Holy Hills of the Ozarks

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri.

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Pearl Spurlock, Branson, Missouri’s first tour guide, often told her guests, “God has to keep people chained up in heaven for fear they’ll come to the Ozarks and become hillbillies.” Within a place renowned for religiously oriented tourist offerings and often called “the buckle of the Bible Belt,” it might seem surprising that Spurlock would sanctify this icon. The melding of the persona of the hillbilly—best known in popular imagination as shabbily clad, apparently drunken, sexually promiscuous, impoverished, and indolent—with Ozark, particularly Branson, tourism is an ostensibly perplexing alliance. However, thorough examination of the uses of this moniker by local people and boosters reveals a situation far more complex than the stereotypes just mentioned. In fact, the history of the hillbilly figure attests to a time-tested merger of this persona and a wide variety of regional values—a union that has often positioned the hillbilly as a symbol of Ozark morality.

Although Branson’s growth is attributable to many factors, a positing of inherently virtuous local residents has been integral for the success of a values-driven market since Harold Bell Wright first celebrated the righteous Ozarker. Hazel Dagley Heavin highlighted this theme through a 1949 poem entitled “Hillbilly.” In it the poet bestowed numerous merits on this persona, including honesty, simplicity, neighborliness, industriousness, and other qualities that did not leave “much room for sin.” Although a diligent worker, the hillbilly also was said to possess a love of recreation that was often mixed with religious sentiment. He could “Dance all night and sees no wrong, / Conscience clear as he plods along, / Singin’ an old camp meetin’ song.” The poem then concluded with an allusion to paradise that mimicked Spurlock’s vision of the other-worldly realm full
of souls sympathetic to the Ozark worldview: “Near the throne of God where
the angels stay / They’ll point with pride at him and say: / ‘That’s a hillbilly!’”

Heavin’s ode is complicit in historical processes that have hallowed the hill-
billy, but it also suggests the dual nature and indefinite constitution of that char-
acter. The consensus is that the hillbilly is both materially impoverished and mor-
ally rich, destined for a life of agricultural toil yet content with whatever bounty
nature may offer, and grounded in ethical standards despite outsider perceptions
couched in terms of depravity. As will be demonstrated, these ambiguities posi-
tion the emblematic Ozarker as a classic trickster figure. Because the persona
is important in the creation of regional culture, the hillbilly mimics the role of
tradition inventor assumed by most tricksters. Simultaneously, however, both
archetypal conventions also suggest behaviors and vantages that can sully these
foundations. Any investigation of the Ozark hillbilly must therefore wrestle with
elements of contradiction to reveal the ways that the character has underscored
a cohesive system of religious and philosophical principles while concomitantly
illuminating issues that jeopardize the integration of piety and pleasure in
Branson.

THE OZARK TRICKSTER

As religion scholar S. G. F. Brandon has noted, the many “guises” of the
trickster consist of “deceiver, thief, parricide, cannibal, inventor, benefactor,
magician, perpetrator of obscene acts,” and a host of other roles that reflect
“common occurrence in human experience.” This multiplicity of characteristics makes any attempt at an all-encompassing definition a tenuous undertaking.
Although indigenous mythologies still constitute the primary focus of work on
the trickster, incredibly diverse manifestations beyond these bounds are now be-
coming obvious. Over the past fifty years, scholars have identified tricksters in
such sundry locations as Greek mythology and African American folklore and
even within the images of American popular culture icons such as Bugs Bunny
and Bart Simpson. In light of this variation, one may safely add ubiquity to a set
of defining attributes mired in what William J. Hynes has referred to as “polyse-
uous diversity and endless semiotic activity.”

Recent scholars have drawn on the work of Victor Turner to suggest that a
liminal nature is possibly the only universally defining feature of the trickster.
As Turner wrote, “The attributes of liminality . . . are necessarily ambiguous”
because they “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally
locate states and positions in cultural space.” While Turner viewed society as
a constant interplay of structure and antistructure, Mary Douglas’s landmark study of cultural boundary making described the ways that purity and impurity create “unity in human experience.” Such seminal scholarship, therefore, has underscored theorizations that refuse to limit tricksters to a singular construction and instead focus on representations immersed in changeable meanings.4

The juxtaposed functions embedded in these characterizations and the inability to situate them as wholly benevolent or malevolent prompted folklorist Barbara Babcock-Abrahams to write, “The distinctive feature of trickster tales (like Trickster himself) may well be their ability to confound classification.” Through this indefinite relationship with creation, such accounts function as an anamnesis, or recollection of existential complexities. Like tricksters elsewhere, the hillbilly represents cherished regional standards but also embodies a multiplicity of social taboos; offers residents and tourists the opportunity to safely mock established ethical dictates but solidifies them by means of a process of symbolic inversion; and lies at the foundation of Branson-area consumer culture while representing a host of ideologies and behaviors that are contrary to the codified values of local tourism. He is, in other words, “of the margins yet somehow of the center.”5

A trickster’s oppositional nature allows people to celebrate and remember ontological stances ensconced in contradiction. When examining the uses of the hillbilly motif in Branson, it becomes evident that the term and its embodiments have indeed permitted locals to represent their collective values (religious or otherwise) and to demarcate the merits of the Ozarks from those of America at large. By ambivalently modeling the worldview of a culture, the southwestern Missouri hillbilly (in all its forms) has affirmed and negated extant ethical understandings, thereby mimicking ethnologist Klaus-Peter Koepping’s description of tricksters as “the chaos on which order depends.” In this manner, the archetype differentiates itself from the better-known Appalachian variant, sustains and confutes what is often perceived as a hegemonic body of regional principles, and deserves treatment as a unique but equally multifaceted expression of the trickster.6

In 1900, a reporter from the New York Journal coined the term hillbilly and applied it to residents of Appalachia: “A Hill-Billie is a free and untrammeled white citizen who lives in the hills . . . has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whisky when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him.” Many of the initial written impressions concerning this region were the product of the Hatfield-McCoy “feud” of the 1880s, a conflict routinely described by eastern authors as the epitome of a culture of violence. Such ac-
counts created the first iconic images of mountaineers as ominous, savage, and irrational.  

During the late nineteenth century, Americans began associating the qualities of laziness, squalor, and an overall propensity for cultural backwardness with the southern mountaineer. As Henry Shapiro wrote, between 1870 and 1900 many felt the “strange land and peculiar people” of Appalachia did not fit with contemporary conceptions of a homogeneous nation. Adding fiscal abnormality to this sense of deviance, New Deal policies portrayed the South as the nation’s primary “economic problem,” and President Lyndon Johnson concentrated on Appalachia in particular as a central battleground in the “War on Poverty.” Furthermore, countless manifestations of these stereotypes have appeared in popular literature, music, film, and television, with the horrific aspect reaching its pinnacle with the portrayal of inbred and brutal sodomites in 1972’s Deliverance. Historian Allen Batteau described the roots of this characterization as descending from literary and political interpretations that highlighted “the animality and rural cacophony of Appalachia.”

Unlike Appalachia, the Ozark region has not historically been subjected to intense scrutiny by national media or politicians. This is not to say that no negative portrayals have been produced by outsider imaginations. For instance, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, whose 1818–1819 explorations took him throughout southern Missouri, described the society of early white inhabitants as “not essentially different from that which exists among the savages.” H. L. Mencken, a later traveler with an equally harsh tone, commented after a trip to the Ozarks in the early 1930s that he saw “dreadful people” who pick lice off their children like “mother monkeys in a zoo.” Finally, New York Times book reviewer Joe Queenan depicted Branson as a “Mulefuckers Mecca” and “cultural penal colony” in a 1999 book on America’s “white trash.”

Most Ozark commentaries, however, have been much more complimentary than their Appalachian counterparts. To illustrate, an early 1960s article in American Mercury was typically benign when the author wrote that these “hillbillies . . . have no set standard of living, no respect for money, nor fame, nor caste. They know no greed, no envy, no subserviency. These unimpressive men in unimpressive garb, though poor, they seem, are immensely rich.” Not chiefly couched in terms of senseless violence, sheer slothfulness, contemptuous family relationships, or deplorable ignorance, the Ozark hillbilly instead presents commentators with a more diverse, complex, and at times problematic set of meanings than the inhabitant of Appalachia.

