areas. Davis found time to visit the hamlet, the crossroads, and the
solitary farmer on the hillside. He could launch a fiery tirade before a
village gathering or he could swap homey tales over the fence with a dirt
farmer. He was the first Arkansas politician to make extensive use of
printed speeches, sending out 125,000 in the 1900 campaign alone. 24

Davis's long-time personal secretary believed the redneck leader
brought a political revolution to Arkansas. He destroyed the old order
by sending the older and long respected leadership into political limbo.
He brought new men to Arkansas's congressional delegation, into the
courts, and into state and local offices. By championing the primary
system and appealing directly to the masses, he bypassed those in estab-
lished positions of authority. Thriving on controversy and emotional
issues he divided the party into factions that reached down into the
county and city level. 25

Governor George Donaghey expressed a similar view of Davis's im-
 pact on the state's political system. He wrote of the overthrow of the
aristocratic dynasty by the democratic forces of Jeff Davis. In Donaghey's
view the aristocrats dominated state politics before 1900. No one dared
seek office without the consent of the inner clique which held a strangle-
hold on the state's government. Voters who thought they had some voice
in the affairs of state really only chose between leaders within the ap-
proved circle. Nearly every newspaper in Arkansas supported the system
and crushed all those who ventured an attack upon the establishment. 26

Jeff Davis was a demagogue. His whole career seems to match the
common stereotype. But his sound and fury was not without significance.
A whole new breed of politicians came to power and with them a new
issue — consciousness. The Democratic party divided into Davis and
anti-Davis factions. New issues and new personalities offered the voter a
significant choice at primary elections or at the least an exciting spectacle.
His emergence brought a greater measure of democracy into Arkansas
politics. Most of all, he became for the rural folk a tribune of the people,
one whose whole heart, soul, and mind was dedicated to the one-gallus
fellow who lived up the forks of the creek.

24 Jacobson, The Life Story of Jeff Davis, 61, 149-150.
25 Ibid., 176.
26 George W. Donaghey, Building a State Capitol (Little Rock, 1937), 39-43.

"On a Slow Train Through Arkansaw"
—The Negative Image of Arkansas
in the Early Twentieth Century

By LEE A. DEW*

Kentucky Wesleyan College

The scene is one of the early episodes of the popular television comedy
"The Beverly Hillbillies." Jed has just sold the farm to the oil company
for a vast sum, and Cousin Pearl is trying to persuade him to move to
California.

"Why?" Jed asks.

"Just look around," Cousin Pearl replies. "You are living in a one-
room cabin made out of logs, you cook on a wood-burning stove, you
keep warm with a fireplace. It's a quarter-mile to the spring for water
and a hundred feet down the path to the outhouse. You are living on
cornbread, wild meat, and garden truck. You've got no electricity, no
refrigeration, no telephone, and you ask why you ought to move?"

Jed reflects on this for a minute, then replies: "Yep, you're right. A
man would be a durn fool to leave all this."

Jed Clampett and his idealized clan, along with the nubile wenches
of "Petticoat Junction" and the hick of "Green Acres" were the
1960s versions of comic characters that have been around for a long time.
Earlier there was Bob Burns of Van Buren, Arkansas, who played a
strange musical instrument that gave its name to a World War II rocket
launcher — the "Bazooka," and the proprietors of the Jot-em-Down

*The author is chairman of the Department of History at Kentucky Wesleyan College,
Owensboro. This paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Arkansas Historical
ARKANSAS HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

Store, Lum and Abner, who inhabited a pre-industrial arcadia atop a mountain in the state of Arkansas.

While the quaint and archaic rural type, out of step and naive in the modern world, has been a stock figure of comedy since the days of the Romans and before, Arkansas, in the public mind at least, seemed particularly to be inhabited by such characters. Arkansas developed a reputation for recalcitrant backwardness and resistance to change which characterized its image throughout much of this century. Jed Clampett represented the comic side of this concept — Orval Faubus defying the Supreme Court to block integration at Central High School in Little Rock symbolized a more realistic, ominous aspect of a reactionary psychology which seemed to see change as negative and modernity as threatening.

