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## Front Porch

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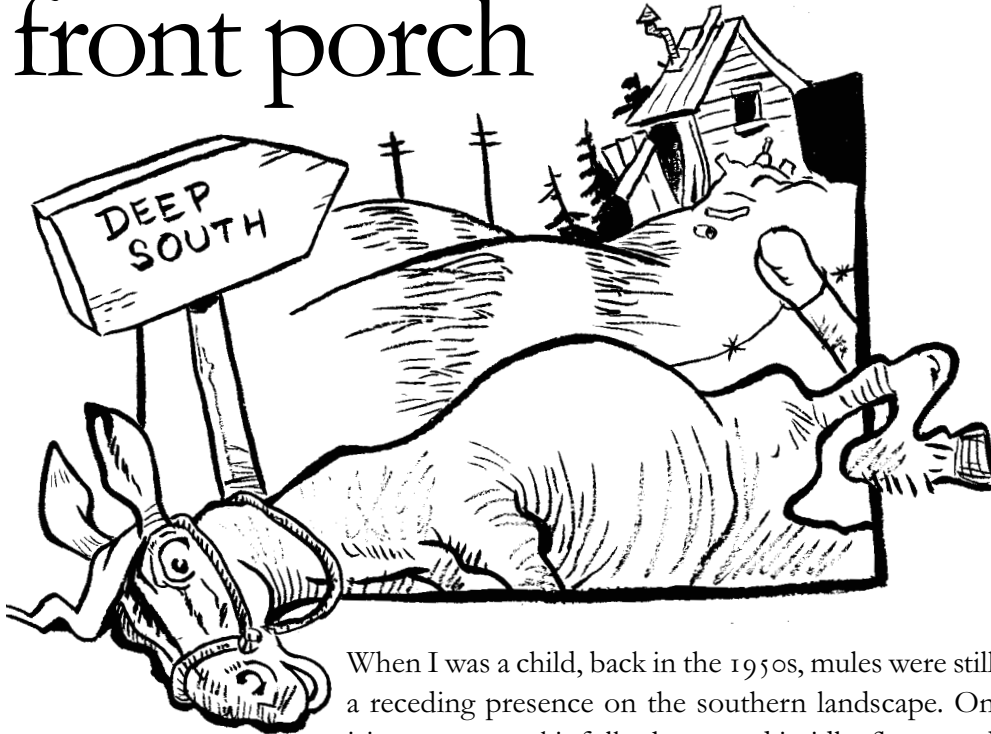
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# front porch



When I was a child, back in the 1950s, mules were still a receding presence on the southern landscape. On visits to country kinfolk, they stood in idle, flop-eared mourning around nearly abandoned barnyards — dark brown mules with bulbous white noses, white mules, even yellow ones. Like the guinea fowl that screeched from nearby coops or the mincing hens that high-stepped around the weedy corners of collapsing sheds, aging mules were kept on as pets mostly, ever since tractors and supermarkets filled the real needs of daily life. Once in a while you saw one in town, pulling an old man’s wagon with rubber automobile tires. Other than that, I don’t think I ever saw a mule at work. Outside of a petting zoo, I wonder if my children have seen a mule at all.

About the time mules began to disappear from southern barnyards, literary critic Jerry Mills began to notice them somewhere else: in the pages of southern literature. But unlike the mules of my childhood, these literary mules were not just dying but altogether dead, some of them reduced to bleaching skeletons in the rank underbrush of postwar southern fiction, others demolished by spectacular violence by authors who seemingly had little to do with one another. Intrigued by his discovery, Mills began to make a collection of dead mules in southern fiction and eventually published an essay on his findings that has become a cult classic: “Equine Gothic: The Dead Mule as a Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century.”

above: *Dead mules are alive and kicking in Jerry Mills’s essay “The Dead Mule Rides Again.”*

*Drawing by Bruce Strauch.*

Mills demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that modern southern fiction is bursting with hitherto unnoticed dead mules. Faulkner, O'Connor, Wolfe, Hurston, Gurganus, and McCarthy have all sung their elegies, along with others too numerous to repeat. Mills has found so many mulish remains that he proposes what some might call a cardinal test of the true southern novel: "*Has it got a dead mule in it?*"

Since first announcing this invaluable criterion in print, Jerry Mills has uncovered even more late lamented victims in southern prose, so many that he kindly agreed to bring us up to date by sharing his latest discoveries. His mournful report is the first article in this issue, "The Dead Mule Rides Again." Mills assures us solemnly that his findings are "innocent of theory" and deferentially leaves "further documentation and the formulation of theory to [his] successors in the field." But while one or two dead mules might be no more than a couple of unhappy accidents, even a casual reader must wonder why so many of these humble beasts have met their ends in southern literature. What makes so many southern authors reach for such a grisly image?

