheless because he was considered a fool. From such a view arose a major

genre of mountain folktales and stories built around the Celtic myth, which among other things linked hillbillies to buffoonery.[37]

When the buffoonery was mixed with politics, fantastic stereotypes emerged, such as was the case in an 1852 article in the *Hannibal Journal*. While attending a meeting of Missouri Democrats for presidential candidate Franklin Pierce, the author—who was neither sympathetic to Pierce nor Democrats—listened to a lecturer who boasted that he could discern a Whig (elite class and precursor to Republicans) from a Democrat, in that Whigs had bumps on their heads, while Democrats were smooth or "flat-headed." The author accepted the lecturer's notion and argued that he thought flat-heads were prevalent throughout the South and especially in the Ozarks. The bumps indicated that their bearer aspired to higher levels of attainment, while flat-heads were content with their lot. Because the Whig sought to use all means, including public resources, to benefit his private situation, that in turn, would benefit everyone else. Specifically, as the Whig brought benefit to himself, the effect would trickle down to others, including the flat-headed Democrats. An elite, cosmopolitan attitude would spread and change the free-riding Democrat "who catches a new idea—a bump begins to sprout on his turnip shaped cranium; he sees more of life; gets the papers; his bumps grow, and finally, if he is an honest man, he becomes a Whig."[38]

In 1929, a columnist for the *Springfield Leader and Press* remarked about the practice of reporters who treated Ozarkers in stereotypical fashion as aliens, slackers, and fools. Reacting to one article that aroused his ire, he wrote: "The writer found a strange race of people [Ozarkers] not 100 miles from St. Louis and he might save railroad fare if he had looked around town a little where Ozarkers go quite frequently. To make the Ozark stories interesting we must be pictured as a different race with a different language."[39]

Arkansas historian Robert Morris noted the common practice of treating Arkansans as rubes who are "creature[s] of jokesmiths."[40] Indeed, Walter Blair indicated that many jokes arose out of stereotypes about mountain people, such as being dirty, lazy, and ignorant. He termed this genre as the Humor of the Irresponsibles, examples of which are Paul Webb's cartoon characters, *Li'l Abner* and *Snuffy Smith*.[41] Finally, Ozark commentator Fred Starr quoted from an Ozark publication: "One of the most popular numbers in the standard brands of humor has always been the hillbilly joke. The hill folk staged before a backdrop displaying a one-room shack stuck like a barnacle on a rocky hillside, with a rickety porch festooned with stone churns, skinny hounds and razorback hogs, has always been a bonanza for the joke writer."[42]

About the Author

Photo by Charles A. Smith, JSU University Communications photographer

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