What’s the use of improvement? Who ever found wild buffalo or a brave Indian in a city? … Where’s the fun, the frolicking, the fighting? Gone! Gone!

Mike Fink, King of the River

In chapter 19 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain introduces two outrageous scoundrels, the Duke and the King, pathological liars who claim to be European aristocrats. The Duke of Bilgewater and “the late Dauphin” (the latter, the rightful heir to “King Looey”) are two of Twain’s greatest literary creations; these swindlers lead Huck and Jim on a series of comical yet dangerous misadventures. Mark Twain loved to lampoon Europeans and European aristocracy, as in chapter 4 of *Life on the Mississippi*, where he introduces an ignorant, “soiled and seedy” steamboat engineer who also makes ridiculous claims of descent from European royalty. “He was the son of an English nobleman—either an earl or an alderman, he could not remember which, but believed was both.”

The characters and story lines of Twain’s steamboat engineer, the Duke, and the King are based on American oral folk traditions. Throughout the antebellum years, Americans told tales of European aristocrats who somehow found themselves in

America. Like many folktales, the stories reflect historic context. A revolutionary people who had just shed themselves of a monarchy liked to poke fun at aristocratic traditions and hapless aristocrats wandering America like ducks out of water, as it were.

Another such tale features a democratic boat captain named Thomas Carter. Carter supposedly commanded the keelboat carrying Louis Phillipe (the dispossessed French Bourbon monarch, also descended from “King Looey”) and his brothers as they traveled through the Mississippi Valley in the early nineteenth century. Although Phillipe and his brothers actually did travel in America, the Carter tale is probably concocted; it is certainly exaggerated. According to the story, the keelboat regularly grounded on shoals (sandbars), whereupon Captain Carter would call down to Louis and his entourage: “You Kings down there! Show yourselves, and help us three-spots pull off this bar!” Immediately obeying the boatman’s orders, the French royal family ascended the stairs, jumped into the river, and set to work. Upon completion of the difficult task, they returned to their quarters, wet and muddy, and resumed their lives as noblemen in a frontier republic.3

CRACKER CULTURE

Folklore—nonverbal, partly verbal, and verbal traditions—tells us a good deal about the history of the Mississippi Valley’s common men and women. Workways, material culture, food, celebrations, dances and music, vernacular language and sayings, superstitions, practical jokes, and other folkways hold much historical information. After spending considerable time researching literate elites, historians are now turning to the study of the American folk.4

3. Leland D. Baldwin, The Keelboat Age on Western Waters (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1941), 72.
A good deal of Mississippi Valley folk culture is cracker culture. “Cracker” is an early vernacular term describing common American folk of Celtic descent. While there were several important ethnic groups in the trans-Appalachian West, crackers were extremely influential. Crackers were reputedly good talkers, and gained a reputation in America for storytelling and joking—making “cracks,” or wisecracks.\(^5\)

The first crackers were Scots Presbyterians who emigrated to Colonial America from Ulster, in northern Ireland, where they had grown weary of violent relations with their Irish Catholic cousins. These Protestant Ulster crackers were called Scots Irish. Other crackers migrated to America from the Scottish Highlands, and portions of Wales, Cornwall, and northern England. They avoided the Anglo Yankee settlements of New England, the middle states, and the South’s tidal lowlands; crackers initially settled in western Pennsylvania and the eastern Appalachian highlands. By the late eighteenth century, they were crossing the Appalachians, in search of free land and opportunities in Tennessee, Kentucky, and the southern portions of Ohio Territory. By the first third of the nineteenth century, crackers had joined other ethnic groups settling west Georgia, Alabama, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Louisiana—the heart of the Mississippi Valley.\(^6\)

It would be a mistake to describe cracker culture as simply a European germ that replicated itself on the early American frontier. While crackers certainly brought many of their Old World ways to America, they were forced to adapt to survive new frontier conditions. Moreover, an important part of this process was their adaptation of, and influence upon, the traits of other American ethnic folk groups. To the south in Louisiana, there were strong French and Spanish influences, while German and Scandinavian immigrant folk held sway to the north in

---

5. For epigrams defining crackers, see front matter, Grady McWhiney, *Cracker Culture: Celtics Ways of the Old South* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1988), n.p.

Minnesota, Wisconsin, northwest Illinois, and Iowa. But the three most important non-Celtic groups were Indians and Anglo and African Americans. Mississippi Valley cracker culture is thus based in Celtic folkways, but with other Old and New World influences melded into the gumbo.\(^7\)

Grady McWhiney, preeminent scholar of Celtic Americans, closely examined their agricultural and herding lifestyle, leisure pursuits, foodways, morality, and intellect. He characterizes them as precapitalist, anti-intellectual, and violent folk who were “hospitable, generous, frank, courteous, spontaneous, lazy, lawless, militaristic, wasteful, and reckless.” These characteristics overlap some (not all) of those Frederick Jackson Turner ascribes to American frontier settlers; they also reflect “Indianization” delineated by Turner (and, later, James Axtell), and aspects of Thomas Sowell’s analysis of Black American folkways. This emergent folk culture stands in stark contrast to that of taciturn, pious, and industrious Yankees.\(^8\)

Following the American Revolution, tens of thousands of frontiersmen and women crossed the Appalachians into the Mississippi Valley in what was known as the Great Migration. They followed three principal routes. Initial parties crossed the mountains through the Cumberland Gap, then trekked Boone’s Wilderness Road into Kentucky’s Bluegrass region. A second more circuitous route (used, for example, by the Scots Irishman Andrew Jackson to settle Nashborough in 1790) was to cross the Carolina Appalachians, sail down the Tennessee River to the Ohio, then move upstream along the Cumberland. Following

---


defeat of upper Ohio Valley Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers (1794), tens of thousands of pioneers sailed flatboats southwest on a third route down the Ohio River. Landing in river ports like Maysville and Hendersonville, Kentucky, they immediately fanned out over the countryside. The traveler Morris Birbeck later wrote:

Old America seemed to be breaking up, and moving westward. We are seldom out of sight … of family groups, behind and before us… Add to these the numerous stages, loaded to the utmost, and the innumerable travelers on horseback, on foot, and in light wagons, and you have before you a scene of bustle and business extending over three miles, which is truly wonderful.9

Arriving in the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, pioneers were forced to adapt to the new, challenging environment. At first, this meant utilizing American Indian workways, food, and material culture. Settlers learned Indian words, incorporating names like raccoon, hickory, mosquito, pone, pecan, moose, and skunk (and literally hundreds of Indian place names) into an emergent American English dialect. They sometimes dressed in deerskin breeches, hunting shirts, and animal skins, donning moccasins to more stealthily hunt in the forests of the trans-Appalachian West. They incorporated Indian foods—corn, beans, squash, and bear and venison jerky—into their diet. They learned to fashion dugout canoes from logs; in winter they traveled via snowshoes.10

Like Anglo colonials before them, westerners learned to fight Indian style. “The colonist … builds the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him,” Turner wrote. “He shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion.” Beginning with Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark, Mississippi Valley militiamen learned to defend themselves and expand their territory by blending European warfare techniques with Indian guerilla tactics—fighting in all

seasons and in camouflage, attacking civilians, marching single file, and employing hit-and-run ambushes and surprise attacks. To those with Celtic ancestry, fierce warfare techniques came naturally.\(^\text{11}\)

After achieving relative safety, these pioneer folk set about the work of farming. Using axes to hew out a small clearing, they built a cabin with the timber, perhaps hosting a cabin-raising party to help with the work. Clearing five acres for crops proved more difficult; the Indian practice of girdling large trees with sapling tourniquets helped pioneers fell scores of deciduous trees to clear the way for planting. The typical backwoods farmer planted one acre of wheat and vegetables and four acres of corn; crop rotation and fertilization were rare. Adept herdsmen, crackers turned their hogs, cattle, and sheep into the forest to graze on the public domain. Hogs—“wind splitters” in folk parlance—were the dominant source of protein. Crackers were known to herd hundreds of pigs at a time.\(^\text{12}\)

Thus the cracker entrée of choice was pork, with portions of venison, bear, raccoon, squirrel, and catfish thrown in for variety. On the side, frontiersmen and women ate lots of corn—roasted, boiled, and fried. They soaked it and made hominy, and they ground it into meal for cornbread, pancakes (johnnycakes), pone bread, hush puppies, or cornmeal mush. Much corn was distilled into whisky, the Mississippi Valley’s most common beverage; a sign of progress was acquisition of milk cows. Apples were served year-round, imported from upstream, or picked from orchards that matured in less than a generation. Hearty (and heavy) vegetables—potatoes, squash, and beans—were common; lighter greens (including poke “salet”) were harvested in summer, then boiled for hours with pork fatback, or served fried in bacon grease (“dressing”). This fatty, unbalanced diet caused some sickness, and travelers often commented on the “pale” and


“bluish-white complexions.” Yet, these pioneer folk nevertheless grew stronger, and most of them prospered on this simple diet. In a very important sense, Mississippi River Valley civilization was built on pork and corn.¹³

Thomas Lincoln, Abraham’s father, an Illinoisan by way of southern Indiana and Kentucky, described his family’s hardscrabble frontier lifestyle, saying, “We lived the same as the Indians ‘ceptin’ we took an interest in politics and religion.” (Today, we note that the Indians also took an interest in politics and religion, though there were huge differences.) Mississippi Valley religion differed from that practiced by European Americans east of the Appalachians, which in turn differed from that of Europeans. As Americans moved westward, mainstream Protestant congregations of Congregationalists and Anglicans gave way to Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and a number of schisms thereof. No Baptist minister was required to have formal education to preach; a man need only be “called” to the pulpit. This democratic practice quickly spread to other Protestant denominations, and democratic lay churches arose and fired the Second Great Awakening. Circuit riders rode up to a hundred miles ministering to scores of frontier congregants. The folk became heady with old-time religion.¹⁴

Mississippi Valley theology was simple, revolving around beliefs in predestination, salvation, and millennialism. Believers worshiped in an increasingly enthusiastic style. Like the early Puritans, the faithful knew that God predestined each person to salvation or damnation at birth (one schism’s members called themselves Two-seed-in-the-Spirit Baptists). If one were “chosen,” he or she learned this through a religious conversion experience, a joyous and wondrous occasion. Moreover,


Protestant millennialists believed increasing religious fervor was a response to an impending Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, preparing the way for the return of Jesus Christ. Millenarians, including many frontier revivalists, believed Christ’s return was imminent.\textsuperscript{15}

Although few common settlers owned slaves, proximity to slave quarters made for even more remarkable religious adaptations. African American slaves had early on embraced Protestant Christianity, drawn to Old Testament stories of the Jews’ flight from Egyptian slavery and the millennial promise that “There’s a Better Day A’Comin.” Like cracker frontiersmen, African Americans changed European religion’s germ into a hybrid. They added enthusiastic African verbal folkways to religious services, turning up the heat on European call-and-response liturgy. They did the same in song, introducing syncopated rhythms to the performance of once staid European and Euro-American church music.\textsuperscript{16}

All of these themes and influences melded together and ignited camp meetings, the ultimate manifestation of Second Great Awakening religious enthusiasm. From 1815 to 1860, enthusiastic Christians throughout the United States gathered together in large outdoor meetings. Mississippi Valley folk brought camping gear and food, and stayed for as long as a week. These gatherings provided a social, as well as spiritual, outlet for isolated westerners; courtships and marriages often resulted. At the largest gatherings, church services were held around the clock, with a team of preachers speaking in turn to the crowds. Their exhortations were, by all accounts, entertaining and evocative. The crowds responded with singing, shouting, dancing, and other expressions of religious zeal. James Finley, a revivalist who was converted at a huge (twenty thousand congregants) Cane Ridge, Kentucky, meeting, remembered,

The noise was like the roar of Niagara. The vast sea of human

beings seemed to be agitated as if by a storm. I counted seven ministers all preaching at once, some on stumps, others in wagons… Some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy in the most piteous accents, while others were shouting most vociferously… At one time I saw at least five hundred swept down [brought to their knees or prone] in a moment, as if a battery of a thousand guns had opened upon them, and then immediately followed shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens.  

While the religious enthusiasm appeared overwrought and disturbed some observers, the general impression was favorable. Indeed, despite the crackers’ overall penchant for emotion, anti-intellectualism, waste, lawlessness, and violence, outsiders were often complimentary when describing these rough frontier folk. McWhiney’s description of cracker culture as hospitable, generous, frank, and courteous is supported by ample firsthand evidence. Ignorant backwoodsmen were often lauded as “uniformly kind and obliging,” always ready to provide strangers a meal and a bed at no cost. Many noted the recurrent “sirs” and “ma’ams” with which crackers courteously peppered their sentences. When Mississippi Valley folk passed the collection plate around church, they were reportedly always “more ready to give” than their Yankee brethren.  