The answer seems as irresistible as it is obvious. Like the animals of my own childhood, mules are emblematic of the South's rural past. They are also stubborn, ungainly, unnatural, and more than a little ridiculous. Dead ones are probably more so. The authors Mills cites, moreover, seem to dispatch their homely victims by a variety of violent, gruesome, and let's face it, darkly comic means: hanging, drowning, gunshots, highway accidents, and falling off cliffs, to name only a few. Does this reflect a complicated and ambivalent relationship between twentieth-century southerners and the memory of their hardscrabble agrarian past? It's certainly tempting to think so, but I'm reminded here of Mark Twain's famous warning at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot will be shot." But how many critics has that stopped? As good southerners, we at *Southern Cultures* are taught to cherish a good story for its own sake and to despise pernicious abstractions, but Mills's deadpan masterpiece cries out for explication.

Jerry Mills's cardinal test of a southern writer inevitably points to the larger question of southern difference and its causes. As it happens, Peter Coclanis addresses that question directly. In 1999 Coclanis delivered the first annual Alfred D. Chandler Lecture in Southern Economic History at the UNC Center for the Study of the American South, and we are happy to share it with our readers. His essay considers the economic differences between North and South and their origins in the two regions' development from colonial days forward. Reflecting current academic scholarship, Coclanis finds that plantation slavery steered the South onto a very distinct economic path with immense social and cultural consequences, effects that southerners still confront like a dead mule in the front



*In "Tracking the Economic Divergence of North and South," Peter Coclanis asks if South and North were more different in 1900 than before the Civil War. Portrait of the attack on the 6th Massachusetts Regiment in Baltimore, April 1861, from A Complete History of the American Rebellion, Volume 1, published by the Auburn Publishing Company, Auburn, New York, 1865.*

yard. One of his most intriguing ideas is that North and South were even more different from each other in 1900 than in 1860—a painful result of the war that slavery and sectional difference had incited.

One set of southern differences that Coclanis does not explore is the consequences of slavery outside the antebellum South's plantation belt. While the upland South shared many characteristics of the rural North and Midwest, its Piedmont and mountain areas somehow turned out different from small farm districts in the free states. Where Coclanis finds economic diversity, abundant schooling opportunities, and dense networks of transportation and communications in the nineteenth-century northern countryside, students of the southern backcountry are more familiar with physical isolation, subsistence agriculture, poverty, and ignorance in the red clay hills. When stores and railroads eventually reached beyond the fall line, often after the Civil War, isolation gave way to cotton and tobacco monoculture, tenant farming and the crop lien system, exploitative mining, timber, and textile companies, continued lack of schooling, and still more poverty. The old plantation districts featured pretty much the same things, minus the textile mills. From a material perspective, the picture was a lot like what a dead mule might stand for, if dead mules could stand for anything—and a far

cry from the lush fields, overflowing barns, tidy villages, ample schoolhouses, tinker mechanics, and county Chautauquas immortalized by Currier and Ives. Southern distinctiveness, Coclanis argues, was more than a matter of culture; it was deeply rooted in Dixie's economic structure.

One of the most significant aspects of the South's history of deprivation is the complexity of how modern southerners (and other Americans) remember that experience. On the positive side, it's clear that the South's material deprivation was a source of memory, identity, and cultural enrichment. The chances are good, for example, that rural folk in eighteenth-century New England were yodeling "Barbara Allen" right along with their Appalachian contemporaries. But when the Yankees won the nineteenth-century prosperity that Coclanis describes, pianos and Victorian sheet music came right along behind, eventually followed by phonographs and the tunes of Tin Pan Alley, until the remnants of northern folk music had shriveled before the nascent forces of mass culture and mass taste.

