I love community newspapers, brazenly and shamelessly. Whenever I have a chance to travel the state I always keep an eye peered for them, tucked into pay boxes by the entrance to a local restaurant or stacked beneath a weight on the counter at convenience stores and odd-and-ends shops. I never miss a chance to buy one. Even today, when the newspaper industry is barely keeping its ears above the waterline, you can still get an honest feel for a community’s values through its local paper. If you’re lucky, you can even catch a whiff of its peculiar sense of humor.

When I lived in Upshur County I was an avid reader of the Record Delta (founded 1876). One particular issue of that noble publication has given me joy for almost ten years. A local bar had, rather thoughtfully, invested in a modestly sized multi-passenger vehicle, by which staff would convey home nightly any among its clientele who’d gotten too full of cheer to make it back under their own power. The vehicle, kept on street-side parking outside the business, was known informally around town as the “drunk bus.” One evening a man who’d been patronizing a competing establishment, attempting and failing to bring his own car to heel, came in a bit too hot. The Record Delta ran a photo of the resulting damage in the next morning’s edition, front page and above the fold, under an all-caps banner that read “DRUNK MAN HITS DRUNK BUS.” Were I the staffer who’d written that headline, I’d have asked my editor for the rest of the afternoon off.

This train of thought reminds me that it’s never a bad time to educate the young generation, and remind the initiated, of Richwood WV publisher Jim Comstock’s West Virginia Hillbilly (1957-2001)—“a weekly publication,” as its masthead proclaimed, that remains one of the only serial publications ever to nail the unique blend of absurdist skepticism that constitutes a major strain of West Virginia culture.

The story of Comstock and Hillbilly has been told frequently elsewhere. The Council’s own e-WV features a series of articles related to the man, the paper, and its 44-year run. In its glory days the humble journal enjoyed a circulation of between 20,000 and 30,000, across 40 states and in six foreign countries. Comstock himself was featured in several national news outlets of the day, including appearances on Don McNeil’s Breakfast Club on NBC, and the Today Show with Hugh Downs. But today, Comstock’s paper is something of a secret handshake among West Virginians of a certain humor and attitude. “When I see a copy of Best of Hillbilly; a compendium of articles and columns from the paper’s heyday, on someone’s bookshelf, I know I’ve found a brother or sister in spirit.”

Comstock, a former teacher and Navy veteran who also founded and published the rather more sober Best of Hillbilly in 2001, was also a true cultural record, running shaggy-dog pieces on fantastical characters and local folklore. “I’ve found a brother or sister in spirit. That’s Printed to Fit

Heroin, as a state defined by poverty and deprivation. Indeed, much of the anecdotal and tonal humor in the pages of Hillbilly came from situations wherein an ordinary West Virginian upended the condescension of authority, whether official or cultural. Consider the cheeky traveling salesman who reportedly asked the hillbilly boy, “Hey kid, how far is it a mile or so up the creek?” “Oh,” replied the boy, “I reckon it’s about five times as long as a fork, so just lay down and start measurin’.”

For all its prickly humor, though, Hillbilly was also a true cultural record, running shaggy-dog pieces on historical figures like Devil Anse Hatfield, and serious, if pointed, contemporary arguments of state and national political figures. The short piece Comstock ran on President John F. Kennedy’s assassination, for example, couldn’t be more properly a called a memoir. But in three short paragraphs, he honored a president with whom he disagreed in terms that are scarcely thinkable in today’s political rhetoric. Personally, Comstock wrote, “I mourn John Kennedy with every setting sun because, favoring what he opposed, he was the kind of adversary one could oppose with pleasure. He was one to reckon with, that young fellow; one to fight with. And we’ll never see his likes again.”

Comstock was a tireless and serious booster of West Virginia history and culture, in addition to being the most famous West Virginia newspaperman of his time. He led the public effort to preserve Pearl Buck’s birthplace in Hillsboro, contributed personally to the rescue of the historic Cass Scenic Railroad, and was an invertebrate practical joker whose “Great Richwood Panther Hoax” has become a central story in the Mountain State’s folklore.
But any good reporter is first and foremost a people-watcher, and it was here that Hillbilly, and Comstock, excelled. His articles, short profiles, and anecdotal stories of ordinary West Virginians drove Hillbilly’s enormous populist charm, bringing moderate notoriety to regular folks and honoring the unique humanity of the smallest communities everywhere in the state. Editor Otto Whittaker wisely loaded the 300-plus pages of Best of Hillbilly with these sorts of human-interest pieces, wrapped in a dust jacket featuring Martinusberg’s generously proportioned Homer Pankey astraddle a coin-operated rocking horse ("Nothing Hankey About Pankey—Says We’ll Come Out On Tops," reads the leadoff article in that collection).