The opposite poles and contradictions of Mississippi Valley folk culture certainly confirm Frederick Jackson Turner’s description of American character as “dominant individualism working for good and for evil.” Today, it has become fashionable to describe frontiersmen of the trans-Appalachian Great Migration as brutal conquerors, exterminators who killed and extirpated Indian people so they could exploit the land. Indeed, the term “cracker” today reflects many violent, crude redneck stereotypes. Yet, upon examining the historic folk life of these early Mississippi Valley men and women, one must draw a more favorable portrait. To be sure, they had many rough, offensive characteristics. Yet the breadth and difficulty of their pursuits, their accomplishments, and the legacy they hand down to

17. Tyler, Freedom’s Ferment, 35–42 (qtn., 37).
18. McWhiney, Cracker Culture, 95, 163, 190, 262, passim.
contemporary American culture (indigenous American music forms are only one example) render them worthy of some respect, even admiration. Perhaps George Dangerfield best described the character of those folk who made the Great Migration to the Mississippi Valley, when he wrote,

The flow of human beings beyond the Alleghenies at one end to the prairies and the Gulf at the other was a great and wonderful influence upon American life... It was perhaps the last time in all history when mankind discovered that one of its deepest needs—the need to own—could be satisfied by the simple process of walking towards it. Harsh as the journey was, and cruel as the wilderness could be, this movement could not help but be a hopeful one.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{RIVER LORE}

Like people from all occupational groups, early Mississippi Valley nonsteam rivermen (flatboatmen, keelboatmen, and raftsmen\textsuperscript{20}) are characterized by unique nonverbal, partly verbal, and verbal lore. In studying nineteenth-century rivermen’s folklore, we must use written sources because, of course, there were no tape recorders or video cameras to record their traditions. And in examining the printed word, we must be wary of accounts and tales concocted or embellished by professional writers. The key to identifying riverboat folklore is evidence of recurrent lore types and motifs, oral transmission, common usage, and, often, anonymous authorship. Published travel accounts, usually written by educated Americans and Europeans, sometimes contain folkways transcribed by their authors. And American writers and journalists such as Mark Twain, Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, James Hall, Hardin E. Taliaferro, and John Henton Carter were all personally familiar with folkways that they used as sources for their

20. Flatboating, keelboating, and rafting are discussed in chapter 3, this work.}
published stories. Then, too, much folklore is found in existing writings of actual rivermen.  

Boatmen were tricksters and practical jokers. They often howled and called out to one another in passing, swearing back and forth. A Wabash River flatboatman remembered exchanges between rivermen in which “either tries his wit against the other & make very witty and laughable replies & ... questions.” Boatmen were superstitious folk who regularly practiced rituals to ensure good luck and safe voyages. Flatboatmen urinated over the stern or side of their boats, never over the bow, which was bad luck. Boatmen considered women and preachers on board to be bad luck, and thought the same of any white animals (horses, dogs, or cats). Rats were welcome so long as they did not desert the boat suddenly in great numbers, and boatmen believed horseshoes brought good luck. On the upper Cumberland River, some flatboatmen thought a man’s twentieth boat voyage bad luck. According to a descendant, the Cumberland riverman John Willis made nineteen trips to New Orleans, “but he never would do the twentieth trip. He claimed that nobody ever got back from the twentieth trip.”

Lumber and log raftsmen observed many of the same rituals and added a few of their own. A rising river at the beginning of a trip meant good luck. So too did bad weather or a rainstorm: “Bad beginning, a good trip,” Allegheny River raftsmen used to say. Birds alighting and remaining onboard a raft were a good


sign, and so too was a squeaky or “talking” raft. Raftsmen frowned on a falling river, but a corpse aboard reportedly did not cause much consternation. However, in Life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain tells a story of a raftsman named Dick Albright whose raft is followed and haunted by a barrel containing the corpse of his murdered baby.23

A favorite river custom was tricking new crewmen (today’s “greenhorns”). Adapted from widespread use “on the bank” (ashore), flatboatmen harassed new men in varied ways. In Marietta, Ohio, Captain Miles Stacy’s hands ordered new men “to work scouring or greasing the anchor,” while they watched with glee. Ordered to “coon the Steering oar,” green deckhands found themselves crawling all the way out a twenty-foot oar and then back again, risking a cold swim if they failed. Seasoned rivermen forced greenhorns to treat the crew to rounds of whiskey, and on the upper Mississippi near Grand Tower Rock, this was part of an elaborate ritual. There, according to Captain Meriwether Lewis, boatmen conducted a ceremony similar to that of deep-sea sailors crossing “the tropics o[r] Equanoxial line.” Lewis reported that new men who did not treat the crew to drinks were “ducked” in the Mississippi River by senior boatmen.24

Rivermen were renowned talkers and storytellers—wisecrackers in the cracker tradition. We have some idea of the sound of their voices through printed sources. Like other European germs, the King’s English was radically transformed in the Mississippi Valley. As noted above, frontiersmen incorporated Indian nouns into their vocabulary, and the Mississippi Valley’s French and Spanish folk naturally lent new

words to the evolving vernacular language. African-American words and intonations found their way into common speech. Linguists define early Ohio and Mississippi Valley speech as the Midland Accent—the flat-voweled, uneducated drawl that still resonates throughout the American Midwest. Although the Midland Accent has variants—sharp, twangy A’s southward and a more lilting cadence peppered with accented “ou” vowels northward—this is the drawl non-Americans immediately identify as our national speech.25

Boatmen incorporated colorful expressions into their vocabulary. An out-of-work boatman was a “wharf rat,” frozen lines were “cat’s claws,” peddling produce by boat was “ratting,” a lightened flatboat was “sparsed,” and a riverman’s possessions were his “traps.” Rivermen called treacherous stretches of the lower Mississippi by names like “Devil’s Bake Oven,” “Devil’s Punch Bowl,” and “Devil’s Race Ground.” Fearing a collision on the lower Mississippi, a merchant navigator in one of Thomas Bangs Thorpe’s stories yelled to his flatboat’s pilot, “If that ar fellow at the sweep don’t bear on harder and keep us off that tree, I am a busted up pork merchant.” An unreliable man would “never do to tie to,” and a snag in the river was a “Mississippi produce buyer.” Distressed at the swarms of mosquitoes surrounding his flatboat on the lower Mississippi in 1845, an Indiana boatman threatened to tear down the flat’s chimney and throw the bricks overboard so the mosquitoes wouldn’t have anything “too convenient for them to sharpen their bills on”!26

Though some river stories were concocted by professional writers, many printed tales contain folkloric elements that can


be traced to boatmen themselves. Tales provide clues to the rivermen’s characters, how they perceived themselves and joked amongst one another, and, in many cases, how they were perceived by landsmen and portrayed in the popular media.

The Indiana flatboatman Samuel Chew Madden told a tale of an old riverman, Uncle Mark Grimes, who was fooled by his own echo. Grimes was “a regular Harum Scarum and splutter[er] from away back,” who on a very still night during his first flatboat trip to New Orleans “commenced some of his loud spluttering talk and the echo came back and he thought it was somebody on the shore a mocking him.” Grimes “became enraged and bawled out that he was a Tennessean and a Jacksonian, and that he would fight in blood to his knees and if he was out there he would mop up the earth with him.” The moral of the story, Madden concluded, was that if Uncle Mark “had kept his mouth shut” the other fellow would have kept his mouth shut too.27

Two tales reflect popular perceptions of clever, democratic boatmen. The Ohioan James Hall, an early folktale collector, related a story about a group of boatmen who explored an abandoned village, where they discovered an old whipping post used for punishment in colonial times. The rivermen were so disgusted they pulled the post up from the ground and threw it into the river, declaring, “Them that wanted to be whipped mought go after it.” A Kentucky riverman, a “first rate ‘Mississippi snag,’” showed his disdain for European pomp and aristocracy immediately upon arrival in New Orleans. When a “powdered French dandy” rode past him on horseback, the riverman sarcastically bowed low, doffing and sweeping his hat to the ground in feigned respect. The Frenchman’s startled horse promptly threw its rider into a large mud puddle, whereupon the wet, muddied aristocrat arose and returned the salute, adding, “You are a little too d—nd polite, Saire”!28

Miles Stacy retold several tales in his flatboating reminiscences. One is a racist tale that appears to be concocted. Tying his boat up on a dark Ohio River night, Stacy supposedly sent one of his hands, Press Hill, ashore to secure a line. Tying onto “an old tree stub,” Press called out to Stacy and his hands to “haul aboard,” but was surprised to find that the stump was in fact “a big nigger” who complained, “What yo’ all doin’ heah.” In another tale, Stacy recounted a night near the Coal Creek Bend eddy (whirlpool) when some of his crew noted the similarity of the scenery along the riverbanks they were passing. Chiding his crew, “So, you’re going back home, are you boys?” Stacy pointed out that they had steered right into the eddy and had been going around in circles all night.29

Stacy’s second story about the eddy contains migratory motifs—elements that appear in other tales. The story appeared in published versions (by Thorpe and Twain) that Stacy probably read or heard and then “borrowed” to liven up his own memoir.30 The tale might well have oral folk origins, which is certainly the case for another of Stacy’s borrowings, the beef story.31

The beef story is a migratory tale that appeared throughout the trans-Appalachian West in different versions at different times. What follows is a retelling of four different versions, the first being a relatively modern (early twentieth-century) upper Cumberland River rafting story. Whether or not the event occurred in the fantastic way told here, it is significant because upper Cumberland locals repeatedly told the story, and it is a meaningful representation of how they viewed rivermen as trickster folk heroes.

Several very hungry upper Cumberland raftsmen are floating their logs downstream, and they are looking for some dinner. They spy a herd of cattle and decide to shoot a calf; they haul the dead calf back to the raft to cook him up for dinner. Although the farmer they have robbed hears their rifle shot and soon appears, the raftsmen have prepared a trick. They have disguised the calf

30. See Baldwin, Keelboat Age on Western Waters, 74–75.
with “rubber boots on its hind legs and a rain slicker over the rest of it.” When the farmer advances to investigate, a raftsman tells him not to come aboard, for his brother has “just died of the smallpox… There he lays now.” As the raftsman begins to sob in grief, the farmer runs away, “not wanting any contact with the contaminated body.”

Another version of this trickster story appeared as a printed 1840s tale about Mike Fink, the king of the Ohio River keelboatmen. The Fink variant features several sheep instead of one steer, and tricksters who rub “scotch snuff” (granulated tobacco) up all the sheep’s noses to cause wheezing and thus feign an incurable animal plague they soberly call the Black Murrain. In this story, the farmer begs Mike to toss the diseased sheep into the Ohio River; Mike does so, only to pick them from a downstream eddy a few minutes later. Meanwhile the farmer has given Mike and his crew gold coins and “peach brandy” as a reward for staving off the plague of Black Murrain!

Yet another version was recurrent among antebellum African American slaves. This time the slave’s “Massa” (Master) discovers a dead hog in the pen and demands the slaves confess to killing him. A trickster slave gravely informs Massa the hog has died of the “deadly Malitis” and that all the plantation’s pigs would have been lost had it not been for the slaves’ alertness. Massa then rewards all the slaves for their trouble, allowing them to eat what he believes to be disease-tainted meat. “And what was the ‘deadly Malitis,’” the trickster later asks? “Why the deadly Malitis is what happens every time you take a hammer and whack a pig on the forehead; right then the deadly Malitis sets in!”

“Jim Girty’s Beef Story,” published in the Spirit of the Times, tells about a trickster boatman named Jim Girty whose crew shoots and steals fat beef steers and conceals them aboard to enhance

32. Montell, Don’t Go up Kettle Creek, 110n88.
33. Ben Casseday, The History of Louisville (Louisville, Ky., 1852), 73–75; Thomas D. Clark, Rampaging Frontier: Manners and Humors of Pioneer Days in the South and the Middle West (Indianapolis, Ind., 1939), 95–97; Allen, Western Rivermen, 10–11.
34. Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York, 1977), 126–27; American Social History Productions, Doing as They Can (Wyckoff, N.J., 1987), VHS.
their boat’s larder. Confronted by an angry farmer and his gun-wielding friends, Jim invites them onboard to search his flatboat, but informs them gravely that “we buried two [men] yesterday, with smallpox, and them four are very sick—very sick indeed, gentlemen, and I must beg of you not to disturb them.” Needless to say, the farmer and his friends instantly march off the boat “without speaking a word,” and Jim Girty and his crew soon sit down to a steak dinner.\textsuperscript{35}

A final published version appears dramatically altered, yet nevertheless utilizes the basic tale type of a trickster using the fear of disease to outwit more powerful adversaries. In this story there is no sick animal. A young boy is floating down the Mississippi on a raft, helping his Black slave friend escape to the North. When slave hunters advance aboard their own boat, the boy rows a small canoe away from the raft and to the slave hunters’ boat; the slave conceals himself in the river, clinging to the raft. The hunters demand to search the boy’s raft. He assents and begs them to come help his father, who is lying aboard very sick. Yet the boy does not reveal the exact nature of the sickness. The slave hunters conclude the boy’s father has “the smallpox,” and the boy tearfully confesses that is true and begs them again for help. The terrified slave hunters immediately flee after giving the boy some gold coins to help him in his troubles. Saved from the slave hunters, the boy and his Black friend continue their Mississippi River quest for freedom.

The names of the slave and the trickster boy are, of course, Jim and Huckleberry Finn.\textsuperscript{36}

\textbf{ENTER THE ALLIGATOR HORSE}

Whenever Mississippi Valley folk gathered aboard flatboats, on their front porches, around campfires and cabin fireplaces, or in general stores, they told tales of a hero they called the Alligator Horse. The term “Alligator Horse” and its related modifier “half horse, half alligator” are still used with variants in American

\textsuperscript{35} Clark, \textit{Rampaging Frontier}, 95–97.
\textsuperscript{36} Twain, \textit{Adventures of Huckleberry Finn}, 74–76.
vernacular (folk) speech. Like much folklore, authorship is anonymous. The term begins to appear in printed travel accounts as early as 1810, and by the Jacksonian era its use is ubiquitous.37

Alligator Horse tales are good examples of the fact that all folk cultures, not just Indian and African, utilize animal imagery in their traditions. The Alligator Horse was a cracker folk hero; he could be a trapper, hunter, Indian fighter and scout, militiaman, or riverman. He was a rough, tough frontiersman who could prevail on water and on land. He was a lawless trickster, crack shot with a rifle, fierce wrestler and fist fighter, a hard drinker and gambler, a promiscuous lover, and yet, somehow, a romantic symbol of America’s westward expansion.38

From a humble beginning in oral tradition, the Alligator Horse was catapulted to fame, beginning with a song and a play performed during the Age of Jackson. “The Hunters of Kentucky” was a Samuel Woodworth tune celebrating the January 8, 1815, victory of General Andrew Jackson and his army, which included militiamen, at the Battle of New Orleans. When the actor Noah M. Ludlow, attired in a buckskin hunting shirt and leggings (“leatherstockings”), sang the song for a New Orleans theater audience in 1822, the response was overwhelming: “At that instant, came a shout and an Indian yell from [riverboatmen in] the pit, and a tremendous applause from other portions of the house, the whole lasting nearly a minute,” Ludlow remembered.39

“Ye gentlemen and ladies fair / Who grace this famous city / Just listen if you’ve time to spare / While I rehearse a ditty,” the song


began. “And for the opportunity / Conceive yourselves quite lucky / For ’tis not often that you see / A hunter from Kentucky / O Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky!”