According to regional journalist Sarah Overstreet, “Ozarkers know that some
of the stereotypical ‘hillbilly’ characteristics are founded in truth.” This candor is demonstrated in a jocular but insightful manner by a 1975 article in a Springfield, Missouri, newspaper which posed the question, “What is a hillbilly?” To answer, the author offered the experience of a family that had come to the area for a vacation. On arrival in Branson, the father asked a well-dressed man standing on a street corner, “Where can I find a real, live hillbilly?” The local responded, “Why, you’re looking at one rah cheer.” Not matching his preconceived notions, the vacationer responded, “Pshaw and double-pshaw. It’s gettin’ to whir you can’t believe a thing you see or hear. It’s also getting to whir you can’t tell a hillbilly from people.” As attested to by the social and cultural history of Branson, countless instances exist in which the boundary between hillbillies and hill folk has been expunged. Through such erasure, locals and boosters have been able to represent and enact a variety of ultimate concerns.¹¹

The line between hillbilly fact and fiction is often revealed within the realm of tourism. At midcentury, newspaper commentator Elsie Upton described the hillbilly in a manner that bears striking similarities to other confounding tricksters. As she wrote, the figure has “two distinct meanings,” and these “vary almost as much as high or low, true or false, good or bad.” A native will always “assert himself a hillbilly,” and when the term is exercised in this “honorable” manner, it becomes “an eminence worthy of owning.” Problems arose, however, when this definition was mediated by nonlocal boosters and vacationers in order to match extant negative stereotypes. Thus, an evaluation of this regional identity necessitates discussion of the ways that it has been co-opted by residents, given a sometimes hackneyed and exaggerated usage by interlopers, and reinscribed in local identities to encapsulate numerous virtues that resonate with and have been perpetuated by the area’s tourism industry. Such an analysis reveals that Ozark inhabitants have negotiated the ramifications of the idiom within everyday existence and the world of vacationing to craft a predominantly upright, and even sanctified, variant of the hillbilly signifier employed for both pride and profit.¹²

Although it was said in 1911 that “the Hill Billy has a traditional history, reaching into the dim and distant past,” this chapter does not intend to fully unearth such precedents.¹³ Nor will it suggest that an entirely unified hillbilly paradigm has been proffered by Ozarkers since the beginning of the twentieth century. However, evidence intimates that the characterization of the word has more often been affirmative than negative. Moreover, through scrutinizing its many ambiguous uses, one can identify the signifier’s ability to mediate a rather con-
sistent body of ethics. Ozarker Malinda Donaldson demonstrated this play of contradictory meaning in a 1943 essay:

He [the hillbilly] is equally great and humble; he is equally the master and the servant. He is a world, a law, a king in his own right. He draws no line between the King of England and a ditch digger. . . . No matter who you are, or how famous you may be, if you felt your importance or fame in the presence of a Hillbilly he’d make you feel like a fool. And he’d do it with poise and dignity for he never loses face. He’s a good neighbor, the best there is, but you can’t take liberties or he’ll put you in your place. . . . One thing more that few people know, there are not many Hillbillies in the Ozarks. There never was at any time. Most of us who live in the Ozarks are just hillfolks, pretending to be Hillbillies.¹⁴

Donaldson thus highlighted numerous ways that Ozarkers have made a virtue of hillbillyism—a category that represents what is extraordinary about Ozark hill folk and, through this function, enhances relationships to fundamental values and an exalted regional spirit.

Despite the frequent infusion of positive principles into the term, hillbilly has also sometimes been a “fightin’ word” for Ozarkers. Folklorist Vance Randolph cited a murder that occurred in 1934 as a result of this label. Although he recognized that such violence was an anomaly, natives throughout the twentieth century have adversely reacted to the term. A 1944 article entitled “Don’t Call Me a Hillbilly” claimed that, for all mountaineers, the word “smacks of ridicule” and carries a sullying “stigma.” In 1955, champion of Ozark folklore and folk life Otto Ernest Rayburn claimed that he preferred “hillfolks” rather than “hillbillies” because “the average Ozarker is neither ignorant nor stupid.” In 1995, a Branson resident wrote in Newsweek that such stereotypes consistently “oversimplify and misunderstand” rural culture and are “as unmerciful as they are unfounded.” Chastisements have even persisted into a new century, when in 2001 a former English professor at Springfield’s Drury University stated that “hillbilly” is “the single most derogatory word in the Ozarks.” However, most insider criticisms are written in less decisive terms and tend to chastise certain aspects of the representation while valorizing others. Demonstrating this ambiguity, a brochure for Silver Dollar City’s Festival of Ozark Craftsmen from the early 1970s stated, “Ozark mountainfolk do not relish being characterized as ‘hillbillies.’ However, they are proud indeed that their relatively remote way of life helps to preserve the inspiring skills of their doughty forbearers.”¹⁵

Further exhibiting the ubiquitous and sometimes contentious nature of the
characterization is a 1960 court case involving the use of hillbilly terminology. In that year, the Springfield (Missouri) Court of Appeals heard the case of *Moore v. Moore*, a divorce request by husband Lowell against his wife, Minnie, on the grounds of indignities. Lowell claimed that, in addition to committing many indiscretions, his spouse had once disparagingly referred to her in-laws as “hillbillies”—the coup de grâce of her many years of insults and abuses. In his decision for the defendant denying the divorce, Judge Justin Ruark addressed the term as follows:

> We suggest that to refer to a person as a “hillbilly” . . . might or might not be an insult depending upon the meaning to be conveyed, the matter of utterance, and the place where the words are spoken. . . . But without the added implication or inflection which indicates an intention to belittle, we would say that, here in Southern Missouri, the term is often given and accepted as a complimentary expression. An Ozark hillbilly is an individual who has learned the real luxury of doing things without the entangling complications of things which the dependent and overpressed city dweller is required to consider as necessities. . . . The hillbilly is often not familiar with new models, soirees, and office politics. But he does have the time and surroundings conducive to sober reflection and honest thought, the opportunity to get closer to his God. No, in Southern Missouri, the appellation “hillbilly” is not generally an insult or an indignity; it is an expression of envy.16

Here, the judge paid deference to the various usages of the hillbilly moniker while conclusively intoning the many virtues that had been bestowed on it prior to the case and which would continue to be invested in it later in the century. Since the inception of Branson tourism, millions have indeed traveled to southwestern Missouri to covet the lifestyles of simple, honest, natural, and contemplative individuals (actual and contrived) and to grow closer to their own God through these examples.

Ruark’s decision is certainly the most famous judicial pronouncement on the nature of hillbillyism. In the legislative realm, Congressman Dewey Short, the “Orator of the Ozarks,” most thoroughly expounded on the term. Short was born in Galena, Missouri (just a few miles northwest of Branson), in 1898 and lived in Stone County until going to college in 1915 and subsequently entering the ministry. While pursing religious credentials, he also continued his studies and attended universities in Berlin, Heidelberg, and Oxford. Eventually he worked as a professor of philosophy and psychology at Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas, from 1923 to 1924 and 1926 to 1928.17

Most notable, Short served as a congressional representative from 1929 to 1931 and 1935 to 1957 for the district that included Stone County. Like his independent
constituency, he was known for supporting individual initiative and criticizing Franklin Roosevelt’s interventionist New Deal programs. His oratorical flair became the talk of Washington, D.C., during the mid-1930s, with national commentators describing his plainspoken yet stinging style as “revivalistic.” Even with his vast academic training, worldwide travels, and political fame, Short always emphasized his Ozark upbringing and the values it inculcated in him. For instance, he once stated: “I take pride in the fact that I am a hillbilly from the Ozarks. I like hillbillies. They are frank, candid and honest. Their generosity is unbounded, their hospitality is sincere. They are genuine folks. If they like you, they will die for you; if they dislike you they may let you die. Not all of them are over-industrious for Nature is bountiful, and it is rather easy to live in the Ozarks.”

This most famous of all self-proclaimed hillbillies again illustrates the many facets of that term. Despite a well-known career as an academic, pastor, and congressman, he insisted on being buried in Galena. He had always felt most comfortable there because locals “do not write their name across the stars” but rather “write it in the hearts” of their fellow human beings. According to Short, such simple “hillbilly” merits “are the things of his greatness.”

Amid heated mid-twentieth-century debates over hillbilly terminology, the Ozarks Mountaineer came into existence as a periodical meant to rebut negative portrayals of hill folk. Founded in 1952 as a small tabloid featuring stories of political interest for residents of southwestern Missouri, the publication came under new ownership in 1967 and began to attend more thoroughly to Ozarks history, folklore, and pioneer life. In that year, the editor addressed the name of the journal in a brief column that spoke to the relationship between “mountaineer” and “hillbilly.” Expressing a desire to dispel stereotypes, “project an image of a proud heritage,” and look toward a “progressive future,” the piece ultimately concluded that these goals could be accomplished by a local renegotiation of the “hillbilly” idiom. Likening that term to initial derogatory uses of the word Christian by nonbelievers, the piece claimed that numerous “valuable traditions” are still encapsulated within the moniker and that, contrary to recurrent outsider characterizations, “what we are speaks loudest of all.”

THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF OZARK LEISURE

Jim Owen, a Branson float-trip operator, bank president, owner of numerous businesses, and six-term mayor, was dubbed “King of the Hillbillies” in a 1972 obituary. Reflecting on Ozarkers’ relationship with work in Jim Owen’s Hillbilly Humor he wrote, “A genuine hillbilly is a person who is shrewd enough and lazy
enough to do it right the first time.” In a chapter entitled “Hill-Osophy,” he went on to describe the belief system of “a special breed of men and women” which places much value on independent, simple, and honest work but tempers this impulse with an equally hearty appreciation for recreation. By conjoining these inclinations, people claiming hillbilly affiliation have facilitated a century-long process of cultural creation in Branson.22

Many first-wave white immigrants arriving in southwestern Missouri in the early nineteenth century were yeoman farmers of Scots-Irish stock. Some scholars deduce that it was this ethnic group that, in fact, created the term “hillbilly.” These farmers were descended from Lowland Scots who immigrated to Ulster Plantation in Northern Ireland in the early seventeenth century. Accustomed to the hardships of the Irish wilderness, the Scots-Irish became the frontier vanguard on arrival in North America. First settling in Appalachia, they brought with them many songs and ballads that dealt with William, Prince of Orange, who defeated King James II at the Battle of Boyne, Ireland, in 1690. Supporters of King William were known as “Billy Boys,” and some of their North American counterparts were soon referred to as “hill-billies.”23

Also known as the Presbyterian Irish, these pioneers entered the United States with a particular religious heritage that informed their relationship with work. The Reformed theology practiced by their Calvinist ancestors and the ways that it enlightened perceptions of labor have been much discussed. Max Weber initiated this dialogue in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism when he analyzed Calvinism’s affinity with early capitalist enterprise, the roots of Reformation-derived individualism, and the psychic effects of a modern cultural shift toward personal rather than communal notions of success and salvation. Weber’s subjects were driven by the opportunity for “forever renewed profit” commandeered by means of “rationalistic capitalist organization”—a piously motivated ontology that eventually informed “all areas of culture.” Although his study was not meant to detail religious understandings of leisure, the author did conclude that the “summum bonum” of this mind-set was “the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life.”24

Many of Weber’s claims rest on the doctrine of predestination. According to this principle, individuals have fallen from grace and thereby lost their ability to influence salvation. Yet despite this somber condition, people still longed to know their fate and to at least partially validate their claims of election. With a lack of self-confidence being equated with insufficient faith, intense worldly activity became a way to bolster assurance. One’s success served as a “divine tool”
to express this faithfulness. Ultimately, Weber’s Protestants viewed work as a way to assuage religious anxiety, identified wealth as something to be earned not enjoyed, defined leisure as sinful indulgence of the flesh, and marked acquisition as wicked when pursued with the goal of “living merrily and without care.”