Jed’s contentment with his preindustrial environment in the hills was the modern equivalent of the early pioneer’s rule of thumb — when the country got crowded enough that you could see the smoke from your neighbor’s chimney it was time to move on. Arcadia lay away from the corrupting influence of man and all his works. Henry David Thoreau, sitting in his cabin on Walden Pond and cursing the sight of locomotive smoke on the horizon, verbalized in concrete terms the fear and suspicion of those who saw in the industrial revolution ominous and threatening implications for the quality of life, just as much earlier the satirical poet Juvenal condemned the crowds, crime, and pollution of Rome.

While Thoreau attacked the locomotive and all it symbolized and saw only gloom and decline in its coming, most Americans seized upon the new instruments of technology as idols and fell to worshipping the products of the industrial state. One of the main manifestations of the dominance of technology on the national psyche was the emergence of the dogma that all who do not conform to the social mores of the industrial society are figures of contempt, or derision, or, in a somewhat kinder vein, of comedy. Yet this comedy walks a thin line between laughter and scorn. We could laugh at Jed Clampett’s antics, yet we would not really have wanted him for a next-door neighbor and we surely would not have wanted our daughter to marry his illiterate, moronic nephew Jethro Bodine.

NEGATIVE IMAGE OF ARKANSAS IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY

This comic ridicule also may contain an element of envy. Caught up in our technological world, scurrying along in our rat race, we may subconsciously (or even at times with great conscious awareness) envy the repudiation of modernity reflected by these comic figures. While we would not visit our banker in tattered hat and work clothing, we sometimes perhaps think, “Why not?” Jed Clampett was not as ridiculous a figure as was Banker Drysdale.

It is in this context that Thomas W. Jackson’s book, On a Slow Train Through Arkansas, becomes more than just a quaint document of folklore but a fundamental expression of the impact of technology on early twentieth century America. The book, privately printed and published in 1903, was “sent post paid to any address on receipt of 25 cents.” It was an eclectic volume; the subtitle promising “funny railroad stories — sayings of the Southern darkies — all the best minstrel jokes of the day.” A phenomenal success, it went through several printings and became the pattern for other books by the same author and for numerous imitators. Regional ethnic humor became “in.”

Jackson’s railroad stories were typical of the humor of the turn of the century: Examples — a lady complained to the conductor because the train moved so slowly. “Conductor, can’t this train make any better time than this?” He said, ‘If you ain’t satisfied with this train, you can get off and walk.’ She said she would, only her folks didn’t expect her ’til the train got there.” Or, “They stopped so often one of the passengers tried to commit suicide. He ran ahead for half a mile, laid down on the track, but he starved to death before the train got there.”

Some of the stories were pretty far-fetched for inclusion as railroad humor:

Have you noticed the number of railroad accidents that have happened lately? Just the other night at a wedding it so happened that Johnny Carr was going to be married to a young lady of the same name. Just as the preacher was pronouncing the ceremony a rifle ball came through the window, struck the preacher

Thomas W. Jackson, On a Slow Train Through Arkansas (Chicago, 1903).
Ibid., 5, 7.
Ibid., 11.
in the breast and killed him.

Well, what has that got to do with a railroad accident?

They say he was killed while coupling cars!

Other stories recognized the important position held by skilled and learned men in the society of Arkansas: “I stopped at a place where there was one doctor, two shoe makers, and a blacksmith. The doctor killed a man. They didn’t want to be without a doctor, so they hung one of the shoe makers.” There are a lot of rural communities that might make that same choice today!

Other stories dealt with prevailing attitudes toward Jews, Negroes, traveling salesmen, preachers, and other stock comic figures, but most of the book dealt in one way or other with the railroads and with the curiosities to be found in the state of Arkansas.