The song celebrates Jackson’s spectacular success; with nearly two thousand Britons killed or wounded and the loss of only nineteen Americans, the Battle of New Orleans ranks as one of the greatest American victories of all time. But the song ignores or distorts much of the historic record. In fact, the battle was fought mistakenly, two weeks after the signing of a treaty ending the War of 1812. Moreover, the sharpshooting militiamen were not all from Kentucky (Jackson certainly was not!), and regular army troops and Creole artillerymen played equally important roles in the triumph.

But Americans then, as now, were ready and willing to ignore inconvenient details surrounding a heroic military victory. The song struck a responsive chord in a nation that had recently romanticized the minutemen of the American Revolution. Thus the children of revolutionaries cheered the verse, “And if a daring foe annoys / Whate’er his strength and forces / We’ll show him that Kentucky boys / Are alligator horses / O Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky!” A stanza describing the Americans’ strategic positioning contains a second, and final, reference to the Alligator Horse: “Behind [a bank] stood our little force / None wished it to be greater / For ev’ry man was half a horse / And half an alligator.”

The Alligator Horse hero of folklore and popular culture was a raucous, comic, violent fellow, the nineteenth-century version of today’s cracker, redneck, or good ol’ boy. Like all authentic folk heroes, his antics were based on a core of historic truth and are directly descended from the kinds of tales, practical jokes, and superstitions related above, embellished and modified over time. As 1830s magazine, almanac, and newspaper writers caught wind of the tales, the Alligator Horse’s exploits found their way into print and even onto theater stages across the land. A new genre of folk-based literature was born, featuring half-horse,

half-alligator frontier heroes. That writing is known as the Southwestern School of American literature—emanating from small print shops across the Old Southwestern states of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys.\textsuperscript{41}

Alongside Jackson, the most famous Alligator Horse was Davy Crockett, the folkloric alter ego of Tennessee’s historic colonel and congressman \textit{David} Crockett.\textsuperscript{42} In “The Lion of the West,” James Kirke Paulding’s wildly popular 1831 melodrama based on Davy’s legend,\textsuperscript{43} the hero is portrayed as a fast-talking, hard-drinking, practical-joking, hard-fighting, straight-shooting, egalitarian American frontiersman. Many stories spotlight Davy’s hunting prowess, but some storytellers borrowed motifs from European tales of Robin Hood and William Tell. They told of Davy outshooting a skilled adversary by splitting his opponent’s spent bullet in the target (Robin Hood split his adversary’s arrow in half). Another shooting tale features Davy’s folkloric (not historic) nemesis Mike Fink, the “Last of the Boatmen.” Mike shoots a comb out of his wife’s hair (not an apple, like William Tell), and challenges Davy to equal the feat. Davy declines because, unlike Mike, he is too much a gentleman to endanger Mrs. Fink.\textsuperscript{44}

Yet in most stories, Davy appears as a pretty rough customer. He drinks heavily, going on partying sprees and imbibing huge quantities of “lickur,” “flem cutter,” and “anti-fogmatic.” He often speaks aggressive, racist words, bragging of “swallowing niggers and Injuns whole,” so long as someone first “buttered their ears back.” He despised “greasers” (Mexicans) as well, traveling all the way to Texas to teach them some respect. Indeed, the folkloric Davy Crockett vented his violence against any man or beast who

\textsuperscript{41} DeVoto, \textit{Mark Twain's America}, 91–93, 240–68; Blair and Meine, \textit{Half Horse, Half Alligator}, passim.

\textsuperscript{42} See chapter 1, this work.


got in his way, beginning his fights with an elaborate boast, proclaiming, “You infernal heathen … I’ll have you understand that I’m a snorter by birth and eddycation, and … I’ll give you a taste of my breed. I’ll begin with the snapping turtle, and after I’ve chawed you up with that I’ll rub you down with a spice of alligator.”

Several spurious 1830s “autobiographies,” written without Crockett’s permission, claimed to tell the *Life and Adventures of Colonel David Crockett* or *Colonel Crockett’s Tour of the Northern States* (Crockett ultimately hired a co-author and published his own *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett*). Here the democratic political anecdote emerged as standard fare, with the Whig Congressman Crockett appearing as an equality-loving political candidate in the Age of Democracy. Davy’s firm belief in the rights of the common white man is evident in campaign stories in which he uses down-home sense and tactics (with a little trickery thrown in) to win election. One tale has Davy buying drinks for a crowd of voters (a true story to that point), but paying for repeated rounds using the *same* coonskin, retrieved by Crockett from a hole in the bar wall immediately after making each payment to the bartender. In a more ribald tale, a farmer’s daughter variant, Davy tricks an important constituent into believing his opponent—his real-life rival, the Democrat Adam Huntsman—tried to seduce his daughter. Upon discovering Huntsman’s seeming lecherousness, the farmer proclaims, “You can’t fool me,” renounces his support of Huntsman, and urges his friends and neighbors to vote for the upright Davy Crockett; Davy wins the election.

There are scores of tales of Davy Crockett’s hunting feats, but one in particular merits close attention. The story is deceptively simple: Davy claims he could “grin a coon [raccoon]” out of a tree to avoid ruining the critter’s pelt with gunshot. “Well, I discovered a long time ago that a ’coon couldn’t stand my grin,” he relates earnestly. “I could bring one down tumbling from the

highest tree. I never wasted powder and lead when I wanted one of the creatures."  

Aficionados have heard and told this story so many times that few ever think about its absurdity. How could a grin kill an animal? Surely it was not a friendly or warm grin. Indeed, it must have been a ferocious grin—a grin so horrible that it could strike an animal dead! This simple story is not so simple; it ranks among the most effective uses of irony in early American oral and written tradition.

While Congressman David Crockett’s real-life opponents were the Jacksonian Democrats, his most famous folkloric rival was Big Mike Fink, a character we met briefly in the preceding stories about tricksters stealing livestock. Crockett probably never met Fink, but the two are paired in numerous oral traditions and folk-based newspaper and magazine stories. Like Crockett and Jackson, the historic Mike Fink was a trans-Appalachian frontiersman; as a professional keelboatman, he plied the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers between 1790 and 1823. In the employ of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, Mike Fink died a violent death at the mouth of the Yellowstone River. During and after his life, stories of Fink’s feats spread rapidly among the folk of the Mississippi Valley and found their way into print. Mike Fink’s humble life and lack of a professional or political résumé make his rise in oral tradition and literature even more unusual than that of Crockett and Jackson. Mike Fink was evidently such an extraordinary individual that tens of thousands of frontier folk talked about him, and their talk made him a popular culture hero ranking alongside a congressman and the president of the United States.  

The Mike Fink stories are double-edged: some are light-hearted and comical, while others are laced with violence, alcoholism, racism, and sexism. And, like Crockett’s lore, many Fink tales somehow combine all of the above with a romantic and nostalgic view of a vanishing frontier way of life.

47. Paul Hutton, introduction to A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett by Himself, by David Crockett (1834; repr. Lincoln, Nebr., 1987), xv.  
Mike loved to joke, but warned he “told his jokes on purpose to be laughed at, and no man should ‘make light’ of them!” He was a trickster who, as noted, once swindled a farmer out of his sheep by convincing him they were dying of a nonexistent disease called the Black Murrain. In another trickster tale Mike was summoned to court in Louisville; he appeared before the judge in his keelboat, which had been loaded onto a wagon and “poled” up Main Street because Mike “felt at home nowhere but in his boat and among his men.” But Mike could also fall victim to his own pranks. Once, mounting the back of a ferocious bull to torment him, Mike accidentally upset a hornet’s nest; the terrified bull raced away, dragging Mike “over brier and stump in the field … like a fat bear with pack of hounds at his heels.”

To Mike Fink, fighting was great fun. Indeed, he once grew so restless he said he “must fight something or catch the dry rot.” Mike fought his way across the trans-Appalachian West and licked the river pirates of Cave-in Rock. Like all Alligator Horses, Mike prefaced his fight with violent (and racist) oratory: “Hooray for me you scapegoats! … I can lick five times my own weight in wild-cats. I can use up Injens by the cord. I can swallow niggers whole, raw, or cooked. I can out-run, out-dance, out-jump, out-dive, out-drink, out-holler, and out-lick any white thing in the shape o’ human that’s ever put foot down within two thousand miles o’ the big Massassip.”

Mike demanded strong drink and immoral women. One storyteller claimed he could “drink a gallon [of whiskey] in twenty-four hours without its effect being perceptible in his language or demeanor.” His promiscuity, we are told, stemmed from true love gone bad. As a youth in western Pennsylvania, Mike was smitten with one Mary Benson, only to have his heart broken when her father forced her to marry an evil man named Taggart. Mike never got over this hurt; he never married, instead

---

cavorting with numerous women he met in taverns and inns along the western rivers. In one outrageous story, a jealous Mike suspects his girlfriend Peg has flirted with another man. To teach her a lesson, he covers her in dry leaves, sets them afire, and holds her at gunpoint until she promises never to flirt again. Another tale has Mike shooting a whisky cup from between a girlfriend’s thighs.52

The preceding stories form the tip of a racist iceberg, for the folkloric Mike Fink also aimed his rifle at African and Native Americans. A story published in 1837, “Trimming a Darky’s Heel,” is purported to be true. Here Mike is arrested for shooting at a Black man in the Saint Louis port. Taken to court for severing “the hinder part of [a] nigger’s heel,” Mike demands the judge pay him “fur trimmin’ the heel of one of your town niggers.” The story ends with Mike sending “a handful of silver to the darky to extract the pain from his shortened heel.” Thomas Bangs Thorpe published a related story, “The Disgraced Scalp Lock,” in 1842. This time Mike shoots off an Indian’s ponytail; the Indian, Proud Joe, is so enraged at this disrespect he stalks Mike and tries to kill him. Mike carries the day when he kills Joe in a knife fight.53

Coming of age near Fort Pitt, Mike earned a reputation as a legendary crack shot. One storyteller claims that whenever a shooting match prize was a side of beef, Mike was given the beef hide and tallow simply for agreeing not to compete! Another tale has him killing an Indian and a deer with the same bullet. And there are dozens of varied accounts of Mike shooting a cup of whisky off a fellow boatman’s head (à la William Tell). In the standard tale type, Mike positions the whisky cup on his own head, paces off three or four dozen yards, and yells, “Blaze away!” The “sharp crack of the rifle” is heard, and the cup goes flying. Then Mike returns the favor, and the two men

finish the ritual toasting and share a round of drinks. There are numerous variants including Davy Crockett or a girlfriend, as related above. The most recurrent version is set at the mouth of the Yellowstone River, where the real Mike Fink died in an 1823 shooting fray. In this tale, Mike and an estranged friend named Carpenter trade shots, but Mike shoots Carpenter in the head and is in turn murdered by Carpenter’s friend Talbot.\(^{54}\)

Although Mike Fink’s shooting death was served up in scores of folk-based publications, a related tale tells much more about the significance of Mike Fink and the myth of the Alligator Horse. The tale of Mike’s death was sometimes preceded by a story of why he chose to go to the Rockies in the first place. It seems that by the early 1820s the Mississippi Valley was getting too populated and “civilized” for Mike Fink. There was too much settlement and too many people; the frontier era was drawing to a close. “What’s the use of improvement?” Mike asked in “The Disgraced Scalp Lock.” “Who ever found wild buffalo or a brave Indian in a city? … Where’s the fun, the frolicking, the fighting? Gone! Gone!”\(^{55}\)

Mike’s decision to move farther west is woven into a metaphoric tale. One day in 1822, Mike spies a steamboat belching smoke, working its way up the Mississippi. Mike despises steamboats; they represent the industrial revolution and the “progress” that is ruining his world and putting him and his fellow keelboatmen out of work. He keeps his fully loaded keel in the channel, sailing quickly downstream aimed right at the slow-moving steamer. Soon the two boats collide: “Water pouring through [a] hundred gaping seams, told the weight and force of the collision.” Having destroyed both the steamer and his own keel, Mike heads for shore “with a savage smile on his face.” Soon, in Saint Louis, he signs a contract to work as a Missouri River keelboatman and trapper for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company.\(^{56}\)

This story is one example of a tale type so important it became

---


mythic. The legend of a lone frontiersman riding off into the sunset became classic fare for thousands of future western heroes. It emerged simultaneously with the dawn of the American industrial revolution, spawning stories of Daniel Boone moving his family west whenever he caught sight of chimney smoke and clearings, and Davy Crockett telling the voters they can “go to hell” while he goes to Texas. James Fenimore Cooper served it up in The Last of the Mohicans (1827); fifty years later, Huckleberry Finn, having finished his grand Mississippi River adventure, decides he must “light out for the Territory ahead of the rest” because folks want to “sivilize” him. And seventy years after The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Joey Stark, played by the movie actor Brandon DeWilde, cries after the gunfighter hero Shane, played by Alan Ladd, “Come back, Shane! Come back!” as Shane rides alone into the Rocky Mountains.57

In one of the most famous of all these stories, the Black railroad laborer John Henry challenges the steam-driven hammer. John Henry’s story is possibly connected to John William Henry, a Black worker on a postbellum Appalachian prison labor gang; Henry and his coworkers blasted the famed Big Bend and Lewis Tunnels for the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.58 The legend of John Henry took shape in late-nineteenth-century oral tales and songs. Like Daniel Boone and Sergeant Alvin York, Appalachian heroes who preceded and followed him, the folkloric John Henry does not conform to all of the Alligator Horse motifs. Neither raucous nor braggadocio, John Henry is stoic—a strong, courageous, mountain hero. The fact he is Black and a former slave adds great power and irony to his heroism. In the face of a changing, industrializing world, John Henry says, “Enough.” He tells his “captain” (foreman) that he can beat the steam-powered hammer with a sledge hammer and his own two hands. Although it is true that a “man ain’t nothing but

57. Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 229; George Stevens, dir., Shane (Hollywood, Calif., 1951), film.
a man,” John Henry declares: “Before that steam drill shall beat me down / I’ll die with my hammer in my hand, Lord, Lord / I’ll die with my hammer in my hand.” He proceeds to defeat the machine, then “he laid down his hammer and he died.”