Iterating Weber’s thesis, Ozark scholar Don Holliday claimed that in the early history of the region, the Scots-Irish positioned work as “the social Bible.” Similarly, historian and Ozarker Robert Gilmore wrote that generations of residents have grown up with the words of the mid-nineteenth-century hymn “Work for the Night Is Coming” serving “not just as a religious metaphor but as a prescription for everyday living.” These sentiments certainly stand in opposition to the patented representations of the languid Ozarker which have permeated the area’s popular culture offerings. However, Holliday, who grew up as a third-generation resident of Taney County, refuted this stereotype and complicated The Protestant Ethic’s theory when applied to the area’s first-wave settlers. Because of their Calvinist vantage and the tumult of their hardscrabble lives, the Scots-Irish Ozarkers possessed a “sense of fatalism.” Summarizing this worldview, he stated, “You work as hard as you can but there is a limit beyond which you can’t go,” and this approach provides “a kind of physical and moral fiber.” Thus, the Scots-Irish did view work as a “calling,” or moral justification for worldly activity. However, this notion did not disallow leisure spawned from the fruits of one’s toil—an accretion that may be the product of adopting Methodist, Baptist, or other non-Calvinist perspectives during the great revivals of the early nineteenth century. In light of this juxtaposition, Holliday’s conclusion therefore echoes Jim Owen’s maxim concerning the ethical yet tempered nature of hillbilly labor.

From the beginning of white settlement in southwestern Missouri, religiously motivated industriousness has been epitomized by the circuit preacher. American religions scholar David Embree wrote that the Ozarks area “has long been a ‘frontier region’ for religion.” Some local itinerants actually adopted accouterments of the prototypical frontiersman. For instance, U. G. Johnson, an early twentieth-century Baptist minister out of Taney County, traveled the region with a long duster coat and a pair of pearl-handled Colt .45 pistols accompanying his pulpit and Bible. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Protestant preachers (and eventually the Branson tourism industry at large) have championed an individualistic theology that emphasized the dire necessity of a personal and emotive commitment to Christ; the gratuitous nature of clerical mediation between believers and the divine; simple answers to existential questions rooted in unwavering religious certainty; and the obligation to bring others into the flock by proclaiming the good news of salvation. In turn, this religious perspective
helped to create and fortify a sense of radical independence and self-sufficiency made manifest in other sociocultural arenas.  

Numerous accounts of Ozark circuit riders attest to their extraordinary commitment to church building and faith promotion throughout that sizable region. For instance, a diary entry from Jacob Lanius—an itinerant pastor for the Methodist Episcopal Church—described a quarterly meeting held in Stone County in June 1839. At this event, he and another local minister platted a circuit of about 200 miles with eighteen different preaching places. Within this immense territory, the men located only twenty-four church members. The life of Sadie McCoy Crank is a further demonstration of solitary religious labor. A Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister, she accepted her first pastorate in 1891 and began a fifty-year career as church organizer, minister, traveling revivalist, and temperance speaker. During this period, she planted or revived fifty houses of worship, baptized approximately seven thousand people, and performed more than a thousand funerals and weddings. According to religion scholar Lora Hobbs, “One would be hard-pressed to find a town in southwest Missouri in which Mrs. Crank did not preach.”

Certain denominations thrived in this isolated Ozark context because of theologies well suited for the individualistic and populist ideology of inhabitants. The Methodist circuit system allowed missionary work among disparate communities. Baptist support for lay clergy prompted an amalgamation of farmer and preacher which rejected notions of ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) stressed its call for a return to “primitive” New Testament Christianity that rejected complicated liturgies and church structures. And the egalitarian stance of Cumberland Presbyterians resonated nicely with a regional frontier ethic. According to Brooks Blevins, however, “most Ozark churches were very similar” because each “shared a reliance on evangelical, revivalistic methods and a faith in a righteous, caring, and omnipotent God.” Such commonalities often led to the establishment of “union churches,” or sites assembled through the combined efforts of a variety of denominations. As demonstrated in previous chapters, nondenominationalism has coursed its way through the history of Branson. From Harold Bell Wright’s condemnations of “churchianity” to the popular religion proffered at Silver Dollar City and the area’s variety show theaters, and then to numerous social initiatives by consortia of local churches, the city has continued to enact the religious impulses of the Ozark frontier period.
vices in the form of brush arbor or camp meetings replete with emotional messages that aroused penitence, altar calls, and conversion experiences. Revivalists attracted participants from across the denominational spectrum regardless of their own affiliation. The Reverend Allen Ledbetter, of Ava, Missouri (approximately 50 miles northeast of Branson), was ordained in the General Baptist Church in 1935. By 1981, he claimed to have pastored twenty-seven different churches and preached nearly four hundred interdenominational revivals in the Ozarks and beyond. Further attesting to the nonsectarian spirit of these meetings, Joe Cranfield of Taney County stated, “I’ve seen as many as forty or fifty preachers at one of them. . . . Every preacher around in the whole country would come. It didn’t make any difference about his denominational standing. . . . They left off their denominations. They preached the Bible.”

Despite the fire-and-brimstone sermons of revival ministers and the grave pleas for forgiveness from many of the people assembled, camp meetings also served a vital social and recreational function. Although small revivals were frequently held at schoolhouses or lodge halls, it was the protracted yearly event that was cause for the most excitement. As communal gatherings for widely dispersed frontier populations, camp meetings drew citizens of all faiths who came from many miles away in late summer for a week-long experience. On a social level, they facilitated the making of new friends, the rejuvenation of old relationships, opportunities for courtship, and easy channels for the sharing of community-wide news. Although a minister’s alliance in Springfield, Missouri, declared in 1897 that “killing time” was “a grievous sin against God,” for Ozarkers with few opportunities for group amusement these meetings also were a prime occasion for leisure. As local resident Emmett Yoeman stated, “I think ‘recreation’ would be a pretty good term to describe them [camp meetings]. . . . I would say that it was as much a matter of entertainment and was devised for that purpose more so than any spiritual purpose.” Campers were amused by their cohorts and found pleasure in the affective tone and mannerisms of ministers. Somber orations were peppered with jokes and anecdotes, and because audience participation was encouraged, the crowd could easily join in “the show.” Thus, according to Ozark historian Robert K. Gilmore, multifaceted revivals offered the opportunity for “communication, self-realization, and enlightenment.”

This uniting of theologically driven individualism, creedal independence, and religious labor (and often leisure as well) has, on occasion, been subsumed under the hillbilly appellation. In this it adds further nuance to that term. Jim Owen referred to the exciting nature of “hillbilly revivals” in his description of the local ideological structure. An advertisement for Gainesville, Missouri’s 1966 Hootin’
PLAYING HILLBILLY

As discussed in Chapter 1, roving Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister Harold Bell Wright’s semifictional *The Shepherd of the Hills* essentially created Branson’s tourism industry. In this text, Wright only once employed the term “Hill-Billy.” On this occasion, however, the word was meant to represent “every native” in the area, even the “wildest” of the lot. Consonant with this rowdy characterization, the author also made use of several negative portrayals of mountaineers that existed in his turn-of-the-century milieu. The malevolence of hill folks was primarily represented through the book’s antagonist, Wash Gibbs, and his gang of vigilantes. Echoing carnal stereotypes, Gibbs was depicted as having a “brutal face that had very little of the human in it.” He and his men made a livelihood of drinking, fighting, cursing, and essentially refuting the propriety that Wright penned as inherent in this Ozark community. To craft these figures, the author drew on more than hillbilly typecasting. In a melding of fact and fiction which has since infused all periods of Ozark popular culture, he also harked back to some historical precedent. For example, Wright certainly knew about Taney County’s infamous late nineteenth-century vigilante group, the Bald Knobbers, when he formulated the Gibbs gang.