You can find references to Hillbilly in popular culture even today. The paper gets a passing reference in Glenn Taylor’s 2009 novel The Balad of Trenchmouth Taggart, and Matthew Neill Null published a touching encomium to Comstock in no less a publication than The Paris Review in 2016. But as far as I know—and I’d be glad to be corrected on this—Best of Hillbilly was only ever published in two editions: the 1968 hardback distributed by New York’s venerable Grosset & Dunlap, and a mass market paperback published by Pocket Books the following year. That’s a real shame. True universal appeal lies in the particulars, which is why the best pieces in Hillbilly still feel rather startlingly contemporary. Anyone attuned to the organic absurdity of human behavior will find much to enjoy in that collection.

Personally, I think of Comstock’s paper and its wry worldview on a regular basis, as I did one recent morning when, after filling up the car on my way to work, I overheard another patron briskly ask the young lady behind the counter whether there was a specific fast food business nearby, as he hadn’t gotten his breakfast yet. “I’m not sure exactly how far,” said the young lady, huffed the man, did she know of any fast food businesses, “There’s a few just up the road,” she replied, “but I’m not sure exactly how far.”

The headline reads, “A Small Black Mule Dies.”

His eye is on the sparrow, indeed.

**EVENTS FEBRUARY - MARCH 2023**

**Feb 9**

Bessie Smith - History Alivel, Brookie County Public Library, Wheeling. 3:30pm

**Feb 13**

Bil Lupp and James Freeman - Storytelling WV Folklife apprenticeship demonstration, South Charleston Public Library. TIME

**Mar 1**

Charles Schultz - History Alivel, Cowen Public Library, Cowen. 5pm

**Mar 2**

Radical Unfranchisement in the Jury Room and Public Life - Amicus Curiae Lecture by Sonali Chakravarti, Marshall University Erickson Alumni Center. 7pm

**Mar 21**

Ruby Bradley - History Alivel, Ohio County Public Library. Meeting. 12pm

**Mar 23**

Nellie By - History Alivel, Robert R. Ridd Library, Glenville State University. 5pm

**Mar 26**

Rose Couten Black Dreams in Blue Skies - Humanities Council Little Lecture By Ilene Evans, MacFarland-Hubbard House, Charleston. 2pm

Join us at the historic MacFarland-Hubbard House in Charleston for each of this year’s Little Lectures on March 26, April 23, May 21, and June 25!

Visit our website and check out “Little Lectures” under the “Programs” tab for more details.

**HERITAGE CHAMPION (Continued from front)**

actively involved in Appalachian heritage events, such as the Vandalia Gathering and Stonewall Jackson Jubilee, and in promoting Frank’s music career. For her many efforts to preserve Appalachian culture and her key role in the crafts movement, she was awarded the 1993 Vandalia Award, West Virginia’s highest folkloric honor.

Jane George died at age 95 on February 19, 2018, three months after Frank’s death.

**WEST VIRGINIA MAN WINS DUBIOUS LITERARY HONOR**

Joe Tussey, a mining and minerals consultant from Daniels, Raleigh County, and currently a professor at Concord University, recently seized the top prize in the Adventure category of the 2022 Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest, which celebrated its fortieth year of literary infamy last year.

According to the contest’s website, “Since 1982 the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest has challenged participants to write an atrocious opening sentence to the worst novel ever written.” For whom is the dubious honor named? Sir Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, whose 1830 novel Paul Clifford made famous one of the most pernicious parodies of English-language literature: “It was a dark and stormy night.”

Tussey’s category-winning entry, selected from among thousands by the organization’s “Panel of Undistinguished Judges,” reads:

*“Hoist the maineall ye accursed wairs!” shouted the Captain over the roar of the waves as the ship was tossed like a cork dropped from a wine bottle into a jacuzzi when the faucet is wide open and the jets are running full blast and one has just settled into the water with a glass of red wine to ease the aches and pains after a day of hard labor raking leaves from the front yard.*

Visit www.bulwer-lytton.com, where “wwww” means “wretched writers welcome,” to enjoy more of last year’s top travesties. Congratulations to Mr. Tussey on his literary debut.

**THE BROAD SIDE**