Throughout the nineteenth century, Alligator Horse tales continued to evolve from oral tradition into popular print. Some were based on historic characters, while others featured invented heroes who wore the Alligator Horse costume. As we shall see, scores of Black Jack Tales combined African and cracker folkways to feature cotton plantation trickster heroes. Journalists wrote about the Revolutionary War veteran-turned-outlaw Simon Girty. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet populated his Georgia Scenes (1835) with tall-talking Alligator Horses, while Johnson Jones Hooper created a bombastic folk-based hero in Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers (1845). In his classic short story “The Big Bear of Arkansaw,” Thomas Bangs Thorpe presented an Alligator Horse hunting tale with a compelling, thoughtful, and ironic conclusion. Later, in Sut Lovingood’s Yarns (1867), the Tennessean George Washington Harris molded the Alligator Horse into a hillbilly—a crude, violent, irreverent, and yet somehow amusing and engaging Appalachian trickster.

At the same time Harris was writing his Sut Lovingood stories, a crucial new element was being added to this folkloric archetype: technology. Heretofore, the half-horse, half-alligator folk hero had always been a pre-industrial man, a sworn enemy of machines and progress who vowed to shun modernity and die with his hammer in his hand. But in 1881, Mark Twain simultaneously published The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Life on the Mississippi, extolling the heroics and antics of both pre-industrial and industrial folk heroes. He celebrated the “rude ways and tremendous talk” of jolly lumber raftsmen in chapter 3 of Life on the Mississippi (a passage originally written for Adventures of Huckleberry Finn); yet mere pages later, he began

60. Justus, Fetching the Old Southwest, passim.
to fashion a technological variant. The steamboat pilot Stephen W. emerges from the pages of *Life on the Mississippi* as an industrialized Alligator Horse, a crackernick, “harum-scarum devil-may-care” steamboat pilot who is also a trickster, complete with a fiddle and a pet cat. Stephen W. thus stands heroically behind the wheel of the same kind of smoke-belching monster that runs down Huck and Jim in a pivotal chapter of *Huckleberry Finn*: “She was a big one … big and scary, with a long row of wide open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth … as Jim went overboard on one side and I on the other, she comes smashing straight through the raft.”

Soon thereafter, storytellers and singers celebrated the brave railroad engineer John Luther “Casey” Jones. Born in 1863 in the Missouri Bootheel and raised in the western Kentucky village of Cayce (pronounced “Casey”), Jones was a handsome man who stood six foot four. He worked his way up in the railroading trade from brakeman to fireman to engineer on the prestigious Illinois Central line, running the Mississippi Valley from Chicago to New Orleans. Casey Jones became known for his railroading skills, work ethic, daring, and love of Engine Number 638, a “black gleaming monster designed for heavy freight.” But his real claim to fame came behind the throttle of Engine 382 near Vaughan, Mississippi, on April 30, 1900. Ninety-five minutes behind schedule when he boarded, Casey made up all but two minutes by traveling at an amazing (and reckless) speed of 75–100 miles per hour. At 3:52 a.m., however, he crashed into another train and died instantly in the wreckage. Stories of Casey’s daring spread; then Willis Saunders, a Black mechanic for the Illinois Central, penned a song that circulated in hundreds of variants: “Come all you rounders if you want to hear / The story told of a brave engineer / Casey Jones was the rounder’s name / A high right-wheeler of mighty fame.”

As Casey Jones’s legend migrated into early blues music, his mystique evolved from that of a noble Daniel Boone and John

---

Henry to a trickster like Davy Crockett and Mike Fink. Sexual innuendo and hard living were woven into the story of Casey’s heroism; singers told of Casey ignoring the warnings of railroad flagmen and dying because he was so drunk he saw two sets of tracks. Meanwhile, his folkloric family grew callous: “When Casey’s wife heard dat Casey was dead / She was in de kitchen, makin’ up bread / She says, ‘Go bed, chillums, an’ hol’ yo’ breath / You’ll all get a pension at yo’ daddy’s death.’” Other tunes alluded to Casey’s promiscuity. Learning “that Casey was dead,” his old lovers “went home and re-ragged in red” and came “a-slippin’ an’ slidin’ up and down the street / In their loose mother-hubbards and their stockin’ feet.” Consoling her oldest son, Casey’s wife scolds, “Quit cryin’ boy, an’ don’t do that / You got another papa on the same damn track.”

The stories of Stephen W. and Casey Jones marked a change, yet the Alligator Horse entered the twentieth century retaining many of his frontier traits. He certainly kept his penchant for adaptability. Euro-American and African-American folk of the Mississippi Valley would continue to put the Alligator Horse to good use in twentieth-century tales, songs, nonverbal folkways, and popular culture—movies, radio, and television.

BELLE AND JOHNNY ON THE EDGE

Belle Starr, “the Outlaw Queen,” and Johnny Appleseed were significant nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley folk heroes, yet their stories do not neatly fit into the popular Alligator Horse tale type. Johnny and Belle lived their historic lives on the edge of American frontier settlement, and so their legendary lives developed on the frontiers of American oral tradition. The tales and printed stories of Johnny and Belle were formed at widely disparate points where the American folkloric imagination borders good and evil.

Perhaps there is a connection between the rise of Johnny Appleseed, the decline of Mike Fink, and the crescendo of the

---

63. Ibid., 240.
Second Great Awakening. Though Big Mike had affable traits, he was not exactly a role model for Sunday school children, and during the decade before the Civil War religious storytellers began to cast him in the villain’s role. Of course, the stories often ended with a fight, and at this point Mike began to lose fights to strong, righteous challengers, including preachers. In 1850, the Columbus, Georgia, *Southern Sentinel* reprinted a tale about the well-known Kentucky circuit preacher Peter Cartwright beating up Mike Fink at a camp meeting. Mike and his fellow “coarse, drunk ruffians” were interrupting the Reverend Cartwright’s sermon, so he stepped down from the pulpit, took off his coat, and announced, “Wait for a few minutes, my brethren, while I go and make the devil pray.” Soon a “quick, shooting punch of his herculean fist” sent Mike to the ground. Mike rose and attacked again, but the Reverend Cartwright then “crushed him down as if he had been an infant.” Cartwright asked Fink, “Will you pray now?” Thus a Mike Fink story ended with Mike reciting the Lord’s Prayer! “By golly, you’re some beans in a bar [bear] fight,” Mike magnanimously praised Cartwright. “I’d rather set to with an old he bar in the dog days. You can pass in this ’ere crowd of nose smashers, blast your pictur’!”

It seems Mike Fink had fallen on hard folkloric times, as it were. Mike had always been an unsavory character and, as public morals shifted during the Second Great Awakening, his drinking, fighting, and swearing no longer earned him the storytellers’ unquestioned respect. Mike continued to lose fights to moral and upright characters. Ned Taylor, the “small quiet looking” sheriff of the Ohio River town of Westport, smacked Mike “with a tremendous blow under the ear … fell[ed] him to the ground,” and kick-boxed him until “a worse whipped man than the jolly flatboatman was never seen.” Menra Hopewell’s *Legends of the Missouri and Mississippi*, published during the Civil War, characterizes Mike and his brethren as depraved men known for “vulgarity, swearing, carousing,” and of course brawling. Hopewell introduces Jack Pierce, a boatman who seeks a more

moral life and whose “angel-virtue ... was his love of his mother.” Pierce defeats Big Mike in a fight by butting his head against Mike’s so hard “the blows sound[ed] like a maul upon timber.” When Pierce soon thereafter meets a tragic death in Saint Louis, Hopewell portrays Mike’s glee in evil terms, writing that Mike and his men display “gratification” at Pierce’s demise and celebrate, giving “full license to their depraved appetites.” Mike Fink’s day as a hero was done.65

John Chapman, known to this day as Johnny Appleseed, was a Christian pacifist. He was not a fighter like the Reverend Peter Cartwright or Jack Pierce, nor did he in any way resemble his coarse contemporary Mike Fink. Yet Chapman attained a folkloric status that surpassed Mike Fink’s and ranks equally with that of the American icons Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and John Henry.66 What was it about the stories of Johnny Appleseed that mid-nineteenth-century Americans found so appealing?

John Chapman was born in Leominster, in the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts, on September 26, 1774—very close to the birth years of Mike Fink (c. 1770) and Davy Crockett (1786). A direct descendant of 1630s English Puritan immigrants, Chapman grew up amid Revolutionary wartime struggle and postwar economic downturn. His father Nathaniel was off fighting the Revolutionary War when two-year-old John's mother Elizabeth died. Chapman apparently attended school for a short time, but in the mid-1780s Nathaniel was forced to sell their farm to pay the heavy tax levies that soon led to Shay’s Rebellion. Sometime in the early 1790s, teen-aged John Chapman chose to leave New England for the Allegheny River Valley of northwest Pennsylvania. By the early 1800s, he

had crossed the Ohio River into the Muskingum River Valley of the new state of Ohio.\textsuperscript{67}

In the Allegheny and Muskingum River Valleys, John Chapman was drawn to the first of the two great loves of his life—at apple tree nurseries. The historian William Kerrigan has thoroughly chronicled Chapman’s career in horticulture. Gathering apple seeds at cider presses, he began to plant and raise apple tree saplings to transplant and market. He initially planted seeds in secluded spots near streams on the public domain, but was eventually able to purchase land for his nurseries. Chapman chose to plant seeds, as opposed to grafting branches onto existing apple tree roots or branches. Seeds were free, they were easy to carry onto his isolated nurseries, and seedlings produced the hardy wild apples praised and coveted by frontier Americans. Although many of John Chapman’s seedlings were lost to deer and the weather, enough survived for him to slowly build a highly marketable inventory. The image of a lone wanderer planting and tending to wilderness apple tree nurseries made for evocative oral tales and, later, published stories. The biographer W. D. Haley wrote in 1871, “The sites chosen by him [were] such as an artist or poet would select, rich, secluded spots, hemmed in by giant trees, picturesque now, but fifty years ago, with their wild surroundings and the primal silence, they must have been tenfold more so.”\textsuperscript{68}

John Chapman’s second and stronger passion was religion, and his arrival in the trans-Appalachian West coincided with the stirrings of the Second Great Awakening. Chapman’s own religious fervor was born of the unique writings of the eighteenth-century Scandinavian Christian prophet Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg was visited by angels with whom he spoke and traveled to visit heaven and hell, and from whom he learned the true word of God. Following his

\textsuperscript{67} Chapman’s Massachusetts youth is traced in Kerrigan, \textit{Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard}, 18–35; his Pennsylvania sojourn is in ibid., 36–70, and Price, \textit{Johnny Appleseed}, 20–45.

\textsuperscript{68} Kerrigan, \textit{Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard}, 4–5, 10–11, 58–59, 82–83; William Kerrigan, “The Invention of Johnny Appleseed,” \textit{Antioch Review} 70 (Fall 2012), 614 (qtn.). No nurseryman as skilled as Chapman would have planted seeds in the shade of “giant trees.”
angelic conversations, Swedenborg wrote numerous volumes expounding a Christian theology peppered by remarkable new insights that Christ had already made his Second Coming to the spirit world (not the physical world) and that human beings could continue to seek salvation and a home in heaven even after their worldly lives had ended. Swedenborg also wrote that one could find the path to heaven in any Christian church, a belief in stark contrast to divisive Catholic and Protestant beliefs in only one true church. Swedenborg prophesied his teachings would one day be adopted by the “Old Church,” producing a “Church of New Jerusalem”—or “New Church”—to welcome Christ’s imminent Second Coming to the physical world. After his death, English followers veered from Swedenborg’s call to reform from within, bolted from the Church of England, and founded the Church of New Jerusalem. John Chapman was ten years old when the New Church’s doctrines spread to America.69

Swedenborgianism appealed to a bright Puritan descendant like Chapman. His love of horticulture was thus joined by religious enthusiasm, and he spent four decades spreading both apple seeds and the gospel of the Lord (which he called “good news fresh from heaven”). In 1817, in Manchester, England, leaders of the New Church published an annual report with remarkable news from the American West:

There is in the western country a very extraordinary missionary of the New Jerusalem. A man has appeared who seems to be almost independent of corporal wants and sufferings. He goes barefooted, can sleep anywhere, in house or out of house, and live upon the coarsest and most scanty fare. He has actually thawed ice with his bare feet.

He procures what books he can of the New Church; travels into remote settlements, and lends them wherever he can find readers, and sometimes divides a book into two or three parts for more extensive distribution and usefulness. This man for years past has been in the employment of bringing into cultivation, in numberless

places in the wilderness, small patches (two or three acres) of ground, and then sowing apple seeds and rearing nurseries.

These become valuable as the settlements approximate, and the profits of the whole are intended for the purpose of enabling him to print all the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, and distribute them through the western settlements of the United States.

Although the New Church never became a major force in America (by 1889 it could boast only 7,028 members), its beliefs mirrored important aspects of the radical Protestantism that transformed the nineteenth-century United States religious landscape. The New Church was a small part of a revivalist Protestant Christianity that fostered a spiritual and cultural revolution, producing abolitionism, pacifism, feminism, temperance, and vegetarianism movements along the way. And the New Church played a role in all of this while simultaneously producing a legendary American frontier folk hero.  