Despite the actions of Wash Gibbs, the overarching tone of *The Shepherd of the Hills* celebrates rather than censures the lifestyle of Wright’s subjects. For instance, their stance toward work resonates with later understandings that made a virtue of mitigated labor. When facing the possibility of marriage to the economically endowed Ollie Stewart, the young heroine of the novel declared, “It would be nice to have lots of money and pretties, but somehow I feel like there’s a heap more than that to think about.” Further deliberating on this dilemma,
her father advised that she not consider “what he’s got ’stead of what he is.” If Wright’s characters were to embrace urbane ways, such “cheap culture” would signal “death to all true refinement.” The heroes in *The Shepherd of the Hills* are industriousness enough to eke out a living from a difficult terrain and possess an inspiring frontier work ethic that embraces the travails of intense physical labor. However, they also demonstrate an appreciation for leisure and a worldview that makes moral lifestyles a higher priority than material gain. These attributes established them as templates for the simple and righteous Ozark hillbilly. Furthermore, as the religio-philosophical impetus behind a nascent tourism industry, they can also be easily positioned as tricksters bequeathed with an ability to create culture.34

After the publication of *The Shepherd of the Hills*, thousands of readers arrived in Stone and Taney counties in the early twentieth century to meet Wright’s mostly fictional subjects. This quest could have easily resulted in disappointment. But natives, who understood the economic value of perpetuating the book’s myths, gladly stepped in to play their hillbilly parts and offer tourists Ozark “reality.” Historian Lynn Morrow has recounted an episode that demonstrates the burgeoning work of such “put-on.” In 1915, honeymooners made a trip to Shepherd of the Hills Country. On arriving at the Cliff House Club across the river from Forsyth, they were greeted by locals who introduced themselves as “hillbillies.” During their stay, which lasted several weeks, they toured sites made famous by Wright’s novel, “met” and dined with people who were supposedly fodder for its characters, and visited “actual” caves, cabins, and scenic vistas described in the book. Quickly realizing that sojourners wanted to consume a vision of the essentialized hill person, Ozarkers learned to cash in on this image. As southwestern Missouri native and Springfield newspaper columnist Lucille Morris wrote in 1937, once being a hillbilly became “good box-office,” residents were more than willing to “push [their] split-bonnet back . . . smooth out the creases in [their] store boughten calico dress and coyly say ‘Jest call me hillbilly.’” Although this willing implication in stereotypes was the fodder for “cheap crudities,” Morris invoked the hallowed nature of the archetype by concluding that it had “ancient and significant foundation.”35

In 1929, *Missouri Magazine* (a publication of the Missouri State Chamber of Commerce) addressed the growing environment of manufactured hillbillies through an appeal to Branson’s tourism industry: “Let us not develop into bunk artists for the purpose of filling credulous visitors with half truths or exaggerated ideas about our state.” Consonant with this call, scholars of Ozark tourism Lynn Morrow and Linda Myers-Phinney have described these early self-imposed
caricatures as “demeaning.” Further elaborating on such debasement, regional historian Brooks Blevins used religious imagery to portray the enacting of hillbillyism as identity forfeiture and the willful bearing of others’ sins: “The Ozark region has been sacrificed at the altar of American nostalgia. . . . In many ways, the region has scaled the sacrificial heights as a willing if anxious Isaac.” However, evidence suggests that local industriousness has crafted a more complex, and often fulsome, notion of the hillbilly than that represented by these commentators and that much of the region’s vaunted yet ambivalent work ethic has been employed to this end.36

Early innovators of Branson-area tourism often extolled the meritorious aspects of hillbilly labor and its accompanying virtues of simplicity, independence, and authentic living. J. K. Ross, taken to be the model for Wright’s “Old Matt,” defined the hillbilly in a 1915 (Branson) White River Leader editorial. For him, this term implied living without many material goods but also possessing an intimate knowledge of nature and its bounty. This station, however, did not exclude an ability to engage in professions such as judge, lawyer, teacher, or merchant. Ultimately, the hillbilly was “a man capable of the position he holds,” and to join this assembly one must only “go to work and do something.” Pearl Spurlock, the most renowned tour guide in the early years of Shepherd of the Hills Country, often reiterated a similar sense of pride in vocation-related identity. Not a native of southwestern Missouri, she claimed that it took her ten years to advance through the rigorous ranks of this fraternity. After a decade, she received her “H. B.” degree and became a “full-fledged hillbilly,” adding that she was “really proud to be classified as one, among these real mountain people.”37

Spurlock recounted numerous instances of tourist appreciation for the pious facets of indigenous labor. Most compelling is an account of the erection of a rudimentary tombstone by two siblings who had recently lost their parents. Unable to purchase a traditional marker, the children constructed a rustic cross on which they hung a crude birdhouse. As the grave was located in the Shepherd of the Hills Cemetery, Spurlock often highlighted it for her guests. Moved by its simple yet meaningful craftsmanship, a tourist wrote to her that this “‘Hillbilly’ tombstone was as sacred and holy” as the “vast, costly mausoleums” in her city. Here, the writer took the enacting of mountaineer motifs one step further by valorizing work not specifically intended for vacationers’ eyes and, in doing so, demonstrated that all facets and rituals of the righteous hillbilly lifestyle were available in some form for tourist consumption.38

Over the past one hundred years, thousands of Ozarkers have implicated themselves in a value-laden variant of hillbillyism. However, Jim Owen was the
undisputed “King” of this construct. According to Dan Saults, a former administrator with the Missouri Department of Conservation, “There are those in America that suspect Jim invented the hillbilly.” Owen was born upstate from Shepherd of the Hills Country in Elkland, Missouri, in 1903. In 1934 he moved to Branson to operate a drug store owned by his father. An avid outdoorsman, he began a small float-trip business one year later and promoted it by detailing the glories of the White River to the fishing editor for Outdoor Life Magazine. Beginning with only six boats and one guide, his operation peaked in the late 1940s with more than one hundred vessels and one hundred employees.39

The Owen Boat Line was known for an ability to attract wealthy patrons. According to a 1955 Saturday Evening Post feature, this “circle of disciples” included “princes of industry, prelates of the church, persons prominent in professions, politics and the theater, and some one-gallussed Ozark hillbillies”—all of whom possessed a “fierce reverence” for rivers and would “rather go floating than go to heaven.” In accord with the historical melding of rustic experiences and modern comforts, Owen provided guests with portable toilets, bar boats that ferried between fishing craft, and an extensive commissary list. Such luxuries attracted Charlton Heston, Gene Autry, Smiley Burnett, and many other lesser stars.40

Through a combination of folksy hillbilly vernacular and mystical language, Owen lured more than ten thousand anglers during the twenty-five years of his float service. His operation graced the cover of Life and was featured in Look, the American, Sports Afield, and dozens of large newspapers. Owen also built Branson’s first movie house (once known as the Hillbilly Theater) and the city’s original bowling alley. He was a bank president, realtor, and newspaper columnist; owned an auto dealership, hamburger stand, and dairy; and bred champion fox hounds and bird dogs (which ate only his self-designed brand of food). Moreover, he was elected mayor of Branson on six occasions beginning in the mid-1930s and even made a run for the state legislature in 1954.41

Despite this incredible work ethic, Owen immersed himself in a now familiar Ozark attitude toward industry—one that necessitated a balance between labor and recreation. He frequently voiced the adage “If you’re too busy to fish, you’re too busy,” and his business career keenly demonstrated the ways that hillbillyism reworks Weber’s Protestant ethic. According to Paul Henning, creator of The Beverly Hillbillies and longtime friend, Owen was a “hillbilly by choice” and, like many rural religious folks, was “converted” to that ideology and lifestyle “in the river.” Owen himself claimed that it took him nearly four decades to be accepted as a “real hillbilly.” As with many before him, he adopted that persona originally for the sake of tourists but then shaped the image into one laden with a variety
of meritorious qualities. Without resorting to extant stereotypes, he employed the hillbilly lingua franca and catered to outsider perceptions of how a hill person ought to talk. It was even rumored that he held language classes for his guides to be sure that they mispronounced correctly. However, this dialect also often expressed a poetic reverence for Ozark natural wonders, with Owen sometimes remarking that flowering dogwoods in the spring were “nature’s way of saying grace before breakfast.”

Owen’s hillbilly philosophy, or “Hill-Osophy,” was codified in a 1970 book of anecdotes and aphorisms entitled Jim Owen’s Hillbilly Humor. Amid the stories and sayings, a reader is offered a distinct view of the appropriate mix between work and leisure. His witticisms were decidedly in favor of independence and self-sufficiency and opposed to outsider aid (“Used to be, my advice to young men deciding on a career was for them to go into a business or a profession. Now I tell them to skip all that and go into poverty—that’s where the big money is.”) Owen persistently extolled the merits of honest work in a modern culture that was neglecting this sentiment (“Nowadays, there is a lot being said about tranquilizers. But even back in Grandpa’s time there was something to make you sleep. They called it work.”) But in classic hillbilly trickster style, he also embraced a sense of righteous poverty and soulfully beneficial relaxation. For instance, he quipped, “We don’t have psychoanalysis here in the hills. We’re considered poor people so we have friends instead.” On the subject of recreation he added, “A hillbilly doesn’t get excited about things that worry city people. . . . He likes to take life easy.” Merging these outlooks with staunch antimodernism, clever anti-intellectualism, a disavowal of government intervention into the lives of Ozarkers, and appreciation for a time-tested regional brand of nondenominational religiosity, Owen thus offered an all-encompassing hillbilly worldview.

