

Cracker and Hoosier

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IT IS DOUBTFUL TO THE POINT of risibility whether anyone ever addressed Kemp Malone as a *cracker*. As a native Mississippian, he was not entitled to the appellation, even in its broadest sense; when he was a student at Emory, his contemporaries knew too well the social inferences of the term; in academe, he was too intimately associated with early Germanic legend for his colleagues to think of him in terms of a Southern byword. Nevertheless, his sensitivity to words and their implications was such that it is inconceivable that he never speculated about *cracker*. So it is fitting that some further speculations, based this time on systematic data, should be a part of a memorial to a distinguished fellow Southerner, and a professional and personal friend.¹

To most outlanders from the Northern and Western states, the term *cracker* is at worst a humorous designation for certain Southerners, usually rural ones and most particularly Georgians. Even in Georgia, the term often has an aura of innocence, if not of pride. For instance, the local professional baseball team in Atlanta was cheered as the *Crackers* until farsighted entrepreneurs kidnapped the sometime Boston *Braves* (and their designation) from Milwaukee. But even in investigations conducted during the past few years there is evidence of derogatory overtones, as indeed there are for the comparable designation *hoosier*,² which will also be discussed.

For all the regional linguistic atlases in North America, fieldworkers have systematically investigated the pejorative names for rustics, chiefly

¹ This study is based on the field records for the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States, now being edited at the University of Chicago and the Illinois Institute of Technology. They have been used with the permission of the American Council of Learned Societies, sponsor of the original project of a linguistic atlas of the United States and Canada.

² For an earlier study of *hoosier*, see Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "Word Magic, or Would You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Hoosier?" *Indiana English Journal* 2 (1967), 1-7. Many of the popular designations for inhabitants of various states were originally appropriate, such as *Tar Heel* (North Carolina) in the South, *Wolverine* (Michigan), *Badger* (Wisconsin), and *Sucker* (Illinois) in the Middle West. In New England, *Nutmeg* (Connecticut) reflects the prowess of its peddlers of wooden nutmegs — acumen their descendants now practice in imposing exorbitant prices for real estate on corporate executives who wish to avoid robbery, mayhem, rape, confiscatory taxation and other fringe benefits of Mayor Lindsay's administration in New York City.

farmers.³ In addition, the worksheets for the South Atlantic States⁴ called for the designations for poor whites found in the speech of other whites and in that of Negroes. Since in the South the same names are often applied to rustics and poor whites, all three sets of responses need to be examined.

In evaluating the results of field investigation, especially under the conditions prevailing for the American regional atlases, one can never disregard differences among field workers.⁵ The principal differences to be taken into account in this study are those between Guy S. Lowman, Jr., field worker in the area from 1933 until his death in 1941, and Raven I. McDavid, Jr., field worker thereafter.⁶ These differences arise from three possible causes: (1) relative interest in a particular item; (2) rapport with the informants on potentially treacherous items; (3) the number of responses recorded from free conversation. For whatever reasons, Lowman has relatively few synonyms, and almost no conversational responses for these items in the worksheets; in North Carolina he has almost no responses for "rustic" in the coastal plain and very few for "poor white" in the uplands. McDavid, on the other hand, generously

³ An interesting regional survey is Harold B. Allen, "Pejorative Terms for Midwest Farmers," *American Speech* 33 (1958), 260-65. It was originally intended to make a comparable study for the Atlantic Seaboard; however, since the collection of Allen's field records, slightly more than 200, yielded 68 such designations, with another 18 in the supplementary checklists, it was evident that there would not be time to make a serious analysis of the more than 1,500 records that would have to be consulted. True, there would be diminishing returns in widely distributed terms, but there is a constant possibility of individual and local epithets, especially in the small rural communities in the South.

⁴ As elsewhere, the term *worksheets* is applied to an instrument for field interviewing; *checklists*, such as those used by Allen, are printed from forms to be filled out by the informant. See A. L. Davis, "A Word Atlas of the Great Lakes Region," (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1949). The materials for the Atlantic Seaboard consist of field records alone.