The quoted New Church report is the first formalized summary of oral stories that had for perhaps two decades been circling around the man who some called, and we will now refer to as, Johnny Appleseed. All legends are built on a core of truth that begins in recurrent oral tales and is modified and embellished with variant motifs. If the storytellers are literate, the legend eventually finds its way onto the printed page. Robert Price and William Kerrigan have traced the course of Johnny Appleseed’s legend from word of mouth to newspaper and magazine articles, popular biographies, poems, short stories, novels, children’s literature, television, movies, and historical and folkloric studies. A list of the most important purveyors of the Appleseed myth includes Rosella Rice, W. D. Haley, Lydia Maria Child, Vachel Lindsay, Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benet, Howard Fast, and Walt Disney. Taken together, their portraits of Johnny Appleseed mirror an American archetype.


Johnny Appleseed was known for what one contemporary called “his eccentricity and strange garb he usually wore.” In place of a shirt and coat, he wore “a coarse coffee-sack, with a hole cut through the centre through which he passed his head.” He wore a broad-brimmed cap, though writers later, and strangely, put a saucepan on his head, perhaps in homage to the Yankee trader folk type. For winter trousers he reportedly wore “the waists of four pairs of pants. These were cut off at the forks, ripped up at the sides and fronts thrown away, saving the waistband attached to the upper hinder part. These hinder parts were buttoned around him, lapping like shingles so as to cover the whole lower part of his body, and over all these were drawn a pair of what was once pantaloons.” Almost all accounts describe Johnny as shoeless, walking barefoot no matter the season or terrain.  

While Johnny’s hard working, ingenuity, and thrift denote a Yankee connection, his link to the Alligator Horse mystique was seen in his strength, courage, and endurance. Yet both these folkloric similarities are overshadowed by his unique religiosity. The Johnny Appleseed of history and legend was saint-like, exhibiting traits of piety, meekness, benevolence, and charity found in neither the Yankee nor Alligator Horse. Given his historic bachelorhood and possible celibacy, the mythic Johnny Appleseed was nearly Christ-like. “He was never known to hurt any animal or to give any living thing pain—not even a snake. The Indians all liked him and treated him very kindly,” wrote one of his admirers. There are many stories of Johnny refusing to swat a mosquito or crush an ant. Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benet echoed these praises in a poem: “Of Jonathan Chapman / Two things known, / That he loved apples, / That he walked alone. / … The stalking Indian, / The beast in its lair / Did no hurt / While he was there. / For they could tell, / As wild things can, / That Jonathan Chapman / Was God’s own man.” And Vachel Lindsay also celebrated Johnny Appleseed in verse: “A boy / Blew west, / And with prayers and incantations, / And

72. This description is drawn from Chapman’s obituary, quoted in ibid., 608–609.
with “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” / Crossed the Appalachians, / And was “young John Chapman,” Then / “Johnny Appleseed, Johnny Appleseed, ...”:

Trading hearts with all beasts and weathers
He swept on, winged and wonder-crested,
Bare-armed, barefooted, and bare-breasted.
The maples shedding their spinning seeds,
Called to his appleseeds in the ground,
Vast chest-nut trees, with their butterfly nations,
Called to his seeds without a sound.
And the chipmunk turned a “summerset.”
And the foxes danced the Virginia reel;
Hawthorn and crab-thorn bent, rain-wet,
And dropped their flowers in his night-black hair;
And soft fawns stopped for perorations;
And his black eyes shone through the forest gleam,
And he plunged young hands into the new-turned earth,
And prayed dear orchard boughs into birth;

... 

And so for us he made great medicine—
Johnny Appleseed, medicine-man.
Then
The sun was their turned-up broken barrel,
Out of which their juicy apples rolled,
Down the repeated terraces,
Thumping across the gold,
An angel in each apple that touched the forest mold,
A ballot-box in each apple,
A state capital in each apple,
Great high schools, great colleges,
All America in each apple,
Each red, rich, round, and bouncing moon
That touched the forest mold.
Like scrolls and rolled-up flags of silk,
He saw the fruits unfold.73

Johnny Appleseed’s story fits into the overarching myth of the West—the epic legend of America’s westward advance and the spreading of civilization across the frontier. While Boone, Crockett, and Fink all helped to advance, and came to symbolize, this westward course, their wild characteristics were unfriendly to civilization and progress. Johnny thus complements and counters the Alligator Horse, moving onto the frontier to sow orchards rather than slay Indians, and to befriend wild animals rather than hunt them down and eat them. Johnny is a frontiersman who ushers in religion and community. Kerrigan writes, “His story was free from the taint of … the vulgarity and violence of the Crockett myths, a more appealing champion. Johnny Appleseed, after all, was a man of extraordinary gentleness and peace.”

Yet, like the Alligator Horse, Johnny Appleseed had no place in the civilized world he helped to create. In both his historic and mythic lives, he could never live for long among those communities he nurtured, for Johnny was “eccentric.” He had to keep moving farther west, leaving apple trees for the civilized folk who followed in his path. His was a mythic journey along the historic path he had followed from Massachusetts to Pennsylvania to Ohio and, at last, to the Wabash River Valley of Indiana. In 1845, near Fort Wayne, Indiana, at seventy-one years of age, Johnny Appleseed died, probably from complications of exposure to the elements—“the winter plague.” His *Fort Wayne Sentinel* obituary read, “He followed the occupation of a nurseryman and has been a regular visitor here upwards of twenty years.... He is supposed to have considerable property … yet denied himself the most common necessities of life.”

Over the past two centuries, Johnny Appleseed’s varied storytellers have naturally used his legend to stress points of view important to them. While early raconteurs emphasized westward


expansion, nation-building, and religion, some of Johnny’s later fans had a socioeconomic axe to grind. Johnny’s eschewing monetary gain proved attractive to the socialist Vachel Lindsay and the Communist Howard Fast (The Tall Hunter, 1942), who saw him as a role model for wealth distribution. On the other hand, a columnist for the American Fruit Grower pointed out that Johnny was an astute capitalist, “an entrepreneur … who seems to have comprehended his market exactly.” While Johnny was indeed an entrepreneur, he chose to channel all his wealth into Christian missionary work, investing in America’s spiritual gross national product, as it were. Whatever their political bent, Lindsay, Fast, et al. shared an admiration of Johnny Appleseed absent from post-modern assessments of the past two decades. In Botany of Desire, Michael Pollan points a finger at Johnny’s supposed role in America’s thirst for alcoholic cider, while the biographer Howard Means asserts that, given his religious and behavioral eccentricities, “John Chapman almost certainly was insane” if judged by “modern” criteria.76

However, William Kerrigan rightly concludes that making “any headway in upending the myth of Johnny Appleseed is unlikely.” And, as in so many aspects of American popular culture, the Walt Disney Studios have played a crucial role in portraying and defining the myth of Johnny Appleseed. In 1948, nearly a decade prior to the release of the televised movies Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier (1955) and Davy Crockett and the River Pirates (1956), Disney Studios released the eighteen-minute cartoon feature Johnny Appleseed, re-introducing Johnny to the baby boom generation. More important, it reiterated and established themes and motifs mirrored in children’s storybook literature—individualism, courage, strength, hard work, thrift, and Christian pacifism and liberality. “Here I am ’neath the blue blue sky, doing as I please / Singing with my feathered friends, humming with the bees,” Johnny sings as he tramps across the Ohio River Valley, sowing apple seeds and tending his nursery saplings. And, in a prayer that is still recited at American youth

Camp gatherings and around family dinner tables, Johnny Appleseed praises God:

The Lord’s been good to me
And so I thank the Lord
For giving me the things I need
The sun and rain and the apple seed
Yes, He’s been good to me.\(^{77}\)

Antebellum American women’s folklore was overshadowed by the masculine myth and printed tales of Daniel Boone, the Alligator Horse, and Johnny Appleseed. Many women’s folkways—quilting, cooking, hair braiding, folk medicine, etc.—were nonverbal or partly verbal customs passed down through generations. Of course, women shared tales and songs, but the men who edited America’s popular press publications were apparently uninterested in printing women’s verbal lore. The market for newspapers, magazines, and almanacs was largely a male market, and so women’s lore remained mostly within the women’s sphere.\(^ {78}\)

Yet that sphere was slowly expanding. The long road to the formulation of a female Mississippi Valley folk hero began with various Jacksonian literary incarnations of Peg (Mrs. Mike Fink), their daughter Sal, and Mike’s assorted girlfriends. Because the historic Mike Fink was apparently unmarried, and any offspring of the King of the Keelboatmen were unknown, male antebellum writers invented wives, girlfriends, and daughters for Mike. These women served mainly as abettors of Mike’s sexist antics. He rescues them from Indians and rival Alligator Horses, and shoots whisky cups and combs off their heads. As noted, one storyteller has Mike shooting a whisky cup from in-between his

---

77. Wilfred Jackson, dir., Johnny Appleseed, in Melody Time (Burbank, Calif., 1948), film. See also Kerrigan, Johnny Appleseed and the American Orchard, 179–80.

woman’s thighs, while another tells of him covering his wife with leaves, setting them afire, and holding her at gunpoint until she promises not to wink at other men. The women in these stories are victims of the Alligator Horse, not heroines.  

Amid these tales, an unnamed Crockett almanac writer created a spunky daughter for Mike named Sal Fink, “the Mississippi Screamer.” She was a chip off the old block. A “great she-human critter,” Sal duels thunderbolts and rides the Mississippi “on an alligator’s back” and gives a vicious beating to marauding Indians. Subsequent and equally lively Crockett almanac heroines—Katy Goodgrit, Sappina Wing, Sal Fungus, and Sally Ann Thunder Whirlwind Crockett—were later joined by women characters in the Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill genre. This trend continued into the late twentieth century, when children’s book authors hit upon Sal Fink as a means of achieving gender equity and toned down her more violent behavior to make her a role model for young American girls. Today, one can find children’s books about Sal and other female folk heroes. In a related (but more naughty) vein, Lyle Saxon’s early twentieth-century stories told of the herculean feats of Annie Christmas, the Louisiana saloon and whorehouse madam.

Myra Belle Shirley, the first female Mississippi Valley folk hero, arose as Belle Starr, “the Outlaw Queen,” amid the bloody guerilla warfare and crime sprees that plagued the Missouri Ozarks before, during, and following the Civil War. Belle’s famous Starr surname was that of her second husband, the
Cherokee Indian criminal Tom Starr. The woman outlaw folk type is connected to male robbers and murderers in the post-Revolution Mississippi Valley. Stories of Samuel Mason, Micajah and Wiley Harpe, and the so-called River Pirates of Cave-in Rock sometimes included female consorts, none of whom attained significant folkloric status. The same can be said of Lizzie Powell, Maggie Creath, and Ann Walker (Nancy Slaughter), whose names pepper stories of the border wars of Civil War–era Missouri. Yet tales about their contemporary Myra Belle Shirley coalesced to define the folk type writers and folklorists commonly term Banditt, Outlaw Queen, Petticoat Terror, and Desperada. Belle thus set the folkloric stage for the legendary Calamity Jane, Bonnie Parker, and Ma Barker.81

While the myth of Belle Starr began in oral tales and was formalized in Richard K. Fox’s sensationalized Bella Starr, the Bandit Queen; or, The Female Jesse James (1889), history students are fortunate Belle also attracted an accomplished scholarly biographer, Glenn Shirley, whose Belle Starr and Her Times: The Literature, the Facts, and the Legends (1982) remains the authoritative account. An important part of Belle’s mystique was her supposed tie to the southern planter class through genteel birth and upraising, and there is a core of truth to that story. Myra Belle Shirley was born February 5, 1848, to Virginia migrants to the Mississippi Valley. John and Elizabeth Hatfield Shirley traversed Tennessee, Kentucky, and Iowa before settling in the southwestern Missouri Ozark country around 1840. The Shirley family worked hard and prospered at farming their Jasper County acreage; John Shirley purchased slaves, raised fine racing horses, influenced state Democratic Party politics, and moved into a town house in Carthage, Missouri. John and

Elizabeth sent their budding teenaged daughter Myra Belle to the Carthage Academy for Young Women, where she studied “reading, writing, grammar, algebra, deportment, Greek, Latin, Hebrew,” and learned to play the piano. But Myra Belle also roamed the surrounding Ozark foothills. Her love for horseback riding and pistol shooting was instilled by her beloved older brother Edwin, whom the family called Bud.82

Carthage, Missouri, lay in the heart of the region that included the new states of Arkansas and Missouri, the Oklahoma Indian Territory, and Kansas-Nebraska Territory; Texas was only a two-day ride south. Bordering the Ozark Mountains to the north is the valley of the Osage River, a Missouri River tributary; to the south is the valley of the Canadian River, a tributary of the Arkansas. This isolated part of the United States was populated by a diverse humankind—Anglo- and Celtic-American farmers and planters, slaves and free Blacks, Tejanos, Native Osage Indians, members of the relocated Indians of the Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee tribes, and folk who boasted descent from varied combinations of this ethnic patchwork. Because this unique region was situated where the trans-Appalachian frontier slowly turned into the trans-Mississippi frontier, it was also the place where the Mississippi Valley Alligator Horse folk hero type slowly turned into the cowboy outlaw folk heroes of the Wild West.83

Southwest Missouri was also the scene of violent disagreements over slavery, free soil, states’ rights, and secession. A half dozen years before Abraham Lincoln was elected president, civil war erupted in these borderlands. Here, the differences between pro- and antislavery stalwarts and common criminals became blurred, and remained so throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction. This region was known for the murderous abolitionist John Brown and hard-riding Unionist Jayhawkers. Standing against them were legendary Rebel “Bushwhackers” like Todd “Bloody Bill” Anderson, William