The Owen Boat Line met its demise when Table Rock Dam impounded the lower White River in 1957, and the proprietor then moved on to other business endeavors. In recognition of his contributions to the local economy, Branson hosted Jim Owen Day on May 13, 1967. This event served as the climax of the city’s Plumb Nellie Days—an annual “Hillbilly Festival and Craft Show” that began in 1960. Described by a Branson entertainment news service as a celebration of the customs and artistic heritage of Ozark “hill folk,” it invites guests to don “hillbilly costumes and clothes in 1890’s styles.” Owen’s acknowledgment at the celebration demonstrated the many ways that he facilitated the merger of “authentic” mountaineer culture with hillbilly lore. On his death in 1972, Paul Henning eulogized him as “the best friend the Ozarks ever had.”
STAGING THE OZARK TRICKSTER

Although Paul Henning’s Uncle Jed, Granny, Elly Mae and Jethro are the most famous pop culture Ozark hillbillies, such characters have been portrayed in film since 1915. In that year, *Billie—the Hill Billy* stereotypically told of a city dweller who travels to the region, encounters a backwoods family headed by a tyrannical father, falls in love with his daughter, and eventually whisks her away for an urban life. Other early offerings set in the area featured more stock characters (both positive and negative), including feuding mountain families in *The Big Killing* (1928); a pedophile in *Child Bride of the Ozarks* (1937); a Nazi-fighting regional heroine in *Joan of Ozark* (1942); and poor, antimodern, yet ethical mountaineers in *The Kettles in the Ozarks* (1956). As this limited sample demonstrates, the cinema (like the rest of America) situated Ozark hillbillies within a dichotomy of meaning. As cultural historian Anthony Harkins has asserted, because the region was not subject to the degree of outsider scrutiny that plagued Appalachia in the early twentieth century, film producers and viewers more easily defined the Ozarks as “mythic space.”

In addition to fame from films set in the region, a few residents of Arkansas and Missouri became actors during the 1930s and 1940s. Van Buren, Arkansas’s Bob Burns starred in numerous B films that played on hillbilly stereotypes. These included *Comin’ round the Mountain* (1940), which featured “the only surviving species of the genus homos hillbillicus Americanious.” Frank, Leon, and June Weaver, better known as the Weaver Brothers and Elviry, came from Springfield, Missouri, and had been successful vaudeville comedians in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Between 1930 and 1943 they starred in twelve films that portrayed hillbillies who, aware of the foibles of human nature, used simple astuteness and plain virtue to triumph over city slickers. For instance, the director of *Friendly Neighbors* (1940) described the actors (like their characters) as “grand, simple, honest, sincere, fun to be around.” Finally, Chester Lauck and Norris Guff of Mena, Arkansas, created their Lum and Abner personalities in 1931 and captivated radio audiences with life in the fabled Ozark town of Pine Ridge until 1951. During this run, they also made six movies that played on archetypal mountaineer themes. Although some critics said the fictitious Pine Ridge gave the Ozarks a national “black eye,” Lauck responded with the upright hillbilly model: “We have endeavored to depict a good, clean, wholesome, down-to-earth way of life. . . . Those who don’t know that type of life want to dream of it. Those
who do know it want to return to it. We have tried to picture Pine Ridge as a Shangri-La.”

Ozark hillbillies made their first television appearance in 1968 when Jack Benny returned to his supposed roots by portraying fiddler “Zeke Benny and his Ozark Hillbillies” on a single show. It was Paul Henning who truly invented this regional television persona, however, by defining it for a national audience and allying it with modern Branson tourism. Henning was born in Independence, Missouri, in 1911. Prior to creating and producing *The Beverly Hillbillies* (whose mountaineer family named the Clampetts supposedly came from the Ozarks), he was instrumental in other television programs such as *Fibber McGee and Molly, Burns and Allen,* and *The Bob Cummings Show.* Recounting boyhood Scout trips to southwestern Missouri, he asserted, “I fell in love with hillbilly characters. I thought they were independent and had always been a fan of hillbilly humor.” When *The Beverly Hillbillies* debuted in 1962, an estimated 50 percent of television viewers watched, making the series America’s number one rated show by the end of its first month. The most watched program of 1962 and 1963, *The Beverly Hillbillies* still boasts the highest rated half-hour individual episode in television history and counts eight episodes among the fifty most viewed. During the show’s run from 1962 to 1970, Henning also served as creator and producer of *Petticoat Junction* (1963–1970) and executive producer of *Green Acres* (1965–1971). These credentials thus make him the undisputed king of rural situation comedy.

Many aspects of *The Beverly Hillbillies* might account for its incredible success. Within a 1960s context of social and cultural upheaval, the show offered simple escapism and a sense of “down-home” security. Moreover, mountaineers had come to national attention during the 1960 West Virginia Democratic primary when John F. Kennedy made the poverty of Appalachia central to his presidential campaign. On an intellectual level, however, the show possessed an ability to cleverly combine banal comedy with social criticism. By illustrating the idiosyncrasies of consumer culture, censuring the pretense of social elites, epitomizing traditional value systems that necessitated support from family and kin, and modeling a democratic egalitarianism that was deemed by some to be rapidly waning in the United States, *The Beverly Hillbillies* had many interesting nuances that often escaped commentators of the time yet mimicked the Branson ideology. Through these reappraisals, Horace Newcomb has claimed that the program promoted “the moral superiority of rural wisdom” and that the Clampetts functioned as a metaphor for a set of “truly American values.”

Most vital for this study, *The Beverly Hillbillies* also instituted a national redefi-
nition of “hillbilly.” The program did perpetuate a number of patented images, of course, including shotgun wielding, government fearing, and moonshining mountaineers; signature attire of plaid shirts, overalls, and slouched hats; superstitious matriarchs (as epitomized by Granny); innate sexuality that is sultry yet immature (as represented by Elly Mae); and ingrained naïveté-cum-stupidity (as characterized by Jethro). However, a Saturday Evening Post writer described Buddy Ebsen (Jed Clampett) as a “hand-me-down philosopher” and repository of folk knowledge. Furthermore, Paul Henning depicted Granny (Irene Ryan), whom he modeled after his mother, as having “the accumulated wisdom of self-sufficient generations.” Reflecting on this infusion of integrity into the hillbilly icon, an executive for Filmways (the project’s production company) claimed that through “simple, but not stupid” depictions “the word ‘hillbilly’ will ultimately have a new meaning in the United States as a result of our show.” Again demonstrating hillbilly dualism, this program provided viewers with a more virtuous construct of that signer and embraced its moral fortitude and regard for principled (if not sometimes misguided) labor accentuated by an appreciation for leisure.49

In 1967, four episodes of The Beverly Hillbillies were filmed at Silver Dollar City in Branson. Aired as the debut of the 1969 season, they focused on the family’s return to its Ozark home in order to find a suitable husband for Elly Mae. Entering the city limits, the characters immediately imbibed the rarified air of the Ozarks. On a breath of it, Jed concluded, “This clean stuff is going to take some getting used to.” Many local celebrities and attractions provided cameos, and mention was made of famous sites from The Shepherd of the Hills. As a result of the episodes, Silver Dollar City witnessed its greatest one-year increase in visitation to date, and newfound national interest pushed guest totals above one million by the early 1970s. Reflecting on this upsurge and the ways that these TV tricksters facilitated a process of cultural formation, co-owner Pete Herschend stated, “The Beverly Hillbillies moved Silver Dollar City, and therefore Branson, out of the regional business and into a national attraction. That was the change. That made the difference. And this community has never looked back since that time.”50

As Branson began to establish an identity with variety show entertainment in the late 1960s, the hard work of “playing hillbilly” became the bastion of on-stage, rather than on-screen, performers. When the Presley Family opened the Ozark Mountain Jubilee (the first theater on the now famous Highway 76 Strip) in 1967, it featured not only country and gospel music but also the antics of Gary Presley, a.k.a. Herkimer—a comedian described by his theater as a “savant hillbilly.” Travel writer Bruce Cook utilized typically paradoxical language when
describing Presley as “swaggering and sort of dim” on stage but “intelligent” and “direct” outside this role. He was further extolled as “a remarkable combination of businessman and performer”—a characterization that again demonstrates the ambiguities of the hillbilly persona and the ever present merger of Ozark labor and leisure.51

During a performance I attended in the mid-1990s, Herkimer warmed up the crowd in a manner that exhibited the hillbilly’s role as mediator of values. The act began with a joke about a chance meeting between Moses and former president George H. W. Bush and then continued with a succession of religiously motivated yarns that laid bare the production’s ideological vantage. Herkimer made clear that the Presleys’ Country Jubilee endorsed Christianity and conservative politics—a civil religious merger that finds expression in almost every contemporary production. While serving as a prelude to a medley of gospel numbers, his comedy focused on the evangelistic work of preachers and ministers awaiting entrance into heaven. It also included several jabs at the Clinton administration and “liberal” politics writ large. For instance, Herkimer proposed that he would run for president. After the emcee responded that people would not vote for a hillbilly, he replied that since enduring the Clinton White House Americans may very well want a “real clown” in office.