But not in the South, or at least, not in the same way. Like their Yankee counterparts, black and white southerners bought phonographs and radios and banjos from Montgomery Ward, but the legacy of poverty, frustration, and isolation also preserved a homegrown folk tradition that fostered the richest strains of indigenous American music of the twentieth century. We all know the genealogy: gospel and the blues begat rhythm and blues, soul, and rock on one side; old time string bands begat bluegrass and the Nashville sound on the other.

Philip Gura evokes this part of the southern tradition in his essay "Southern Roots and Branches: Forty Years of the New Lost City Ramblers." In the 1950s, the Ramblers were the first band to recover the vocal and string-band music of the southern highlands and to introduce it to northern urban audiences. They were major contributors to the folk revival of that era, and Gura explains their invaluable role in preserving music that southerners themselves—finally grasping some postwar prosperity of their own—were about to lose.

Reading between the lines, it's clear that the public appetite for Appalachian folk music was partly driven by nostalgia for the "authentic," the "unspoiled," the exotic, by northern audiences fed up with what they saw as the tacky-conformity and commercialism that surrounded them. A cynic might say that the urban folk revival was just a rarefied form of commercialism itself, by which a crowd of jaded intellectuals could shake off some alienation for the price of an album or a ticket to Newport, and without enduring the disadvantages of actually living among hillbillies or reconstructing their own, perhaps equally problematic pasts.

But look at the alternatives, Gura might counter. The folk revival gave some genuine virtuosi like "Doc" Watson the chance to make some decent money, while a lot of great music was saved for future generations who, for better or worse, will never have the honor of being born in a cabin on the ridge. And the

New Lost City Ramblers produced some mighty fine picking and fiddling of their own, now classics in their own right. Nostalgia has its uses after all, you might say, even nostalgia for the “backward” world of the impoverished South.

But nostalgia has its costs as well. The South’s years of poverty and isolation were also years of horrific racial violence and oppression, ranging from the daily miseries of sharecropping and domestic service to the spectacular orgies of the lynch mob. Nostalgia and false memories were central components of Jim Crow culture, as whites used folklore about benevolent plantations, faithful Sambos, and the horrors of Reconstruction to justify the prevailing system of racial tyranny.

Melton McLaurin explores this underside of southern memory in his essay on recent events in Wilmington, North Carolina. As many of us have been reminded, Wilmington was the site of a major episode of white violence against blacks in 1898, at the height of a wave of lynching and mob attacks that accompanied the imposition of disfranchisement and segregation around the beginning of the twentieth century. For most of the next ten decades, white Wilmington either glorified or repressed the memory of this part of its past, while the African American community remembered tales of the Cape Fear River choked with black bodies.

As 1998 approached, however, a handful of white and black Wilmingtonians came together to construct a new and more accurate public memory. McLaurin’s



*Melton McLaurin explores Wilmington’s efforts to commemorate the race riot of 1898. Scene outside the Daily Record newspaper after it was destroyed in the riot, courtesy of the Cape Fear Museum, Wilmington, North Carolina.*

essay is an account of their efforts, their gratifying successes, and their remaining disappointments. In his telling, blacks and whites in Wilmington committed themselves to confronting a painful history, agreeing that reconciliation in the present requires a common understanding of what happened in the past. The only people who apparently couldn't see the point of this exercise were white newcomers from outside the South, for history, identity, and community were both separable and disposable encumbrances. Like more than one dead mule, it seems, the twin memories of violence and folk culture are inextricable parts of contemporary southern culture.

Besides these longer essays, this issue contains our usual assortment of extra features. Several readers have made thoughtful and provocative responses to Joseph Crespino's critique of Atticus Finch, published in our Summer 2000 issue. We thank them for their letters, and Mr. Crespino for his reply. Mark Winchell offers a memoir of Jerry Lee Lewis in "Up Beat Down South"; Bland Simpson has put together some choice book reviews; and our poetry editor, Michael Chitwood, has found a wonderful poem by Forrest Hamer for "Mason-Dixon Lines." In short, this old mule has a lot of kick left, so come along for the ride.

HARRY L. WATSON, *Coeditor*