⁵ It has been suggested that superior results might be achieved by a rigidly structured questionnaire, with a prescribed order of questioning and an unalterable phraseology for each question, such as that in Harold Orton's *Survey of English Dialects* (1962-71). Without first-hand knowledge of the English scene, but with a tolerable experience in North America, we may demur that (1) social mobility has made Americans, in general, self-conscious about the humbler side of their linguistic behavior, and uneasy over the possibility of seeming uneducated or rustic; (2) a rigid ordering of questions makes informants suspicious that they are being subjected to an "intelligence test," so that they become guarded in their responses. For sensitive aspects of language, including both grammar and the vocabulary of social relations, indirection seems the better policy. In fact, H. Rex Wilson, director of the Dialect Survey of the Maritime Provinces of Canada, has suggested that it may be more profitable to allow ample opportunity for conversation and to assume that most of the grammatical items will appear on tape. This, essentially, was the practice of Raven I. McDavid, Jr., following the instructions of Bernard Bloch.

⁶ Recent field records by Gerald Udell, Lee Pederson, Raymond O'Cain, and Pederson's students were taped and independently transcribed by McDavid.

recorded synonyms and conversational responses for such items, not only in the South but in Upstate New York. However, these differences do not seem to affect the general regional distribution of *cracker* and its congeners.

As already indicated, for this paper the occurrences of *cracker* and of *hoosier* have been taken into account, regardless of the item for which they were elicited. The justification for this decision – borne out by some of the comments recorded from informants – comes from the fact that, until recently, the South was primarily rural, with a strongly marked class structure. Planters, however remote from centers of culture, were not likely to be grouped with the rustics. And, conversely, there are few Southern terms for urban poor whites: *factory people*, *mill hands*, *mill people*, and *lintheads*, all for textile workers, and the Charleston *wharfingers* for dockers. Of course, some terms such as *backwoodsman* are almost never applied to the poor whites – often described as whites who did not own slaves but lived in areas dominated by slaveowners – and *croppers*, *sharecroppers*, *renters*, and *tenants* would be applied only to the dependent poor whites, for the backwoods people, however impoverished, normally tried to obtain title to their own lands. And *poor buckra* (*buckra* being of African origin) is never applied to the independent rustic, only to the poor white. But though *cracker* was elicited somewhat oftener with reference to poor whites, and *hoosier* with reference to the isolated rustics, especially the mountaineers, both are found referring to both groups.

Besides the simple *cracker*, a number of compounds are found in the South: *backwoods cracker*, *common cracker*,⁸ *country cracker*, *cow cracker*, *Florida cracker*, *Georgia cracker*, *North Carolina cracker*, *poor cracker*, *poor white cracker*, *soda cracker*, *town cracker*,⁹ *white cracker*, and *white soda cracker*.¹⁰ Further north there are four instances of *cracker* in Upstate New York, all used in conversation about the South (one about Georgia), and one in Vermont, along with the compound *Vermont cracker*. There is no apparent reason why the Vermont informant should have used these forms.

⁷ As a sixth-generation Up-Country South Carolinian, McDavid was aware of the social implication of these terms, and as a sometime historian was interested in exploring them (conversely, Lowman showed greater interest and skill in dealing with the adjectives describing physical and mental states). Moreover, he had a special advantage in that his father, for 30 years active in state politics, provided not only a network of local contacts but a model of behavior to emulate in dealing with relatively unsophisticated informants.

⁸ As is well known, *common*, *ordinary*, and *plain people* are terms often derogatory in the South. *Common* apparently still has some derogatory significance in Britain; see its use in John Braine's *Stay with Me till Morning*.

⁹ A South Carolinian commented that a *cracker* could be from either town or country.

¹⁰ *Soda crackers* (Macon, Georgia) and *white soda crackers* (eastern North Carolina) were reported as disparaging terms used by Negroes.