Comments from guests who attended the Presleys’ show during the fall of 2004 and spring of 2005 indicate the ways that an ostensibly facile production can fuse a range of regional values with hillbilly antics. For instance, a Missouri visitor wrote that friends who accompanied her from across the country “really appreciate the values/morals/etc.” An Iowa couple who had seen the show during three different decades proclaimed that they “love Herkimer” yet followed up by praising Branson’s ever present civil religiosity: “Thanks for honoring the vets.” A teenage girl from Oklahoma attested to her love of “the colors of the clothes” and the theater’s “comedy” but then added value-laden texture when she wrote, “But most of all the gospel music and the atmosphere.” Finally, a Colorado vacationer stated that she had seen the show as a child and most remembered its hillbilly jester. However, she visited again as an adult in 1991 and has returned on three other occasions. Closing her review, she asserted, “What a job to make people laugh. You have truly been blessed!!” This last comment can certainly be read as one that is merely extolling the skills of the theater’s comics. However, as evidenced throughout this chapter, Branson boosters and entertainers have worked for many decades to forge a more literal link between hillbilly enactment and blessedness.52

Although Branson’s hillbilly comics pepper their acts with humorous com-
ments on religious and political subjects, they also include much material that is seemingly objectionable within the local entertainment context. In doing so, they further demonstrate the dichotomous nature of their character. The Baldknobbers Jamboree (originally the Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree) was the first musical show in Branson and, in 1968, became the second act on the Strip. Throughout the course of almost four decades, its hillbilly component (the Mabe brothers) has mixed droll discussions of Ozark values with what commentator Lori A. Robbins has called “toilet humor.” Creating a template still utilized by all regional comics, they have blended outhouse wit with jokes about flatulence, senior citizen sexuality, immoderate alcohol consumption, and other “taboo” Branson subjects. In doing so, the Mabe brothers and other area jesters offer a brand of comedy that mimics the often salacious nature of tricksters worldwide and, like the antics of their folkloric counterparts, permits invited guests to laugh at the hopes, fears, and crudities of their common humanity.53

Since the late 1960s, the Presleys and Baldknobbers have inspired countless imitators in the Branson entertainment scene. Nearly every venue offers some
variant of the hillbilly guise. However, this characterization is not static. Instead, the nebulous hillbilly trickster has adapted to changing social and cultural climates. For example, in 1987 Herkimer began wearing sequined overalls and inspired a move toward this more brassy attire among all area performers. Similarly, Terri Sanders, a participant in the local industry for more than twenty years who plays a jester named Homer Lee at the Braschler Music Show, attested to the need to “mutate” and “evolve.” During a 2002 performance, Sanders lampooned the Latin maids now prominent at local hotels and motels, performed a version of the River Dance, and leveled numerous jokes about Wal-Mart (supposedly the Branson tourist’s favorite retail store). Ultimately, Gary Presley astutely addressed the moral vision that underscores such an ever transforming yet “simple and ancient” genre when he posited this type of humor as perfect for the “Bible Belt.”

In an atmosphere sated with performances of the Ozark trickster, Bruce Seaton was the consummate example of the integration of hillbilly enactment, lifestyle, and religious promotion. An Ozark native, he spent fifteen years away from the region before returning in the early 1960s to take a job as a Linotype operator for the Stone County Republican. Possessing little knowledge of contemporary machinery, Seaton instead began work on an antique hand press at his editor’s print shop at Silver Dollar City. There he realized his true career objective—to reenact a prototypical variant of nineteenth-century pioneer life. Soon after, he entered his family in Branson’s Plumb Nellie Days parade. Attired in overalls and a fake shabby beard, he was accompanied by his wife in a tattered calico skirt and bonnet and assisted by his eight barefoot children. The Seatons won the event’s “Best Hillbilly Family” award on several occasions.

The family’s success as hillbilly performers led to a career. Attired in their parade garb and situated around dilapidated cabins or rickety outhouses, the Seatons began selling pictures of themselves to a Springfield photographer. For nearly a decade, they forged a life as “professional hillbillies.” Their likenesses appeared on postcards, cookbooks, and calendars. Then in 1963, the family further blurred the line between fact and fiction by purchasing a plot of land and a little shack in rural Stone County. In a setting replete with a tar-paper roof and sagging front porch, they butchered and cured their own meats, chopped wood for heat, and did their own barbering. Further demonstrating hillbilly ambiguity, Seaton asserted that everything in the house was modern “but it don’t look it.”

Leon Fredrick, Seaton’s former print-shop employer, once labeled him “a genuine manufactured hillbilly.” Although most of this appearance was forged through pictorial representations, he also constructed his hillbillyism by play-
ing Preachin’ Bill in the Shepherd of the Hills pageant. Seaton came to the production shortly after it debuted. Preachin’ Bill, while not a major character in Wright’s work, possesses special significance because he is the first to speak in the book. He declares, “When God looked upon th’ work of his hands an’ called hit good, he war sure a lookin’ at this here Ozark country.” Seaton died at a young age in 1976. However, his dual persona as archetypal hillbilly and Ozark-sanctifying vicar united outwardly disparate roles into a career that typified the virtues of mitigated labor and the encouragement of regional sanctity.  

J. W. Williamson, a historian of Appalachian popular culture representations, has described the hillbilly as “an outlaw on the fringes of the economy” and “the idiot of capitalism.” Dissecting the character’s market-based function, he stated:

If capitalism operates by inducing its workers to believe in the virtues of work and by condemning the evils that interfere with work, such as strong drink, roaming the woods and hunting, and various social indiscretions including murder, may-hem, and bastardy . . . then clearly the hillbilly fool is a warning, a keep-away sign enjoining us to avoid the rocky rural edges outside the grasp of the urban economy. 

It is true that the Ozark hillbilly perpetrates acts prohibited by the ethos of the larger Branson entertainment industry and is thus involved in some of the chi-
holy hills of the ozarks

canery mentioned by Williamson. It is also accurate that constructions of this vague figure have historically been based in an aversion to capitalist enterprise. However, for nearly a century area natives have made a merit of simple, independent, and honest work; stressed the equally necessary nature of deserved recreation; and folded these qualities into the hillbilly persona. On translation into the tourism industry, this ethic as enacted by a seemingly indolent character has been vital for the region’s fertile consumer culture.

Unlike in the Appalachian context, willful participation in a stereotype mostly molded from within has produced what one Springfield journalist called “hillbilly tycoons.” The author held that, in contrast to other business magnates, this mogul does not have to work on Wall Street, engage in a lengthy commute, or “risk his life on the subway.” Possessing a tricksteresque ability to change and reshape, the Ozark hillbilly can “go to college and travel in Europe undistinguishable from other tycoons,” but on return to the hills he “resumes his native character and costume, smokes his corncob pipe, whittles his walnut walking sticks, hitches up his galluses, and watches the dollars roll in.” Thus, for this writer and many people throughout Branson’s history, the hard work of facilitating the recreation of others through enacting hillbillyism has been valorized as an ethic worth cultivating.59

Racializing the Ozark Trickster

In the United States, hillbilly stereotypes and tensions were heightened by a massive out-migration of Appalachian residents in the three decades following World War II. Spawned by loss of jobs in the area’s coal mines and employment opportunities in northern cities, the diaspora reached its height in the 1950s. In total, more than three million southern Appalachian people abandoned the hills during this period. In 1958, an author for Harper’s Magazine described such a group in Chicago as resistant to change, clannish, disorderly, drunken, content in their dire poverty, and devoid of a moral code. Representing “the American dream gone berserk,” these “hillbillies” “confound [ed] all notions of racial, religious, and cultural purity.” Thus, for this writer and many others, when Appalachian hill folk invaded urban areas, any vestige of quaintness or down-home virtue was lost. The anomalous makeup of mountaineer culture became anathema to majority understandings of propriety, especially in regard to normative whiteness. As the Appalachian hillbilly often served as an ominous signifier of antimodernism, the trope also became indicative of a perilous racial standing. And, through “othering” Appalachian residents whose authentic whiteness was
being called into question, urbanites thereby affirmed historian Matthew Frye Jacobson’s contention that “Caucasians are made and not born.”

Again demonstrating the sometimes vast divide between Ozark hillbillies and their eastern counterparts, and highlighting the play of contradictory meaning inherent in the signer, boosters in southwestern Missouri have frequently remade this racial dynamic. For these commentators, the Ozarks served as an ethnic refuge—one that preserved racial purity amid various waves of immigration and demographic diversification. Although most original immigrants to the region were Scots-Irish, their settlement was by no means totalistic. Within the larger Ozark setting, French Creoles were the first to establish communities along the Mississippi River. By 1840, remnants of the Cherokee nation had settled near the Trail of Tears in the western Ozarks, and sizable populations of free blacks existed throughout the area. Yet despite this racial and ethnic variation, voices throughout the twentieth century frequently connected southwestern Missouri culture to a monolithic Anglo-Saxon heritage and, by association, praised the genuine and often sanctified whiteness of the hillbilly icon.

May Kennedy McCord and Otto Ernest Rayburn were two of Branson’s primary boosters from roughly 1920 to 1970. Each frequently recruited hillbillies to combat the ills of modernity, including a perceived loss of meritorious whiteness. Dubbed “Queen of Hillbillies” on her death in 1979, McCord grew up just a few miles northwest of Branson and had a forty-year career as author, radio host, musician, and folk festival organizer. She is best known for a column entitled “Hillbilly Heartbeats” published weekly by Springfield, Missouri, newspapers from 1932 to 1943 and a radio program of the same name that ran for twenty years. In print and on air she spoke of the hillbilly with great reverence. For instance, in 1933 she stated, “I’m of his tribe and his clan, and I love every bone in his body. And if I or any contributor of mine ever mis-represents the Hillbilly may the blackness of the desert hide us, the sand fleas devour us and our bones bleach till judgment day.”

