

THE BROAD SIDE

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S PRINTED TO FIT

THE LEGACY OF JIM COMSTOCK'S HILLBILLY

by Eric Waggoner,
Council Executive Director



Otto Whittaker's compilation *Best of 'Hillbilly'* is an excellent introduction to Comstock's wit.

Comstock's *West Virginia Hillbilly* (1957-2001)—“a weakly 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 *Richwood News Leader* in 1946, was a man of open and outspoken opinions. Many of these, as touted in the pages of *Hillbilly*, had to do with mistrust of government initiatives. “Commodities,” he once wrote in a footnote to a story about frugal cooking, “are food like Wisconsin cheese that Washington sends down so folks can fight the Poverty War by getting them with food stamps Washington sends down to get them with.”

Comstock loathed the New Deal, and was irritated without end by the public perception of West Virginia as a state defined by poverty and deprivation. Indeed, much of the anecdotal and tonal humor in *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 fool, 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 assessments of state and national political figures. The short piece Comstock ran on President John F. Kennedy's assassination, for example, couldn't properly be called a memorial. 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 inveterate practical joker whose “Great Richwood Panther Hoax” has become a central story in the Mountain State's folklore.

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HERITAGE CHAMPION

THE LIFE AND LOVES OF JANE GEORGE

a new article from the West Virginia Encyclopedia

Emma Jane Taylor was born in Possum Hollow, Roane County, on November 11, 1922, to Ray and Beulah Lowe Taylor. A bright and creative child, she graduated as valedictorian of Spencer High School at age 16. Instead of attending college—her original plan—she remained in Roane County and married Herman Cox. When their four sons were old enough, she organized a 4-H club in St. Albans and ran two others in the area. Jane and her parents had been active in Roane County's early 4-H program.

Word about her success with young people spread quickly, and the Kanawha County Parks and Recreation Commission hired her as its program director. She developed popular activities such as Mountaineer Day Camp, which introduced children to traditional Appalachian culture. In 1963, she was appointed as Kanawha County's representative to the West Virginia Centennial Committee, which oversaw the first Mountain State Art & Craft Fair at the Cedar Lakes Conference Center. She and folklorist Pat Gainer identified traditional craftspeople and musicians across the state to showcase at what would become an annual fair.

Her invaluable contributions to the fair led to a job as crafts specialist for the state Department of Commerce in 1964. Jane, along with fellow staffers Carl Little and Don Page, sought to make West Virginia crafts more commercially marketable and to promote lesser-known Appalachian craftspeople. In that same year, she played an integral role in organizing the West Virginia exhibit at the New York World's Fair.

She missed working with youth, though, and was frustrated by what she viewed as the glacial pace of state government. She worked briefly at the Huntington Job Corps before landing in Putnam County as a 4-H agent in 1967. She developed a traditional Scottish dance troupe, the Sine-Anna Dancers, that performed publicly more than 200 times in three years. She also reintroduced and expanded her Mountaineer Day idea, holding the first Mountain Heritage Weekend March 29-31, 1968, at Hawks Nest State Park. It was attended by some of West Virginia's most-respected artists and musicians, including Frank George, a master of numerous traditional instruments, from the banjo to bagpipes.

By the late 1960s, Jane was divorced from Cox and, on December 6, 1969, married George. They were virtually inseparable the rest of their lives, leading youth in Appalachian heritage performances around the country and on tours of Europe.

In 1970, Jane George became a 4-H agent in Mercer County so Frank could live closer to his aging mother. She later moved on to similar 4-H positions in Monroe County (1978) and Roane County (1982). At each stop, she introduced her Scottish dance and other heritage programs. She retired in 1984 but remained

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Jane George in 1993. Photo by Mike Keller, Courtesy of Goldenseal Magazine.

JIM COMSTOCK'S HILLBILLY

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A Small Black Mule Dies

Mr. Leroy Jones, the little black mule on Sassafras Ridge Farm, died in the snowstorm on March 4 at age 27. Leroy was best known in Hinton as the ass who bore Mary in the Christmas pageants at the First Baptist Church in the late seventies and early eighties. He lived in Woodrumtown for 22 years, serving as a work animal, cowherd, and companion.

He came to Sassafras as a well-broken four year-old mule from Mr. Earl Baber of Summersville. He was known as miners mule, or pony mule, due to his small size, about 500 pounds. He did odd jobs around the farm for a few years, like hauling firewood, plowing field corn, and hauling children around in a wagon made by Thomas Marion of Brooks. He retired from the harness in 1981.

Leroy did not like dogs. Their appearance near his cattle would cause him to prick back his ears, lower his head, and charge towards them full force. His compact build and good nature made him a natural comic and picturesque character.

WORKSHOP

There will be...

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 Martinsburg'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 Ballad 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 brusquely 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," said the young lady.

Well, huffed the man, did she know of any fast food businesses within a mile? "There's a few just up the road," she replied, "but I'm not sure exactly how far."

The man turned to leave, and muttered, "Well, what do you know?"

"I know I brought my breakfast to work with me this morning," the young lady said sweetly, and rang up her next customer.

Jim Comstock, I feel sure, would have loved that story. And as a repository for that sort of commonplace wisdom, Hillbilly is a record of a kind of local journalism that's rare these days.

Rare, that is, but not all the way gone. In my desk drawer at work there's a clipping from the Hinton News, the March 16, 1999 issue, marking the passing of a beloved local public figure named Mr. Leroy Jones, who famously performed at Christmas pageants at the local First Baptist Church in the seventies and eighties and worked at the Sassafras Ridge Farm until his untimely passing at age 27.

The headline reads, "A Small Black Mule Dies."

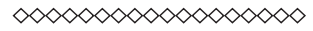
His eye is on the sparrow, indeed.

HERITAGE CHAMPION

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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 folklife 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 perennially parodied openers 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 mainsail ye accursed swine" 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 'www' means 'wretched writers welcome,'" to enjoy more of last year's top travesties. Congratulations to Mr. Tussey on his literary debut.

EVENTS FEBRUARY - MARCH 2023

Table with event listings for Feb 9, Feb 13, Mar 1, Mar 2, Mar 21, Mar 23, and Mar 26. Includes details like 'Bessie Smith - History Alive!', 'Radical Enfranchisement in the Jury Room and Public Life', etc.

The West Virginia Humanities Council, an independent nonpartisan nonprofit, is the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Council is supported by the NEH, the State of West Virginia, and contributions from the private sector. The purposes of the West Virginia Humanities Council are educational, and its mission is to support a vigorous program in the humanities statewide in West Virginia.

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