As the map shows, the Southern examples are mostly from South Carolina and Georgia. There are none from Delaware, Maryland, or Virginia, and only four in eastern North Carolina – one near Raleigh and three between the Roanoke and the Neuse. The heaviest concentration is in the old plantation country of the Lower South, from Georgetown to Savannah. Only in Georgia does it appear in the hills, and there probably through a general association with the state. No examples occur in the North Central States, nor in Allen's material from the Upper Midwest.

Yet *crackers* were once known further north. The earliest *Dictionary of Americanisms* citation, dated 1766, describes them as ruffians infesting the edge of settlement in Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas. The association of the Southern meaning with an earlier significance of "braggart, boaster," dating from Barclay's *Ship of Fools* (1509) is plausible, as any connoisseur of Westerns is aware. This interpretation is reinforced by several comments from informants: "rough, quick to go into anything" (North Carolina); "rude, riotous person" (North Carolina); "uncultured, common" (Georgia). The Up-Country (inland) associations are expressed by cultivated Negro Charlestonians, and by educated informants in Savannah and Darien, Georgia, as well as by a Middle Georgia informant who identified the *crackers* with the teamsters whose oxen hauled hogheads of tobacco to landings on the Savannah River – the original Tobacco Road. The identification is implicit in the *cow cracker* reported by an informant in Camden, South Carolina.¹¹

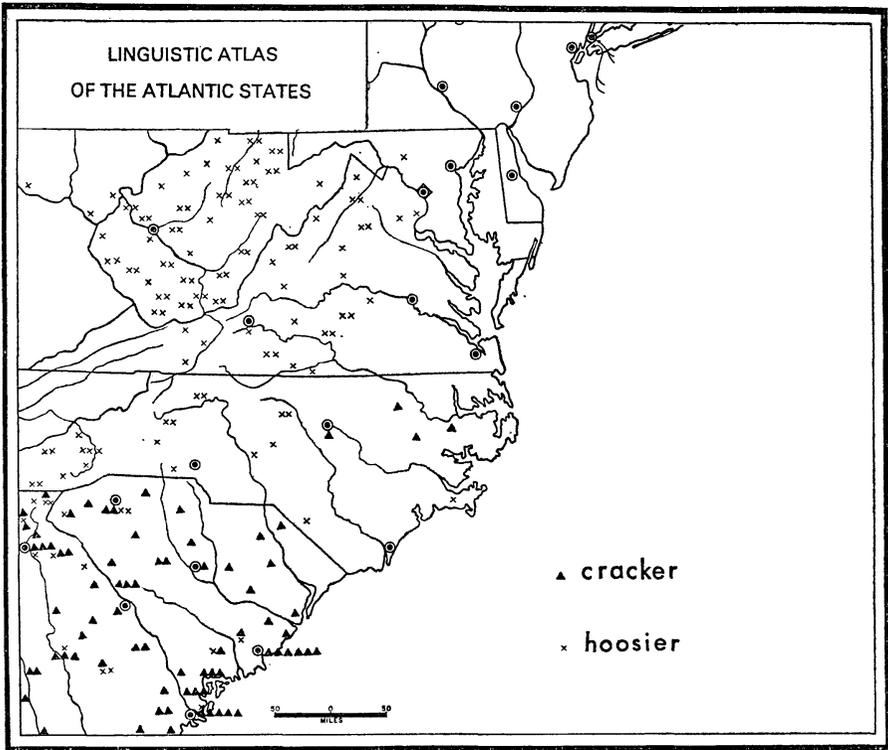
On the other hand, there is evidence of present-day specific identification with Georgia, even to accepting *cracker* as a neutral synonym for *Georgian*. Even some of the Georgians who still identify the term with poor whites do so without rancor. This attitude extends to the poor whites themselves, like the white folk informant near St. Marys, Georgia, who explained that *cracker* is "just what I is." And McDavid noted with amusement that one of his informants in Sylvania (Screven County), Georgia – in addition to using the term freely about his friends and neighbors – introduced him as a "real *cracker*," a term suggesting that he had achieved a satisfactory rapport in the community.¹²

However, *cracker* has undergone little amelioration in Florida. The reason, again, derives from history: after the United States purchased Florida, land-hungry poor whites from Georgia and the Carolinas swarmed across the St. Marys River in such numbers that Georgians note infor-

¹¹ Popular lore, not often recorded in the field records, associates the name with the *cracker* on the end of a bull whip, which helped provide formidable noise when the whip was wielded by a skilled teamster. Though this is not necessarily the ultimate origin, it could have reinforced the currency of the term.