82. Glenn Shirley, Belle Starr and Her Times: The Literature, the Facts, and the Legends (Norman, Okla., 1983), 32–34; Glenn Shirley, “Outlaw Queen,” Old West 1 (Spring 1965), 26, 27 (qtn.).
83. Shirley, Belle Starr and Her Times, 34–39.
Quantrill, Frank and Jesse James, and the Younger Brothers (Cole, John, Jim, and Bob). As a staunch southern Democrat and proud Rebel, John Shirley applauded his son Bud for helping to organize Jasper County’s own band of Confederate Bushwhackers. Teenaged Myra Belle idolized her older brother, whom she watched ride off to war.84

Just as Andrew Jackson somehow gained a reputation for Revolutionary War heroism despite the fact that he was too young to actually fight in the Revolution, tales of Myra Belle Shirley manage to insert her in the middle of the Missouri border wars. Storytellers put Belle in scouting parties aiding William Quantrill’s Rebel band, and they celebrate her “daring ride” to warn Bud and his comrades of approaching Union cavalry. The myth is built on a tiny grain of truth. Like her father and brother, Belle supported the Confederate cause. When Union soldiers killed Bud in June of 1863, she did travel with her father to retrieve the body, and she vowed revenge. Yet the tale tellers have her brandishing Bud’s (unloaded) pistol against the “damned blue-bellies” and swearing, “I’m going to make these bastards pay.” What we know is that the Shirleys retrieved Bud’s body and buried him, but the Federals soon burned Carthage, Missouri, to the ground. The Shirley family members then retreated to Texas to recoup their fortunes and were living on a farm near Dallas when the Civil War ended. By 1868, teenaged Belle had turned into what one biographer describes as a “buxom, black-haired, black-eyed lass of twenty.”85

From this point on the stories fly fast and furious. Belle rides alongside a string of outlaw husbands and lovers in a twenty-year crime spree that stretches from Dodge City, Kansas, to Fort Smith, Arkansas. One tale has her dressing up as a man to rob a


85. Shirley, “Outlaw Queen,” 27, 28 (qtn.); Brown, Gentle Tamers, 263–64; Shirley, Belle Starr and Her Times, 52–62 (qtn., 60). The recurrent revenge motif reminds one of teenaged Andy Jackson reputedly swearing vengeance on British cavalrmen after they raided his family’s North Carolina farm. The recurrent long ride tale type can be traced to ancient Marathon.
Creek Indian chief of $30,000. Certainly, Belle was promiscuous and spent the last half of her short life with a handful of criminals who were her husbands, common-law husbands, and lovers. Jim Reed, Belle’s first husband, was a Confederate Army veteran turned horse and cattle thief shot dead by a territorial sheriff in 1874. In 1880, she married Sam Starr, a Cherokee Indian, Confederate sympathizer, and gunman seven years her junior, from whom she gained her mythic surname. Between short stints in California and Texas, she resided on Sam Starr’s Canadian River farm, which she dubbed Younger’s Bend, in honor of the Younger brothers, Rebel Bushwhackers who rode with Frank and Jesse James. Belle mothered two children. Pearl was rumored to be Cole Younger’s daughter, while Ed, Belle’s son by Jim Reed, was destined to become a convicted assailant and whisky trader who was killed in a Wagner, Oklahoma, gunfight.\(^{86}\)

Belle and Sam Starr were arrested for horse stealing and tried in 1883 by Isaac C. Parker, the legendary “hanging judge” of Fort Smith, Arkansas. The trial was widely covered in national newspaper stories focusing on Belle’s beauty and embellished criminal résumé. The horse-stealing case was Belle’s only criminal conviction, though she was subsequently thrice indicted for robberies. Belle and Sam Starr spent six months in the Detroit, Michigan, federal house of correction. Returning home, Belle might have pursued love affairs with Felix Griffin (the feared outlaw dubbed “Blue Duck”) and John Middleton (an accused murderer, robber, and arsonist) before Sam was shot to death in a drunken brawl at a dance in 1886. In 1888, she formed a traditional Indian tryst with Sam’s twenty-four-year-old cousin Jim July, perhaps aiming to keep her Younger’s Bend abode legally safe from discontented and litigious Cherokee relatives.\(^{87}\)

Belle Starr was shot dead in the back on or around February 3, 1889, in the Canadian River Valley near Briarstown, Oklahoma. Her murderer was never charged and tried, though four suspects drew suspicion. Edgar Watson, Belle’s disgruntled tenant farmer,  

\(^{86}\) Shirley, “Outlaw Queen,” 29–30; Brown, Gentle Tamers, 263–64.  
\(^{87}\) Brown, Gentle Tamers, 263–64; Shirley, “Outlaw Queen,” 30.
was a fugitive Florida murderer who might have feared Belle was going to turn him in. Ed Reed, Belle's son, had bitterly opposed her marriage to Jim July. Old Tom Starr, Sam's father (and Jim's uncle), also opposed the marriage and coveted the Younger's Bend property. And Jim July himself was a suspect, perhaps only because Belle seemed wired for promiscuity and duplicity. The unsolved murder served as the coda to the emerging myth of the Outlaw Queen. 

Belle Starr's career resembled that of Davy Crockett in several important ways. Like Crockett, her mythic persona was being developed and marketed to the public during her lifetime, beginning with press coverage of her and Sam's trial for horse theft. Also like Crockett, Belle played a role in the cultivation of her own mystique. There is an 1886 photograph of her in Fort Smith, sitting sidesaddle on a well-groomed horse, resplendent in a velveteen dress and rakishly creased and flowered hat, and sporting holstered pistols. And finally, like Crockett, Belle died in dramatic fashion; her intriguing 1889 murder turned out to be an upwardly mobile folkloric career move. Before the year was out, Richard K. Fox, publisher of National Police Gazette, released his "biography" Bella Starr, the Bandit Queen; or, The Female Jesse James, which was billed as "a full and authentic history of the dashing female highwayman, with copious extracts from her journal." 

Unlike Davy Crockett, however, Belle Starr was an outlaw, a criminal who was also a folk hero. The outlaw plays an important role in the Myth of the West—he (or she) is a wild foe of civilization and thus the nemesis of the western hero. The outlaw folk type descends from English stories of Robin Hood and is seen in many American variations. While there are evil men with no admirable qualities ("bad guys" like Samuel Mason, the Harpes, and John Murrell), there are also outlaw heroes who possess redeeming characteristics. Belle Starr broke the mold in

88. Shirley, Belle Starr and Her Times, 234–40.
89. Richard Kyle Fox, Bella Starr, the Bandit Queen; or, The Female Jesse James (New York, 1889). Neither the public nor Belle's subsequent biographers adopted Fox's "Bella" flourish. The photo is reproduced in Shirley, "Outlaw Queen," 28.
rising to fame as a *female* outlaw who showed heroic qualities some (not all) of the time. Though Belle did not take from the rich and give to the poor like Robin Hood, Jesse James, or her Canadian River Valley successor Pretty Boy Floyd, she was loyal to the South and to her brother, and was said to have avenged his death in honorable fashion. After the Civil War, Belle Starr became a common criminal while continuing to show grit, horsemanship, and sharpshooting skills.  

Moreover, Belle Starr’s mystique is located where the Myth of the West meets the Myth of the Lost Cause. The Lost Cause myth is made up of a complex set of stories about the Old South that, in part, portray Confederates as honorable and valiant countrymen, true to their principles to the end of their fight against mighty (and cruel) Yankee forces. Belle (as in “southern belle”) and her family fit this story nicely, and tale tellers invent whatever embellishments are necessary. Moreover, Belle Starr *feminizes* both the western and Lost Cause myths. Fox dubs Belle “the female Jesse James,” a fusion of gender and myth unprecedented in America before her rise. It is this blending of femininity with violence that gives Belle her edge. In her stunning 1886 photograph, she actually uses her pistols as fashion accessories. These motifs will later be reprised by Annie Oakley, Bonnie Parker, Patty Hearst, and in the popular 1991 western movie *Thelma and Louise*.  

Just as Johnny Appleseed countered the rough antics of the Alligator Horse, Belle Starr’s stories were a folkloric reaction to heroes like saintly Johnny and the Reverend Peter Cartwright. As the Second Great Awakening waned, the Civil War darkened the mythic imagination and cleared a path for the outlaw folk heroes of the late nineteenth century. The Mississippi Valley would not

90. This is my own analysis, informed by Meyer, “The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folk Type,” and Boatright, “The Western Bad Man as Hero.”

be cleansed of their outlawry until a new generation arose and was drawn to the bravery and virtue of Sergeant Alvin York, Charles Lindbergh, and Amelia Earhart.

**JACK, JOHN, JUBILEE**

African American slaves told many stories about a trickster named Jack, and several of the tales tell about Jack trying to get something special to eat. In one, Jack’s master—Massa—invites the local white preacher to Sunday dinner and orders Jack to cook up a big duck. Jack does a good job, and the cooked bird looks delicious. But Jack is so hungry that he yields to temptation and eats first one duck wing, then another, and finally eats the entire bird. Realizing his predicament, and seeing Massa sharpening a knife to carve and serve the duck, Jack takes the preacher aside. He gravely informs him that Massa “is sharpening his knife to kill you.” Immediately, the preacher breaks into a run and escapes up the plantation road. Meanwhile, Jack calls out to Massa, “There he goes with the duck!”

The French and Spaniards expanded their vast Caribbean and Latin American slavery system to the southeast of North America (Florida and Louisiana) in the 1600s, and in 1619 English Virginians brought Africans to the New World as unwilling indentured servants to harvest their tobacco crops. Some of these indentured servants were freed at the end of their contracts, creating the nucleus of a free Black southern population. But most (90 percent) were not freed, and by 1650 colonial law identified Black slaves as *chattels personal durante vida* in statutes known as Black Codes. Slavery spread to the English colonies of Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and North and South Carolina. By the time of the American Revolution, one out of every five Americans (400,000 in a population of three million) was African American. After the Revolution, African American slaves forcibly arrived in the Mississippi Valley via the western rivers and over the Appalachians. The invention of the

cotton gin soon accelerated the growth of slavery in the southern U.S. Cotton Kingdom. By 1820, there were 1.5 million African American slaves; by 1860, there were approximately 4 million, 15 percent of the overall population.\footnote{Berlin, \textit{Many Thousands Gone}; Berlin, \textit{Generations of Captivity}; Stampp, \textit{The Peculiar Institution}; Thomas, \textit{The Slave Trade}; this work.}

The African-American contribution to American folk life is enormous. Yet, like European-American folklore studies, formal scholarly inquiry into Black folklore developed very slowly during the course of the twentieth century. W. E. B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston addressed folk life in, respectively, \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} (1903) and \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} (1937), and Benjamin Botkin and Eugene Genovese later wove descriptions of slave song and religion into cultural histories of American slavery.\footnote{DuBois, \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}; Hurston, \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God}; Botkin, \textit{Lay My Burden Down}; Genovese, \textit{Roll, Jordan, Roll}; this work.} In the 1960s and ’70s, social historians successfully tapped the wealth of information contained in African-American folklore. Social historians realized the only way to write a thorough history of the United States of America was to explore all groups, not just literate folk. To them, traditions like song, dance, superstitions, food, material culture, and tales provided a strong lens through which to view the past. Two pathbreakers were John Blassingame and Lawrence Levine, authors of, respectively, \textit{The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South} (1972) and \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom} (1977).\footnote{Blassingame, \textit{The Slave Community}; Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness}; Joyner, \textit{Shared Traditions}; White and White, \textit{The Sounds of Slavery}; this work.}
Blassingame blended psychology, anthropology, economics, and folklore to write his social history of slavery. His thesis was that slaves developed folk traditions to endure and survive slavery’s abuses:

Black slaves created several unique cultural forms which lightened their burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided a way for verbalizing aggression, maintaining hope and building self-esteem, and often represented areas of life largely free from control of whites. However oppressive or dehumanizing the plantation was, the struggle for survival was not severe enough to crush the slave’s creative instincts. Among the creative elements of slave culture were: an emotional religion, folk songs and tales, dances, and superstitions[,] … language, customs, beliefs, and ceremonies … [causing] personal autonomy and positive self concept.96

In the face of their masters’ overwhelming power, slaves could find one avenue for hope in superstition, magic, and conjurors. All human traditions exhibit beliefs in magic, and American slaves blended their African practices with those of Anglo, Celtic, Franco, Hispanic, Indian, and other American folk. Some magic beliefs came from Caribbean and Louisiana slaves who practiced Hoodoo. Many plantations boasted conjurors, shrewd men and women who claimed to possess powers to counter those of the master. Witchcraft, fortunetelling, spells, and folk medicine all became part of the conjuror’s repertoire.97

Slaves beseeched conjurors to ease their workloads, prevent floggings, reunite separated families, and, of course, help them in romance through love potions. One escaped slave remembered a conjuror named Dinkie who wore a snakeskin around his neck and carried dried or petrified frogs and lizards in his pockets. Dinkie reportedly never worked, nor was he ever whipped; his owners acknowledged his status and power, and they left him free to wander the plantation and surrounding countryside. In this they were not unusual; there are accounts of slave masters

96. Blassingame, Slave Community, 41.
97. Blassingame, Slave Community, 32–33, 45–49.
who deferred to Black conjurors and sought them out to remedy their own ills.\textsuperscript{98}

William Webb, a Kentucky conjuror, cast spells to make his master treat the slaves more humanely; early one morning he instructed slaves to march around their cabins, pointing bags containing magical roots towards the master’s house. The master soon had a dream in which the slaves avenged themselves; meanwhile, Webb was treated to the best food, and female companionship. Some conjurors dispensed justice in the slave quarters, identifying a guilty thief as one who could not hold a Bible in his hand, or one who refused to drink water sprinkled with graveyard dust.\textsuperscript{99}

Conjurors were also healers who could treat sickness with a variety of incantations and natural (root and herbal) medicines. These treatments reflect African, Indian, and European folk medicine traditions; while some cures seem purely superstitious, others have been confirmed useful by modern medical scientists. And if the medicines and spells did not actually heal, they nevertheless brought hope and confidence, placebos as it were. Indeed, Blassingame concludes the conjuror’s greatest power was providing “a psychological defense against total dependence on and submission to their masters... Whatever his power, the master was a puny man compared to the supernatural.”\textsuperscript{100}

African-American English, a dialect of American English, developed slowly in the slave quarters. The first generation of forced laborers retained their African speech, and in isolated Carolina plantations subsequent generations continued to use African languages. But in general, American-born slaves came to speak their own brand of American English. Certainly nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley slaves north of the Louisiana parishes were exclusively English speakers, even though their speech retained African influences, intonations, words, and constructions. Slave folk told their stories in this rich vernacular English.\textsuperscript{101}

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 45; Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness}, 69–70, passim.
In the slave quarters, Alligator Horse tales blended with African (and Indian) folklore to produce a hybrid folk hero. The hero went by the name John or Jack, and was sometimes represented by an animal character. In the song “John the Rabbit,” for example, slaves sang of a sneaky animal fetching food from Massa’s garden. Massa’s wife tells the story, with the slaves responding “Yes, Ma’am” to each recitation of her woes: “Oh, John the rabbit, Yes, Ma’am / Got a mighty habit / Yes, Ma’am / Jumping in my garden / Yes, Ma’am / Cutting down my cabbage / Yes, Ma’am / My sweet potatoes / Yes, Ma’am / My fresh tomatoes / Yes, Ma’am / An’ if I live / Yes, Ma’am / To see next fall / Yes, Ma’am / I ain’t gonna have / Yes, Ma’am / No garden at all / Yes, Ma’am.” In related tales, drawn in part from Anglo stories like “Jack and the Beanstalk,” a slave named Jack emerges as a trickster hero in human or symbolic animal form. According to Zora Neale Hurston, Jack is “the wish-fulfillment hero of [his] race.”