Imitators were quick to capitalize on Jackson’s success. Marion Hughes of Muskogee, I. T., published Three Years in Arkansas: Beats all Books You Ever Saw with the entire title printed as a rebus puzzle. This work also was available in paperback for twenty-five cents. Here, too, the railroad was the butt of many of the stories, the best of which dealt with the old mountaineer who owned a farm through which the railroad was built:

He stood it pretty well until the track was completed, and the freight train ran through on the line, then he and the old woman and the barefooted girls gathered up what they could carry, and called the dogs, and left the old farm... double quick... As they passed one of the neighbors, he tried to get them to go back..., but the old man said no, that the cars would kill every one of them. When the farmer said “the train that just went through didn’t hurt any of you, did it?” “No,” said the old man, “it went endways, if it had gone through sideways it would have wiped us all off the face of the earth.”

This is the classic confrontation — innocence against technology;

Li’l Abner confronting the Slobbovians, Jed Clampett frustrating the Drysdales, or, in a more contemporary context, the earthlings encountering the extra-terrestrials in their flying saucers.

Often the villain is recognizable. Charles H. Hibler, in Down in Arkansas, published in 1911, pokes fun at “a party of gentlemen representative of culture, capital and avoidiposis — an educated Bostonian, a Philadelphia lawyer, and an obese spectator from Kansas City, “all representatives of the real owners of a certain railroad, the bondholders in Holland.”

Much of the “Arkansas” humor and satire of the early 1900s was directed as much against “outsiders” as Arkansans. Stock figures included merchants (especially Jews), traveling salesmen, lawyers (all of whom seem to have come from Philadelphia) and “capitalists,” a generic term which apparently included everyone unsuspecting enough to have bought stock in an Arkansas enterprise. The natives might be not-too-bright and be overly addicted to telling tall tales and drinking moonshine, but the out-of-state characters come across as being avaricious and unprincipled — much the same sort of stereotype which the “muckraking” literature of the early twentieth century found in control of the great corporations, railways, and other “trusts” which were soon to come under general attack.

Arkansas in 1900 was a rural state. In fact it might even be termed a virgin state, since the census listed it as having 84 percent timberland. Although this vast resource was being cut over at a rapid rate, with small farms then occupying the cut-over regions, the main fact of Arkansas’s economic life at the turn of the century was the presence of the great forests.

With a population of 1,311,564 in 1900, Arkansas was not a large state, although proportionately it was larger than now, as it had nearly twice as many members of Congress in 1900 than in 1979. Its population lived on farms or in small towns — only four cities having a population of 8,000 or more at the birth of the new century.

Charles H. R. Hibler, Down in Arkansas (Kansas City, Mo., 1911), 7.

Most Arkansans made their living by agriculture, and most farmers were subsistence growers, consuming what they raised and selling surpluses, if any, in the frontier tradition. In parts of the state, especially those areas bordering the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers, commercial cotton agriculture was the rule, with sharecropping the primary means of labor. But the cotton planter was the exception, and most Arkansas farmers were the "scratch-gravel" kind, fiercely proud of their land and their independence, and not "beholding" to anyone. Most looked upon those who labored for wages as little better than sharecroppers.

Some Arkansans, however, fell into the impersonal census category of "employees." The state had a total of 1,746 "manufacturing establishments" in 1900, of which 186 were located in the four "cities" of Little Rock, Fort Smith, Hot Springs, and Pine Bluff, and the remaining 1,560 in "rural" areas. Not surprisingly lumber and timber products led the list of manufactured items, followed by cottonseed oil and cake, and flour and gist products. Some 31,525 persons were employed in the state's industries, at an average annual wage of $323.00. Significantly, a high proportion of the work force was adult males, since the timber industry demanded manpower and few women and children were employed in the woods. The average wage, incidentally, figures out to about $6.50 per week.8

Figures such as these are meaningless unless some comparison can be made. Georgia, one of the more industrialized of the former Confederate states, had a population of 2,216,331 in 1900, and boasted seven cities of 8,000 or more. The state's 3,015 manufacturing establishments equalled nearly twice those of Arkansas. More factories were in urban areas—534, as compared to 2,481 in rural communities. The main industries were cotton goods, lumber and timber products, and turpentine and resins. The average wage for all workers in Georgia, however, was only $240 per year, compared to Arkansas's $323. Furthermore, nearly one-fourth of the cotton textile workers of Georgia in 1900 were children under the age of sixteen years, and their average wage was only $195 per year, less than $4 per week. Some 4,500 children were listed as factory workers in Georgia in 1900, while Arkansas had only 618 thus employed.9

