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MISCELLANY

REDNECK: A NEW DISCOVERY

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Political elections in the United States have long helped to shape the American language, as anyone who now knows the difference between a hanging chad and a dimpled chad can testify.¹ Campaign mud slinging in particular has unexpectedly transformed the meanings of several of our popular epithets, especially *wool hat* and *redneck*. *Wool hat* originated shortly after the American Revolution to describe “a yokel or rustic” (*DAHP* 1951). This derisive term, however, did not gain political currency until the 1830s, when members of the Whig Party, in an effort to discredit their opponents, employed the term to ridicule the Democrats’ constituency of small merchants, yeoman farmers, and immigrant workers. In 1830, for example, a Philadelphia newspaper lampooned President Andrew Jackson’s supporters by characterizing them as “the rowdies, the wool hats, the filthy mechanics, &c.” (*DAHP*).

Wool hat resurfaced during the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century, primarily in South Carolina and Georgia, where, according to historian Barton C. Shaw (1984), farmers adopted the term as “an emblem of pride” (1) to describe their own political allegiances. “The hard-fisted yeomanry have a voice,” proclaimed a South Carolina populist in 1882. “The ‘wool-hat’ crowd are in a majority and they are opposed to *class* and *monopoly*” (emphasis in original; Ford 1984, 313). During the first half of the twentieth century, small farmers and textile workers who supported Southern demagogues Benjamin R. “Pitchfork Ben” Tillman and Eugene Talmadge also proudly identified themselves as “wool hats” and “wool hat boys” (Huber 1992, 117).

Southern politics has also shaped the history of the word *redneck*. According to the *OED2* (1989), the first definitive example of *redneck* to describe rural white laborers of the American South dates to 1893: “*Red-neck* . . . [is] a name applied by the better class of people to the poorer inhabitants of the rural districts” (Shands 1893, 53).² But during the 1890s, *redneck* also entered the political discourse of Mississippi when Democrats used it to denigrate farmers within their party who supported populist reforms (Ferguson 1952, 519).

Recently, we uncovered an even earlier citation of *redneck*, used in a political context, buried in the pages of the *Pontotoc Democrat*. In 1891, Pontotoc, a small up-country town in northern Mississippi (approximately 20 miles west of Tupelo), was the scene of a hotly contested election for state representative. By then, many of the state's small planters and landholding farmers within the Democratic Party had joined the Southern Farmers' Alliance, an organization that supported railroad regulation, banking and currency reforms, and other political measures designed to provide relief to beleaguered farmers. Across Mississippi, Alliance members were trying to wrest political control from Bourbon Democrats, mostly wealthy Delta planters and business leaders, who dominated the state's Democratic Party (Kirwan 1951, 85–102).

On 13 August 1891, an unknown writer urged rural residents to vote in the upcoming election for state representative by publishing the following notice in the *Pontotoc Democrat*. His declaration also served as a warning to Bourbon Democrats that underrepresented farmers in the district would soon make themselves heard:

Primary on the 25th.

And the "rednecks" will be there.

And the "Yaller-heels" will be there, also.

And the "hayseeds" and "gray dillers," they'll be there, too.

And the "subordinates" and "subalterns" will be there to rebuke their slanderers and traducers.

And the men who pay ten, twenty, thirty, etc. etc. per cent on borrowed money will be on hand, and they'll remember it, too.

And they'll vote for their principles, and their wives and children on that day.

For on that day they'll vote for the men who will stand by [Frank] Burkitt, [Ethelbert] Barksdale, subtreasury and all.

The writer employed several slurs commonly used by Bourbon Democrats to disparage reform-minded farmers, including *redneck* and *hayseed* (Ferguson 1952, 519). His use of quotation marks around these words, however, strongly suggests his deliberate manipulation of their meanings. He offered *redneck* and *hayseed* not as epithets but as badges of class pride for his county's populist voters. Furthermore, he provided no definitions of these terms, which indicates that they were already familiar words in the vernacular of northern Mississippi.

As far as we know, this 1891 election notice in the *Pontotoc Democrat* contains the earliest printed usage of *redneck* to denote a Southern white farmer or rural laborer. Additionally, it appears that the turbulent political climate of the 1890s led some Mississippi populists to redefine the word *redneck* to mean something other than merely a class epithet. This example demonstrates that, as early as 1891, *redneck* was already being transformed into a marker of solidarity among farmers dissatisfied with the political status quo of the New South.³

NOTES

1. For more on *chad*, hanging, dimpled, or otherwise, see last issue's installment of "Among the New Words" (Glowka et al. 2001, 299-302).
2. According to the *OED2* (1989), *Red Necks* first appeared in American print in a Southern travel book, which describes it as the "name bestowed upon the Presbyterians in Fayetteville [Georgia]" (Royall 1830-31, 1: 148). The connection between this use of *Red Neck* as a religious slur and its more familiar use as a class slur to disparage poor rural white Southerners remains somewhat tenuous. But it may be that since many Presbyterians in the antebellum South were struggling white farmers of Scots-Irish descent, *Red Neck* also connoted their impoverished rural circumstances.
3. Indeed, by 1910, the political supporters of the rabble-rousing Mississippi segregationist James K. Vardaman—chiefly white small farmers and industrial workers—began to describe themselves proudly as "rednecks," even to the point of wearing red neckerchiefs to political rallies and picnics (Kirwan 1951, 212; Ferguson 1952, 617). For examples of the further redefinition of *redneck* as a regional badge of class identity, see also Huber 1994; 1995, 156-61.

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AN UPLIFTING ORIGIN OF 86

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In the popular television series *Get Smart* (1965–70), the bumbling hero Maxwell Smart, played by actor Don Adams, was known in part by his number, namely, as Agent 86. Presumably, the numerical designation was meant to parody Agent 007, the hero of the James Bond spy movies. But why Agent 86? Wouldn't virtually any number have served the same purpose? The answer lies in the slang meaning of 86.

Reported in most late-twentieth-century American slang dictionaries, *eighty-six* is listed as a term used initially in restaurants and bars. There appear to be two different meanings of the term (Lighter 1994, 700). The first refers to soda fountains or restaurant lingo, where the term meant that a particular item was no longer available. Typically cooks in the kitchen would place an 86 on a blackboard next to an entree to signal the wait staff that they should not accept any more orders for that item. The second meaning has to do with designating an unwelcome customer, especially in bars. In this second usage, the term typically referred to ejecting a customer, possible because he was a problem of some kind—either he was on the verge of becoming drunk (and disorderly) or, perhaps, his credit was deemed not sufficient to pay the bill.