In typical tales, writes Blassingame, Jack (or John) “makes fools of whites, [and] pretends to be more ignorant than he is.” One Christmas season Jack asks his master, “How much Christmas kin I have?” He is told that when Christmas comes he is to build a fire and celebrate until the back log in the fireplace burns out. Jack immediately prepares by sawing a gum tree log and soaking it in a ditch for several days; next, he dries the outside of it so it will catch fire. Throwing the log in the back of the fire on Christmas morning, Jack celebrates while the waterlogged fuel burns for seven days!

As we have seen, Jack often uses his wiles to get something to eat. Once Jack was so hungry he stole chickens from Massa and cooked them on his cabin stove. But Massa surprises him, entering the cabin to see what is cooking. Jack lies, telling Massa he is cooking up some possums he had hunted; Massa then announces he is staying to eat some of the possum. Jack delays him for an hour, but Massa insists on looking in the pot, where

102. Ibid., 59 (Hurston quoted); Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* 81–135, passim.
he finds the chickens. “Wal,” Jack immediately explains, “dey wuz possums when Ah put ’em in dar.” In a variant, Jack again tries to pass chickens off as possums; this time when he is discovered, he tricks Massa by telling him all the slaves have spit in the pot: “Us niggers allus spits in possum gravy” to make the meat tender. Cursing the slaves as “damned savages,” Massa hastily departs and the slaves sit down to a chicken dinner.104

Animal trickster tales allowed slaves to use symbolic animal characters to represent their will and ability to triumph over authoritarianism. The best-known animal stories were recorded and published in antebellum popular literature by the white author Joel Chandler Harris. Born in 1848 to humble Celtic-American parents, Harris went to work at age thirteen; he was a printer on a Georgia cotton plantation so large and influential it published a regional newspaper, the Countryman. Harris matured, becoming a Countryman editor, and forming strong friendships with plantation Blacks. A mere decade after Sam Clemens began learning Missouri slave lore, Harris’s friends Old Harbert and Uncle George Terrell were teaching Harris a series of animal stories he would record, transcribe, and embellish in the famed Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (1880) and ten subsequent volumes. The character Uncle Remus is the literary version of Old Harbert and Uncle George, and every story begins with Remus telling a tale to a small white boy on the plantation, just as Harris himself had first heard them.105

“The Tar Baby” is one of Harris’s most famous stories; it was told, retold, published, and reprinted. Eventually, it served as a centerpiece for Walt Disney’s 1946 animated movie Song of the South. The tale is named after a tar and turpentine doll that Brer (Brother) Fox makes to trap and eat his nemesis, Brer Rabbit. This story is based on an African tale in which a rabbit is tricked into attacking, and thereby becoming entrapped within, an image covered with bird feces.106 The African story seems

104. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 128.
106. Blassingame, Slave Community, 26–27.
outrageous, but in fact the folkway is practiced in variant form to this day. Contemporary American adolescent tricksters are known to fill paper bags with their own excrement, light them afire on individuals’ porches, ring the doorbell, and stand back and watch the fun as their victim stomps out the burning turd-filled bags! No wonder Harris, and later Disney, altered the story so the Fox makes the doll out of a different sticky substance.

The Tar Baby story is part of a tale cycle in which Uncle Remus tells the little boy of numerous confrontations between Rabbit and Fox (and Bear), who wants to eat him. Of course, Brer Rabbit always outfoxes his enemies, but in this tale he seems to have run out of luck. Desirous of a rabbit stew, Brer Fox “got ’im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun wat he call a Tar-Baby.” Fox dresses the baby up and sets him in the road “en den he lay off in de bushes” and waits for Rabbit. “Bimeby here comes Brer Rabbit pacin’ down the road—lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity—dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird.” Brer Rabbit, always gregarious, stops and says “Mawnin’!” to the baby, but gets no reply. He tries again to be polite and is again rebuffed. Slowly, Rabbit becomes annoyed by Tar Baby’s rudeness and warns, “I’m gwineter larn you howter talk to specttuble fokes” or “bus’ you wide open.” He punches him, and of course “his fis’ stuck, en he can’t pull loose.” So he punches Tar Baby with his other fist and gets that stuck too; then he starts kicking and sticks both of his feet in the Tar Baby; finally, Rabbit head-butts Tar Baby “en his head got stuck.” At this point, Brer Fox comes out of hiding, saunters on over, and says, “You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin’… en den he rolled de groun’, en laughed en laughed twel he couldn’t laugh no mo.’ ‘I speck you’ll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit’… sez Brer Fox.”

“Did the fox eat the rabbit?” the little boy asks Uncle Remus. As usual, Uncle Remus keeps up the suspense, sending the boy back to the white folks’ house without an answer—“Dat’s all de fur de tale goes… He mout, en den again he moutent.”

108. Ibid., 539.
the little boy returns the next day, he hears the next installation of the story: Fearing he will end up in Fox’s cooking pot, Rabbit digs down deep into his bag of tricks and uses psychology to foil Fox. Rabbit begins to beg: he says to Fox he knows that he is doomed, and asks only that he not be thrown into a nearby briar patch. To hear Rabbit describe it, this briar patch is the worst of all fates. “Do anything with me,” Brer Rabbit begs Fox, “jus’ don’ throw me in dat Briar patch!” Very, very slowly, and after hearing much pleading, the stupid Fox begins to think throwing Rabbit in the briar patch is his own idea, and a great idea at that! So he hurls him in the patch, and Rabbit of course is now free to extricate himself from Tar Baby and go about his business. “Born and bred in de briar patch!” he taunts Fox at story’s end. Like the African-American slaves he represents, Brer Rabbit has used his wiles to triumph over bigger and more powerful creatures.109

Like folktales, music was extremely important in the African Americans’ ability to survive the ordeal of slavery.110 Slaves sang, played musical instruments, and danced to secular and sacred music that reflected both African and European forms.111 From Africa, they brought a musical tradition of syncopated rhythm, call and response, improvisation, and enthusiasm—their songs accented the second and fourth beats, with words and notes echoed in unique, lively phrases. At the same time, slave masters and their poor white neighbors introduced Blacks to two- and three-chord Anglo and Celtic folk tunes that told stories through metaphor and were sung a capella (or with simple accompaniment) and harmonization.

Slaves made rough-hewn musical instruments, fashioning crude guitars and fiddles and carving fifes from tree branches. The banjo, an instrument of African origin, could be made with a few thin wires or pieces of string and a cigar box. Slaves strummed primitive basses they made by hammering one end of

110. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness, 7–8. See also White and White, Sounds of Slavery.
111. Blassingame, Slave Community, 28, passim.
a rope, string, or wire onto a porch post and nailing the other end, strung tight, to the plank floor (the washtub bass was a variant). Homemade tambourines, triangles, log drums, and dried pork or beef rib bones (or wooden spoons) served percussionists as well. And many slaves simply used their own bodies as rhythm instruments, clapping their hands, patting their stomachs, and slapping their knees, chests, and cheeks in a style dubbed “patting juba.”

During leisure time, slaves danced to their music. While their European dance repertoire included waltzes, minuets, reels, quadrilles, and square dances, they preferred line and circle dancing and an Africanized version of Celtic clogging and toe dancing that became known as American tap dancing. One slave remembered individual clog and toe dancers and their shuffling of the feet, swinging of the arms and shoulders in a peculiar rhythm of time [that] developed into what is known today as the Double Shuffle, Heel and Toe, Buck and Wing, Juba, etc. The slaves became proficient in such dances, and could play a tune with their feet, dancing largely to an inward music, a music that was felt, but not heard.

Slaves danced together in traditional African style, in lines and circles featuring individual dancers and couples. One dance consisted of male and female dancers in two separate lines; they simultaneously moved back and forth toward one another, swaying to rhythmic drum and vocal accompaniment. In another dance, circles of clapping dancers formed around one or two individual dancers who performed solos in rapid and sexually suggestive torso movements; the “physical strength required is tremendous,” an observer noted. Like conjuring and oral tales, dancing helped slaves earn prestige and find pleasure while venting their frustrations via the steam valve of the dance experience.

112. Ibid., 55–56.
113. Ibid., 45.
Work songs and “field hollers” incorporated syncopation, call and response, metaphor, and enthusiasm to make bearable the hard work of lifting, hoeing, and chopping. One traveler recalled hearing a slave exhorting his fellows to work, calling, “Come, bredren, come / let’s go at it / come now, eoho! rollaway! / eeho-eeho-weeioho-i!” Another song, a call and response, signaled the time to end the day’s labor: “Ooooh, the sun going down / And I won’t be here long / Ooooh, the sun going down / And I won’t be here long / Ooooh, then I be going home / Ooooh, I can’t let this dark cloud catch me here / Ooooooh, I can’t be here long / Ooooooooh, I be at home.”

Work songs provided entertainment and helped jobs pass more pleasantly. Corn shucking songs were sung in myriad versions. One call-and-response tune describes a corn shucking party thrown by the master. To quickly bring the harvest into storage, he promised to reward the workers with liquor and a big meal: “All dem puty gals will be dar / Shuck dat corn before you eat / Dey will fix it fer us rare / Shuck dat corn before you eat / I know dat supper will be big / Shuck dat corn before you eat / I think I smell a fine roast pig / Shuck dat corn before you eat / I hope dey’ll have some whisky dar / Shuck dat corn before you eat / … I think I’ll fill my pockets full / Shuck dat corn before you eat.” Corn is also featured (with wheat and chicken) in a song that would not have been sung in front of the master: “We raise de wheat / Dey gib us the corn / We bake de bread / Dey give us de cruss / We sif de meal / De gib us de huss / We peal de meat / De gib us de skin / And dat’s de way / Dey take us in.”

On the Mississippi and its tributaries, Black boatmen and steamboat deckhands sang call-and-response work songs. Keelboat and flatboat oarsmen called, “Sing fellows, for my true love / and the water with the long oar strike / See! see! the town! Hurrah! Hurrah!” In the tune “Cross Ober Jordan,” the Jordan River symbolizes the Ohio and the slave boatmen’s desire to reach freedom north of the Ohio: “I’ll sail de worl’ clar roun’ and roun’ / All by de railroad underground / We’ll cross ober Jordan,  

we’ll land on tudder shore / Den make room in de flatboat for one darky more.”

Such references to the Jordan River and the Holy Land were based on the strong influences of European sacred music on African slave folkways.

In religion, as in so many aspects of their culture, Black slaves blended African, Anglo, Celtic, Franco, and Spanish forms. As noted above, slaves converted to Christianity early on, encouraged by their masters, who believed religious slaves would accept slavery as their fate on earth knowing they would receive a heavenly reward upon death. This idea that slaves must wait for death to be free does appear in certain religious expressions and songs, for example, “A few more beatings of the wind and rain / Ere the winter will be over / Glory Hallelujah! / Some friends has gone before me / I must try to go to meet them / Glory Hallelujah!” “When we all meet in Heaven,” another popular church song proclaims, “There is no parting there / When we all meet in Heaven / There is no parting more.”

While the master’s self-serving idea that Christianity taught the slaves they would not be free until the afterlife reflected one reading of the Bible, it was most certainly not the only or most common one. Millennialism—a religious belief system (discussed above) that swept across America and the Mississippi Valley during the Second Great Awakening—taught something very different. Millennialist Christians believed the return of Christ would be accompanied by one thousand years of “heaven on earth.” This strong belief in the coming of a kingdom of earthly peace was of enormous interest to the slaves. Millennialism meant God promised they could be saved and even freed during their lifetimes, and need not await the afterlife.