When compared to a highly urbanized, industrialized state such as Massachusetts, both Arkansas and Georgia reflect a technological lag of substantial proportions. Massachusetts, with a population of 2,805,346, had fifty-six cities of more than 8,000 population, and was listed by the census as predominantly urban. Its main manufactured products were boots and shoes, cotton goods, and foundry and machine shop products, and its factory workers received an average wage of $446 per year. Only some 3 percent of the work force was under the age of sixteen.10

Women, however, comprised nearly one-third of the work force of Massachusetts, as well as a substantial proportion (more than 10,000) in Georgia, while in Arkansas more than 90 percent of the work force was made up of males over sixteen.11 Thus in Arkansas the man remained the primary economic contributor to the family welfare, while in more technologically developed states women and children were more involved in family breadwinning. This, of course, does not mean that children did not work in Arkansas, on the contrary it reflects only the predominantly rural character of the state, where on the farm, everyone contributed his labor for the general welfare. It demonstrates, too, the impact of the timbering industry, in which male employees often worked far from home and lived for long periods of time away from their families in the monastic seclusion of the timber camps.

Another way of measuring the impact of technology is the increased reliance upon mechanical power as compared to human muscle in the production of goods. The number of motors in use to power industrial or manufacturing machinery is an indicator of the level of modernity in factory production. In 1900 Arkansas counted 1,584 steam engines (apart from railroad locomotives), compared to 2,187 for Georgia and nearly 6,500 for Massachusetts. Arkansas reported 39 gasoline engines in industrial use, compared with 45 for Georgia and 486 for the Bay State. Only 26 water wheels turned in Arkansas, compared to Georgia's 249 and 2,089 in Massachusetts. Seventeen electric industrial motors were at work.

---

9 Thirteenth Census: 1910, pp. 315-316; Manufactures, pp. 169-175.
11 Manufactures, 37, 169, 417.
in Arkansas in 1900, while Georgia counted 45 and Massachusetts reported 823. The industry of Arkansas was less mechanized, there were few assembly lines, and more applications of human muscle in the sawmills, the oil mills, and the flour mills which transformed the forests and crops of Arkansas into consumer goods.

Even Arkansas, however, was caught up in the technological boom of the early years of the twentieth century. By 1905 manufacturing was up 9.29 percent over 1900, while invested capital increased by 82.4 percent. Wages rose 42.8 percent during the period while the value of products increased by 35 percent. But if industry increased in Arkansas during the decade after 1900, the small farmer class also expanded. The number of farms multiplied by 20 percent between 1900 and 1910. Much of this increase was due to the opening up of new agricultural areas by the cutting of forests and building of levees and drainage canals. Railroads were active in bringing land seekers into the state, and special “immigrant trains” were common.

More importantly, perhaps, the percentage of farms entailed by mortgages increased by 7.1 percent during this decade, and the number of farms operated by their owners dropped by 4.6 percent. By 1910 half of the farms in Arkansas were operated by tenants.

It was still easy to become a farmer, in the old frontier tradition. The average value of farm land in Arkansas in 1910 was $14.13 per acre. This was higher than in Georgia, where the average price was $13.74, but this was offset somewhat by the fact that the best land in Georgia averaged more than $50.00 per acre. These figures compare with an average of $36.69 per acre in land-scarce Massachusetts and $62.36 per acre in cornbelt Indiana.

So, although industry was increasing in Arkansas in the early years of the century, the state was still predominantly preindustrial in its economic development. The small family farm was still regarded by most Arksans as an achievable economic goal, and land ownership was the preeminent status symbol. The forty-acre farm was sufficient to support a family adequately, and this acreage was the most common offering of land brokers and timber companies. In the cotton areas forty acres was the maximum a family could reasonably be expected to plant and pick, and in the hill country this size farm could be worked with a single horse or mule — a factor of prime importance in a time when animal power was the primary cost factor in subsistence agriculture.