McCord also invited readers and listeners to offer comments on her work and thus facilitated a communal sense of hillbilly pride. In fact, her column became so popular that it generated more letters than all of the newspaper’s other features combined. Reflecting on this community-building project, she declared, “Come on, hillbillies, let’s get together. Let’s rave about it all. Write some poetry and some essays and some love letters to the hills!” For many, her Sunday morning radio broadcast served as an on-air church of nostalgia through its melding of McCord’s folksy religious hymns and discussion of local traditions. According to journalist Lida Wilson Pyles, “There were those who vowed that they
got more good from her . . . than from the preacher’s sermon at church. Many elderly people who were not physically able to attend church substituted just listening to May Kennedy McCord.” Signing off every week with “I’ll see you next Sunday, the Lord willin’ and the creek don’t rise,” she catered to listeners who pined for glimpses of Ozark history, with its supposed deep-seated religiosity and dignified hillbilly heritage.  

Despite her interest in popularizing Ozark life, McCord claimed that her concern did not spring from the lure of tourist dollars. Her goal instead was to preserve the culture of “honorable and industrious” Ozarkers who “directly descended from the colonizers of America” and were “the only true Anglo-Saxons left.” Affirming this sentiment, a 1930 column featured a poem entitled “The Hillbilly”:

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Hillbilly, Hillbilly  
Who are you,  
Dreaming and dreaming the  
Whole day through?  
Blood of the Cavalier  
Bold and true  
Blood of the Puritan  
That is you!
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Aside from this allusion to religious heritage, such environmentally determined racial superiority was also claimed through Ozark folk songs said to descend from ancient English ballads and through “picturesque and lyrical” mountaineer vocabulary said to contain “about 2000 words that can be traced directly to the Elizabethan or Chaucerian periods.”

Although McCord was not the first Ozarker to make such declarations, she greatly influenced outsider perceptions of the region because of her role as tour guide for national journalists and scholarly researchers. For instance, in the early 1950s she accompanied a writer and photographer from *Life* into the region and told him specifically that residents shared “the blood of the Seventeenth Century Colonists.” That constitution led to characteristics such as pride, individualism, and loyalty to family and community. During her long career, McCord did much to promote and defend what she believed was a virtuous hillbilly legacy. As with most conceptions of the signifier discussed thus far, her vision sought to salvage the Ozark native from occasional claims of backwardness leveled from without. Yet crucial for this notion was an erasure of regional diversity and a glorification of locally cultivated whiteness.
Until his death in 1960, folklorist, educator, and author Otto Ernest Rayburn served as another ardent voice for the unique and consecrated nature of the Ozark landscape and its residents. In the various publications discussed in Chapter 5, Rayburn also frequently intoned a racial makeup that mimicked the region’s pristine hills and rivers. As the “‘seedbed’ of Anglo-Saxonism in the United States and the last surviving Elizabethan culture in the western world,” his Ozarks represented a “veritable Garden of Eden” exempt from the unseemly aspects of modern life. In 1924, he moved to northwestern Arkansas to become school superintendent for the Kingston Community Project. Sponsored by the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church, this initiative extended the town’s educational system from only elementary grades to a high school and a summer-session college, thereby creating the “Little Harvard of the Hills.” Kingston was the brainchild of the Reverend Elmer J. Bouher, a missionary and preacher who came to the Ozarks in 1915. Like Rayburn, he considered the region an Anglo-Saxon preserve. As he wrote to a local, “You and your family have maintained the British character exemplified when their ancestors first settled on the Atlantic seaboard. There is no melting pot in these mountains. Your people have maintained your integrity, habits and racial purity.”

Drawing inspiration from an American eugenics movement rising in popularity during the early decades of the twentieth century, Bouher crafted a juxtaposition between the “pure clean-bred” and “sturdy” stock of Ozark Anglo-Saxons cut from the same cloth “as Jackson and Lincoln” and the mounting numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants to the United States. As he suggested in the 1920s, “America’s greatest problem today is the flood of immigration from the lower levels of European society that is threatening to submerge and destroy our American ideals.” Through this statement, he not only allied the Ozark hillbilly with now familiar traits of idealism, purity, industriousness, and democratic standards but also implicitly situated the prototypical mountaineer as a racial redeemer in a country being overrun with unsavory shades of whiteness. Although Rayburn resisted positing this dynamic in such crisis-ridden terms, he too hoped that this seedbed of Anglo-Saxonism would remain unsullied.

Although the discourse focused on slight permutations of whiteness subsided at midcentury, in modern-day Branson one finds the continuation of a nearly homogeneous racial landscape. The city’s permanent population has been and continues to be almost exclusively white. In the mid-1990s, out of a combined populace of 44,000 people, only 14 in Taney County and 6 in Stone County were African American. These figures had increased somewhat by the 2000 census, but Taney County was still 96.2 percent white and Stone County 97.6 percent (sta-
tistics that, in light of my time spent in the area, also reflect the racial constitution of Branson’s visitors). Such numbers might actually account for the dearth of nonwhite performers in the entertainment business. Many variety shows are composed of family members and local musicians, and thus their racial makeup may result from the character of this labor pool. In addition, Branson’s theater industry was built on country-and-western music, a genre that attracts few nonwhite performers. This dynamic was addressed by Charley Pride, Branson’s only longtime black headliner, when he stated, “People say, ‘Why are there no black musicians in your band?’ Well, how many blacks play steel guitar?” Yet despite these structural explanations for a lack of diversity, numerous black performers have claimed that it is difficult to find work in the city. For instance, Arthur Duncan, a dancer with the Welk family since the 1960s, asserted that hundreds of African Americans would like to work in Branson, but “it seems like there is still a good-old-boy mentality here. It seems people want it to stay the way things were 50 years ago.”

Reflecting on this social constitution, travel writer Arthur Frommer noted the “undeniable racism” of some contemporary local promoters, and a journalist for Gentlemen’s Quarterly characterized the city as possessing a “foul smell of bigotry.” Despite nearly fifty theaters and more than one hundred acts, Branson’s current offerings include only a handful of black entertainers. The industry’s primary exception, Charley Pride, arrived in town in 1994. He is a member of the Grand Ole Opry, presents a traditional Nashville sound, and seldom, if ever, includes themes or styles related to African American music in his act. Such an approach therefore suggests that nonwhite performers must engage in a tricksterlike erasure of their racial composition and perform a certain variant of whiteness to profit in the local industry.

In light of the area’s history of vaunted Anglo-Saxonism, it is at first confounding that Shoji Tabuchi, a Japanese-born entertainer, is currently one of Branson’s most popular acts. However, he has worked for many years to gain acceptance through implicating himself in Ozark hillbillyism. Though Tabuchi was trained as a classical violinist, his musical affinities drastically changed when he attended a concert by country music star Roy Acuff. In 1967 he moved from Osaka to San Francisco to pursue a career as a fiddler. A year later, he received his big break when Acuff invited him to appear at the Grand Ole Opry. In 1981, he went to Branson and played at the Starlite Theatre. Remaining in town through the 1980s, he won “Instrumentalist of the Year” at the Ozark Music Awards from 1984 to 1987. In 1990, he opened his own 2,000-seat venue and since that time has often been dubbed the “King of Branson.”
Promotional materials from Tabuchi's theater claim that he “contradicts all ideas about American Country music.” Although he does not don the attire of a hillbilly, numerous aspects of his act mirror the incongruous nature of that signifier. Many musical genres permeate the show, including jazz, conga, polka, classical, country, and gospel. In the late 1990s, Tabuchi even added a 2,000-pound Japanese taiko drum to the production—an instrument that, like the more conventional fiddles and banjos of the hillbilly craft, was embraced in rapidly modernizing post-1945 Japan as a way to supposedly preserve endangered cultural traditions. It is the ostentatious style of his theater, however, that is most discussed by tourists—a further example of this venue’s paradoxical disposition in a Branson context that persistently makes a virtue of simplicity. In particular, the auditorium’s bathrooms, attired with granite and onyx pedestal sinks, gold-leaf mirrors, marble fireplaces, pool tables, and velvet drapes, are cited as a “must see.” Finally, in a city that regularly derides Las Vegas-oriented glitz and glamour, Tabuchi is the most sequined of all stars, his site utilizes a host of high-tech theatrics (animated laser art, mirror balls, and neon lights), and he claims that more indoor pyrotechnics are ignited during his show than in any other production in the country.