Slave millennialism found expression in the music of the Jubilee—based on Old Testament tales of the Jews setting slaves free and Jews themselves escaping Egyptian slavery. The Day of Jubilee and the slaves’ belief there was “a better day a coming”


118. Blassingame, The Slave Community, 69–70, 73.

119. Walters, American Reformers, 21–27. See chapter 1, this work.
became the most recurrent motifs in Black Christian music. Slave hymns were based on the European church music introduced to them by their masters, but the slaves infused African musical traditions to radicalize the genre. They changed some of the words and song structures and incorporated syncopated rhythms. They fused long-standing European call and response (between preacher and congregation) with a much livelier, enthusiastic style. The result was a jubilant brand of church songs we now call gospel music.\textsuperscript{120}

Through metaphor, gospel songs reflected hope beneath slavery’s harsh exterior. One gospel song assures singers and listeners, “No more rain fall for wet you, Hallelujah / No more sun shine for burn you / Dere’s no whips a-crackin’ / No evil-doers in de kingdom / All is gladness in de kingdom.”\textsuperscript{121} Another song seems to begin as a lament, but grows more hopeful as a story unfolds: “See these poor souls from Africa / Transported to America / We are stolen and sold in Georgia / Will you go along with me? / We are stolen, and sold in Georgia / Come sound the jubilee! / See wives and husbands sold apart / Their children’s screams will break my heart / There’s a better day a coming / Go sound the jubilee!”\textsuperscript{122}

The sacred music of African American slaves—like their folk beliefs, religion, medicine, superstitions, conjuring, folktales, dance, and secular music—shows that the slaves were perseverant survivors, not hapless victims of the slaveholders. Black folk survived the ordeal of slavery by building community, family, and folk culture. In the slave quarters, away from the master’s gaze and authority, African Americans gathered and celebrated their traditions. Through their religion, they prayed and sang for deliverance from tyranny and freedom in heaven on earth:

\begin{quote}
O, gracious Lord! When shall it be,
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{121} Blassingame, \textit{Slave Community}, 69–70.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 69–71.
That we poor souls shall all be free;  
Lord break them slavery powers—  
Will you go along with me?  
Lord break them slavery powers,  
Go sound the jubilee!

Dear Lord, dear Lord, when slavery'll cease,  
Then we poor souls will have our peace;—  
There's a better day a coming.  
Will you go along with me?  
There's a better day a coming,  
Go sound the jubilee!123

SO COME, ALL YOU BOLD RAFTSMEN!

The songs of the Mississippi Valley boatmen are based largely on Anglo and Celtic folk traditions, with important Franco, Spanish, and African-American influences. As with all the folklore discussed above, it is sometimes difficult to find boatmen’s songs and glean historical evidence from them, but the effort is essential. Lawrence Levine writes, “Many of the voices that make up any society as large as ours are stilled and we are lulled into the belief that those voices that are recoverable from traditional sources are the only ones that were.” Levine concludes that historians utilizing early American folksongs must learn as much as possible about the sources of the songs, the way they were collected, edited, and published, and then must allow the folklore “to speak for itself and ... understand that it will only speak to those who are willing to take the lore and its creators seriously.”124

Most Mississippi Valley rivermen were raised amidst Anglo- and Celtic-American secular and religious folksong traditions. As we have seen, these British songs consisted of only two or three chords sung with harmonies and limited instrumental accompaniment. These were storytelling songs that employed

123. Ibid., 73.  
symbolism and metaphor. By the time the songs crossed the Appalachian Mountains, they had ceased to be purely British in form. Singers adapted and melded French and Spanish boatmen’s styles and lyrics and, in the case of mixed race (Euro-Indian) voyageurs, American Indian folkways. As we have seen, African-American musicians introduced whites to syncopated rhythm, improvisation, and more enthusiastic call-and-response singing. The results could be heard aboard flatboats, keelboats, and lumber rafts sailing the western rivers.125

Like slave work songs, boatmen’s work songs created a rhythmic medium that rivermen used to synchronize their rowing and receive commands from the captain. At the same time, songs provided psychological benefits, making rivermen’s work more fun (or at least less onerous). On the lower Mississippi in 1810, the traveler John Bradbury witnessed Canadian voyageurs rowing, “measuring the strokes of their oars by songs, which were generally responsive betwixt the oarsmen at the bow and those at the stern; sometimes the steersman sung and was chorused by the men.” In Bradbury’s translation of an old French folksong, we hear a story in which the first, third, and fifth line of each stanza is sung by the patroon (steersman) while the oarsmen’s responses constitute the second, fourth, and sixth lines. The first stanza begins, “Behind our house there is a pond / Fal lal de ra / There came three ducks to swim thereon / All along the river clear / Lightly, my shepherdess dear, Lightly / Fal de ra.” The second stanza continues the tale, “There came three ducks to swim thereon / Fal lal de ra / The prince to chase them he did run / All along the river clear / Lightly, my shepherdess dear, Lightly / Fal de ra.” And, finally, “The prince to chase them he did run / Fal lal de ra / And he had his great silver gun / All

along the river clear / Lightly, my shepherdess dear, Lightly / Fal de ra [repeated].”

In a popular Ohio River flatboat work song, the captain or pilot sings out to his men, who respond enthusiastically as they maneuver huge “sweeps” (oars) at starboard and port: “Some goes up, but we goes down!” the pilot sings, adding, “All the way to Shawneetown!” to which the boatmen respond, “Pull away! Pull away!” Because flatboating downstream included some leisure time, there are accounts of rivermen gathered around a fiddler, “singing catches” to pass the time and help in their work. Firsthand witnesses observed boatmen singing while at their leisure and work. The Englishman James Flint was sailing on board an Ohio River flatboat on a Sunday when he observed that one of the boatmen “commenced a song.” Criticized for singing on the Sabbath, the riverman “alleged he was in a ‘land of liberty’ and that no one had a right to interfere.”

Songs both reflected and romanticized the boatmen’s lifestyle. Robert Carlton remembered an Ohio riverman singing to the tune of “Yankee Doodle”: “Get up good sirs, get up I say / And rouse ye, all ye sleepers / See! down upon us comes a thing / To make us use our peepers … / Yet what it is, I cannot tell / But ’tis as big as thunder / Ah! if it hits our loving arks / We’ll soon be split asunder! / Yankee Doodle, keep it up…” The flatboatman William Richardson composed a song about rivermen “gently gliding” while “whiskey kept in constant motion / soothes them with its lullaby.” “Woman in our Towdn [Town]” was a tune about a loose woman who “loved her husband dear-i-lee / But another man twyste as wed’d [well].”

The nineteenth-century Saint Louis newspaperman Joseph M.


Field stated that the song “Neal Hornback” was written and sung by Big Mike Fink. This is doubtful; according to Richard M. Dorson, the tune is a “home-made local ballad [that] rings true to indigenous American minstrelsy, with its account of a small personal incident and characters known only to the immediate circle, and the caricaturing of hapless Neal Hornback in the style of the solemnly intoned mock ballad.” In this song, Neal blames two of his fellow boatmen for stealing kegs of whiskey that were in fact stolen by a shrewder river man:

My name it are Neal Hornback
I sail-ed from Mudford shore,
And ven-tur-ed up the Poll-ing fork,
Where Indians' rifle roar.

Oh, the matter it are conclu-di-ed,
It are hard for to unbin-d,
I waded the forks of Salt Riviere,
And left my kegs behind.

An hour or two before day,
I pick-ed up my gun,
Returned to my periougue,
And saw the mischief done.

I laid it on Tom John-sti-on,
Who were innercent and clear,
But for to destroy my charac-ture,
It plainly did appear.

I call-ed my friends er-round me,
And thus to them did s-a-a-a-y,
Macdannilly and Tom John-sti-on,
Have stole my kegs er-way.

Oh, if they are the lads whot stole your kegs,
They have done the verri thing,
And if your kegs are miss-ing,
You'll not see them er-gin.129

James Hall recorded boatmen’s love songs that were
despondent and “of a very pathetic nature.” “Oh! its love was the ’casion of my downfall,” one boatman sang, adding “I wish I hadn’t never lov’d none at all!” In another song, a womanless boatman lamented, “an onconstant lover / Is worse nor a thief / … An onconstant lover / Will bring you to the grave!” But Hall also published a more upbeat tune “verbatim, as it flowed from the lips of an Ohio boatman.” The song expressed the boatman’s infatuation with a lass who was “so neat a maid” that she carried her stockings and shoes in her “lilly white hands / For to keep them from the dews.” Another riverman, more resigned to his solitary life, sang, “Here’s to those that has old clothes / And never a wife to mend ’em / A plague on those that has haltjoes [coins] / And hasn’t a heart to spend ’em!”

Like other Ohio and Mississippi boatmen, log and lumber raftsmen sang tunes both for leisure and to aid them in rowing and navigation. Because of the proximity of many (not all) raftsmen to the north woods and the Mississippi’s Minnesota headwaters and Wisconsin tributaries, their tunes contain more British-Canadian folk elements than any other river lore. There are many rafting songs, some of which, according to one collector, “could never be put into print for polite readers.”

A migratory tune entitled “One-Eyed Riley” depicted a raftsman who was a womanizer, con man, and hell-raiser: “He was a prime favorite out our way / The women folks all loved him dearly / He taught the parsons how to pray / An’ got their tin or pretty nearly / He’s the man they speak of highly! / W-a-h-hoop! / Riddle, liddle, linktum / ONE-EYED RILEY!!!” In “The Rafter’s Chant,” rivermen proudly sang of their lives floating along “on a white hick of pine” and chided landsmen who knew nothing of their distinctive trade: “But true to our course, though weather be thick / We set our broad sail as before / And stand by the tiller that governs the hick / Nor care how we look from the shore.”

Less whimsical songs depict raftsmen as womanless drifters assuming a melancholy, sometimes tragic pose. “The Jam on Geary’s Rock” (also known as “Gallant Young Monroe”) is an upper Mississippi version of a northeastern (Maine and Maritime Canada) and Ontario river song about “Gallant Jimmy Whalen.” The tune tells how Monroe and six raftsmen met “a watery grave” trying to break up a logjam on the Wisconsin River: “‘Twas on a Sunday morning in the springtime of the year / The logs were piling mountain high, and we could not keep them clear / ‘Turn out, turn out,’ our foreman cried, with language void of fear / ‘we’ll break the jam on Geary’s Rock, and for Saginaw town we’ll steer.’” Under Monroe’s direction the men set to work, but their plan soon goes awry: “They had not rolled off many logs, till the boss to them did say / ‘I would have you boys be on your guard, for this jam will soon give way’ / He had no sooner spoke those words, till the jam did break and go / And carried off six youthful boys, with foreman Young Monroe.” The raftsmen die and the community grieves the loss, but not so much as “a maid from Saginaw” who soon dies of a broken heart: “And her last request was to be laid by the side / Of her raftsman, Young Monroe.”

Another popular Wisconsin River ballad, “On the Banks of the Little Eau Pleine,” resembles “The Jam on Geary’s Rock.” A young schoolteacher grieves when she learns that the raftsman Johnny Murphy, her lover, has drowned in the Wisconsin Dells. She is so distraught she vows to run away from the Mississippi Valley to Europe: “But I’ll never forget you Johnny Murphy / Nor the banks of the Little Eau Pleine.”

“The Fatal Oak” tells the true story of the 1870 drowning deaths of three young Kickapoo Valley raftsmen, Frank Lawton, Aaron Hatfield, and Jim Roberts: “‘Tis a mournful story I relate / Of three young men, who met their fate / While folded in the

arms of sleep / They sank beneath the billows deep.” After rafting their timber down the Kickapoo and Wisconsin Rivers to the Mississippi River juncture, the men tied up to a huge old oak tree: “When night came on they made for shore / Where they had often stayed before / ’Neath the same oak which had been their stake / They went to sleep, no more to wake.” Next morning, “with a crash, down came the oak,” sinking the raft and drowning three raftsmen as their captain cried, “Awake my boys or you must die.” The captain and one raftsman survived to tell the story to “kindred friends whose hearts were broke / By the sudden fall of the fatal oak.”

Finally, in “Jack Haggerty” (a song also known as “The Flat River Girl”), the listener meets “a heart-broken raftsman” who has fallen for a “dear little lassie … a blacksmith’s daughter on the Flat River.” The song begins, “My occupation is raftsman when the white waters roll / My name is engraved on the rocks and sand shores / Through shabbers and housetops I’m known of renown / And they call me Jack Haggerty, the pride of the town.” Unfortunately, Jack’s deep love is foiled by the Flat River girl’s meddling mother. This evil woman “caused her to leave me” and “cast off the riggin’ that God would soon tie / And … left me to wander till the day that I die.” The song ends with Jack imploring his fellow river men:

So come, all you bold raftsmen with hearts stout and true
Don’t depend on the women, you’re beat if you do
For when you meet one with a dark chestnut curl
Oh, just remember Jack Haggerty and his Flat River girl.

The folksongs of the Mississippi Valley boatmen help us understand both historic and mythic rivermen. “Jack Haggerty,” “The Jam on Geary’s Rock,” “On the Banks of the Little Eau Pleine,” and “The Fatal Oak” reflect the loneliness and dangers facing Mississippi Valley lumber and log raftsmen. Rivermen

who sang the “Onconstant Lover” and “The Fatal Oak” had experienced hard work, solitude, and tragedy in their lives. Yet songs like “Neal Hornback” and “One-Eyed Riley” show the happy-go-lucky side of riverboating—drinking, gambling, lovers, and good times. Just as important, all of the songs show romanticization of brave, independent boatmen who leave the mundane lifestyle on shore to sail the western rivers in search of wealth, fun, and adventure.

Folklore does (and always will) reflect the most important values, ideals, concerns, and tensions of the American people. The combined lore of Mississippi River Valley folk—their food and workways, rituals and superstitions, Alligator Horse folk heroes, cracker and African-American folk culture, and river songs—reveals a great deal about early American civilization. Folkways mirror what Turner describes as the American frontier character: coarse, egalitarian, itinerant, patriotic, pragmatic, innovative, violent, anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian, nostalgic, religious, courageous, hard-working, and freedom-loving. With great strengths and failings, this was the exceptional character of the Mississippi Valley heartland folk.137