Arkansas epitomized the preindustrial society — a society which had since the beginning of time been characterized by one primary fact of economic life, its essential self-sufficiency. Its life style reflected a commonly-held view that a man ought to be content with the fruits of his own labor and not have to sell that labor in trade for another’s goods.

The preindustrial society had many weaknesses, chiefly those of parochialism and isolation. Anti-intellectualism was, and remains today, one of the chief responses of any group who feels at odds with ideas threatening its sense of community. This anti-intellectualism expressed itself in resistance to compulsory education and in refusals to spend tax money for high schools — it was not until 1909 that the state legislature authorized the building of four regional boarding high schools for rural youth. It was expressed, too, in religion, with every new technological device from the locomotive to the saxophone being labeled a “tool of the devil.”

But there were also positive aspects to the life of the Arkansas dirt farmer. His was a value system which stressed the family and an identity with home, place, and kin. His religion was enthusiastic, if not fashionable, and played an important role in his life. The church was often the cement binding rural communities together in social fellowship and it was the center for parties, gossip, courtship, and business as well as religious expression.

Most significantly, however, the lifestyle of the subsistence farmer gave him an independence of spirit that was to be an increasingly scarce commodity in the later years of the twentieth century. The idea of self-reliance, tempered with the leaven of mutual cooperation, could imbue a poor man with a sense of pride and self-reliance which beggared a rich
man who was a slave to others. Jed Clampett thought himself rich, even when he was poor. The one-gallus hillbilly who responded to no factory whistle, who punched no time clock, who met no deadlines, may have been much richer in spirit than the people who could afford the "two bits" to read about him in Jackson's book.

Today the hillbilly's virtues seem unattainable dreams to most Americans. The majority of us have never lived in an environment where we did not have to lock the door, set the alarm clock, or pay the utility bills. Today, one's family experience may likely be the payment of child support or alimony, and grandparents are increasingly warehoused and forgotten.

Today's comic figures are no longer the preindustrial types like the hillbilly. Rather they are what we might call technological victims. They include the proletariat — "Fonzie" of "Good Times," "Welcome Back, Kotter," and "LaVerne and Shirley"; the aged — "Archie Bunker," "Chico and The Man," "Fish"; ethnic; Negroes; one-parent families; homosexuals; and other identifiable minorities including the economically deprived.

Unlike the hillbilly character there is often little sense of social positivism in the modern comic figure. Jed Clampett's honesty, loyalty, family stability and sense of personal worth were never in doubt. A poor Jed Clampett was happier than a pensioned Mr. Fish, and certainly far more well-adjusted than the neurotic inmates of the 4077th M*A*S*H.

In the idealistic 1960s it became "trendy" among some groups to attempt a "post-technological" society. The commune movement called young idealists to repudiate the materialism of technology and to return to a simpler life style dedicated, in part at least, to the reestablishment of the social characteristics of the preindustrial state. These movements failed, almost without exception. The children of the technocrats cannot repudiate technology. The slow train through Arkansas has become the supersonic jet to oblivion, and narcotics, graffiti, alcohol, and terrorism seem well on their way to replacing laughter as a means of social and economic criticism.

But perhaps there are still lessons to be learned from the past, a philosophic perspective that can be maintained. Anyone who has sat nervously on an airplane in a holding pattern sweating out a tight connection might do well to remember the Arkansas railroad described by Irvin S. Cobb: It seems that there was a traveling salesman who often had to ride on a little Arkansas branch line which was never even close to the advertised schedule. One afternoon, to his amazement, the train arrived at its destination right on the minute. The salesman hailed the conductor and offered him a cigar, saying: "Accept this with my compliments."

"Why?" asked the conductor.

"Because I've been riding this train for twelve years and this is the first time you have been on time," replied the drummer.

"Well, mister," the conductor responded, "that looks like a mighty good cigar, but I can't take nothin' on false pretenses. To tell you the truth, this ain't today's train, this is yesterday's train.""17

---

17Irvin S. Cobb, Many Laughs for Many Days (New York, 1925), 25.