Despite Tabuchi’s eccentricities, his biography and act nevertheless resonate with the hillbilly moral standard, thereby functioning to expunge much of his ethnicity. Like that of the acclaimed mountaineer of actuality and lore, his livelihood had a humble beginning, and he rose to prominence only through a virulent work ethic. When asked what he appreciated most about the United States, he responded, “If you work hard, you can find a job and you can eat,” thus intoning what he has labeled a personal “pioneer spirit.” As with the semimythical hill people and their on-stage counterparts, he supports a set of core regional values within his performance. Family is marked as vital to this construct. Tabuchi’s white wife and daughter frequently appear in the show, and he lauds respect for elders. Christianity is endorsed through numbers such as “The Old Rugged Cross.” And every performance is punctuated by a patriotic finale—a component that was recognized in 2004 when he was awarded the “Americanism Medal” by the Daughters of the American Revolution. Finally, Tabuchi has adopted the self-effacing and hackneyed humor of Branson hillbilly comics as a way to both remind people of and make light of his heritage. For instance, he frequently jokes that he and friend Mel Tellis often fish together but Tillis is afraid to turn his back for fear that the Japanese star might “eat the bait.” Thus, Tabuchi, like Charley Pride, has infiltrated Branson’s predominantly white industry by espousing many elements of the hillbilly motif. Considering the demographic makeup of the
area’s residents and guests, this embrace may be the only way that a nonwhite celebrity could be christened an entertainment “king” within a region that has often proclaimed its pure racial legacy.\textsuperscript{72}

Shoji Tabuchi may sometimes make light of his ethnic heritage, but Branson’s most troubling racial development is the recent presence of Christian Identity groups. Followers of this ideology believe that whites are God’s chosen people; mark Jews as descendants of Satan; claim that nonwhites derive from pre-Adamic races and are thus other species; and posit Armageddon as apocalyptic race war. The FBI estimates Identity membership at fifty-thousand nationwide, and the Arkansas-Missouri border is the center of the movement. With more Identity affiliates in Missouri than any other state, many feel that Branson has become the group’s main gathering place. Such formal meetings began in the mid-1990s. In 1995, the International Coalition of Covenant Congregations Conference convened at Branson’s Lodge of the Ozarks one day after the Oklahoma City bombing. This symposium, which drew six hundred attendees, featured guest speaker Peter J. Peters. Peters heads Scriptures for America (an organization that also believes the Bible authorizes the execution of gays and lesbians), pastors a church in LaPorte, Colorado, and is the country’s leading exponent of the Identity belief system. Beyond that date, he engineered similar Branson rallies over the Memorial Day weekends in 2001, 2002, and 2006.\textsuperscript{73}
An analogous gathering entitled “Songs for His People” was held in Branson in February 2000 and attracted nearly three hundred individuals. Speaker Charles A. Jennings, an Identity minister and owner of Truth in History Publications in Springdale, Arkansas, expressed pleasure with “the quality of our race in this room,” extolled the moral superiority of the antebellum South, and promised listeners that his movement would take the Bible Belt as the new promised land. Other presenters included Thom Robb, who lives 30 miles south of Branson and is the Grand Dragon of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Furthermore, Ted R. Weiland, who leads the Mission to Israel affiliate in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, labeled Jews the “enemies of Christ” and claimed that he preaches in Branson “more than anywhere in the United States.”

Although Branson tourism boosters have unremittingly drawn on Christian themes and ideals and sometimes used the area’s Anglo-Saxon heritage as a calling card, locals have not embraced the far less benign presentations of these premises by the Christian Identity Movement. Each Identity gathering has met with protest, as residents paraded in front of meeting sites with placards such as “Hate is Not a Neighborhood Value.” Moreover, the city’s Chateau on the Lake resort canceled a contract for an event to be held in May 2001, with general manager Steven Marshall stating, “We have to take a stand.” According to protester Rosemary Stewart-Stafford, when Christian Identity proponents “dare to call themselves Christian,” resistance to their message becomes a “duty.” The local entertainment industry has certainly been criticized for offering a “fundamentalist” variant of faith, yet the city’s construct of wholesome family values has never included the vitriolic rhetoric of this small segment of the overall leisure market. And although the Ozark hillbilly has been put forth in ambivalent terms, that signifier’s racial standing has connoted a prideful and principled local heritage rather than overt and contemptible racism.

TRICKING THE TOURISTS

Numerous progenitors exist for the stereotypical hillbilly. Most vital for this study is the image of the Arkansas backwoodsman presented in the “Arkansas Traveler” legend. This account was first published as music in 1847 and since has been conveyed both verbally and pictorially. The story details an encounter between a hill man distrustful of strangers and a visitor who happens upon his ramshackle cabin. The native engages in a verbal game of cat and mouse with the foreigner—conversational deception that apes the purposeful vagueness of tricksters worldwide. For instance, asked by the traveler “Will you tell me where
this road goes to?” the native responds, “It’s never gone any whar since I’ve lived here; It’s always thar when I git up in the mornin’.” Furthermore, the sojourner inquires whether the mountaineer has “any spirits,” and he replies, “Lots uv ‘em; Sal seen one last night by that ar ol hollar gum, and it nearly skeered her to death.” In the end, this contested exchange dies down, and the stranger is given food, drink, and a place to sleep for the night. Full of typecasting that would be thoroughly elaborated on in later decades, the “Arkansas Traveler” describes Ozarkers as lazy, inebriated, content in squalor, and unversed in the ways of coherent discourse. However, it also set the precedent for a communicative device whereby what appears to be hillbilly ignorance alternately becomes cunning intellect and what seems local foolishness instead reveals the traveler’s (or tourist’s) own credulity.

In the introduction to an anthology of Ozark tall tales entitled We Always Lie to Strangers, folklorist Vance Randolph wrote, “There’s no harm in ‘stretchin’ the blanket’ or ‘lettin’ out a whack’ or ‘sawin’ off a whopper’ or ‘spinnin’ a windy’ when they involve no attempt to injure anybody. ‘A windy ain’t a lie, nohow,’ said one of my neighbors, ‘unless you tell it for the truth.’ And even if you do not tell it for the truth nobody is deceived, except maybe a few tourists.” Randolph was not a native Ozarker, but no folklorist is more thoroughly associated with the region or has more comprehensively assembled accounts of tourist gullibility at the hands of area natives. His The Ozarks: An American Survival of Primitive Society (1931) was the initial book-length study of the region. Although unabashedly neglectful of the more modern elements of the area’s society and culture, he forcefully argued that “the Ozark hill-billy is a genuine American—that is why he seems so alien to most tourists.” Enamored with notions of isolation and stubborn traditionalism, Randolph commented extensively on virtues long lost within contemporary America. While some saw the nostalgia in The Ozarks as folkloric invention, he insisted that “there is not a line of fiction or intentional exaggeration in it.”

Throughout his life, Randolph tenuously grappled with the ever increasing stream of vacationers pouring into the hills and their effect on traditional culture. He always said that such things disinterested him but nevertheless realized that tourism was good business and desired to see hill folk profit from outsider dollars. Offering opinion on this subject during a speech at a 1934 Eureka Springs, Arkansas, folk festival, he stated, “The professional Ozark boosters would do well to put more of this primitive stuff into their tourist advertising, and not talk so much about our splendid highways and excellent new hotels. . . . They [city people] come here to see rugged mountain scenery and quaint log cabins
and picturesque rail fences and romantic-looking mountaineers.” Through this premise, his much cherished primitivism could actually be protected rather than threatened by outsider interventions. If natives continued to cultivate the illusion of the past, they would both financially profit and preserve aspects of their heritage made available in consumable form. 

Randolph documented many natives who took great pride in their ability to deceive city-dwelling tourists. For instance, in his *Funny Stories about Hillbillies* (1944) he cited an individual who avowed it was “taken as a compliment to be called a liar,” and another who professed, “You can hear anything in Stone County except the truth.” Such yarns continue to be spun for modern-day Branson vacationers. Commenting on the hillbilly’s image within the contemporary tourism industry, Raeanne Presley stated:

In the mind of the people that live here that would call themselves a hillbilly, that didn’t mean stupid. It might have meant that they were uneducated but it never meant that they weren’t smart. . . . So, that’s what carries over and what Gary [Herkimer in the Presleys’ Country Jubilee] tries to do with his comedy. Although you might laugh because he didn’t pronounce the word right or he used it incorrectly in a sentence or he looked kind of silly in his clothes, the end of the joke is always that he outsmarted the other guy. That’s why I think people are not insulted by that. The play is the smart city guy and the dumb hillbilly

“Hillbillies on Vacation” postcard, circa 1960. Postcard from the author’s collection
wins. The people that might consider themselves hillbillies are never insulted by that. Usually the ones that don’t want the Ozarks known for hillbillies aren’t hillbillies.\textsuperscript{80}

One may then securely adjoin deliberate backwardness or an intentional lack of knowledge to the myriad ambivalences that characterize the Ozark trickster. By deceiving visitors in such a manner, the hillbilly fortifies virtues of simplicity, individualism, and relaxed industriousness. Such chicanery furthers a sense of “otherness” in the minds of outsiders and also assists in the cultivation of mountaineer pride, for behind a veil of ignorance is astuteness, just as underneath a shroud of debauched stereotypes is a multifarious set of regional values.

Tricksters play tricks. Utilizing a strategy of deception, they achieve ends that are self-serving, culturally necessary, or a mixture of the two. The hillbilly trickster has effectively enacted this process for nearly one hundred years within the Ozark tourism industry. Words from countless natives throughout this period suggest a complicit involvement in the practice—one that was necessary for the construction of the region’s vast consumer culture. Likewise, the moniker has been worn by many as a badge of honor and used to denote a cohesive group of ethical and religious dictates that lie beneath the tourist’s misperceptions, foibles, and follies. Reducing the function of the hillbilly trickster to a singularity does a disservice to the richness of the semiotic tradition and pigeonholes a signifier with a demonstrable ability to resist coherent description. Positioned on the margins of an Ozark construct of propriety, the figure also resides at the center of the tourism enterprise. Stationed within a mythical lifestyle of indecency and squalor, it also bears connotations of admired simplicity and deep-seated morality. Within a vacation industry intent on offering a strictly delineated portrait of principled thought and action, the ambiguous hillbilly has simultaneously granted reminders of that which imperils its authority and presented an ideological map that charts the path for its continuance.