¹² Some weeks after an interview McDavid learned that a Michigan informant had praised him for being "just as *common* as anybody."

mally, “between 1820 and 1830 the population of Florida doubled and the IQ of Georgia trebled.”¹³ A well-to-do informant from Alachua (/ə'lačəwe/ as he pronounced it) County, near Gainesville, said that to him *crackers* were “sorry people I don’t like.” And a descendant of the old Minorcan settlement at St. Augustine referred to *crackers* as poor white small farmers, descended from “immigrants” out of South Carolina and Georgia.



But what happened to *cracker* on the northern fringe of the Southern colonies? Its fate is suggested by the distribution of *hoosier* – often pronounced with a /j/, possibly related to *huge* through a northern British word meaning somebody or something monstrous, and most commonly occurring in the phrase *mountain hoosier*. With its focus in West Virginia, it is very common in the Shenandoah Valley and in the upper Piedmont

¹³ Such observations have been made about the spectacular population growth of other communities and regions. When a Portland booster expatiated on how the population of Oregon had grown during the 1860s, an antinomian reminded him that the Confederate War had provided every incentive for Southern poor whites and Northern draft dodgers to put a wide space between themselves and the theater of operations.

of Virginia (though not in southwest Virginia)¹⁴ and not unknown in the uplands of the Carolinas and Georgia. There is one example from Maryland, near Frederick. The term is rare below the Fall Line – one occurrence in Virginia, one in the North Carolina Scots settlement south of the Cape Fear, two in the pinelands of lower South Carolina, two in a similar community in Georgia, and two in the speech of Negroes in Savannah and Darien.

Like *cracker*, *hoosier* occurs in compounds, but in fewer of them: *backwoods hoosier*, *country hoosier*, and *mountain hoosier*. Even the unmodified *hoosier* is associated with the mountains and with remoteness from civilization. Still more than *cracker*, it connotes uncouthness: “ruffian” (Virginia), “rough class” (Virginia, North Carolina), “rough people” (North Carolina).¹⁵ Interesting are the comments from the Georgia Negroes: the one in Savannah describes a *hoosier* as “just knocking around”; the one in Darien identifies one as a Negro stevedore (*crackers*, it must be remembered, are always whites). Since Darien was originally a Highlander settlement, the term may be old locally: the traditional association with rough strength could have persisted but have been transferred racially.

West of the Appalachians *hoosier* is rare as a derogatory name, though well known as a designation for an Indianian. There are two examples from Ohio (Cleveland, and upriver from Cincinnati), one from Indiana (Tippecanoe County), four from river counties in Illinois (Joe Davies, Hancock, Cass, Massac), and one from Hickman County in the Jackson Purchase of western Kentucky. Allen records one example from a checklist, but does not identify its locality.

Speculation is inevitable, but reinforced by some facts of settlement history. In Maryland and Virginia, the Piedmont was settled by expansion from the coast, before the Ulster Scots pressed southward from Pennsylvania, and the plantation system gradually followed the inland march of settlement; the poor whites who did not enter into the plantation system became known simply as *plain people*. In the Virginia mountains *cracker* competed unsuccessfully with *hoosier*. In South Carolina, on the other hand, the plantations were restricted to a narrow belt of tidewater country till the middle of the eighteenth century. Frontier townships of Ulster Scots and Germans – small farmers, not slaveholders – were established to protect Charleston and the plantations against the marauding Spaniards and Indians. Georgia too was originally a military outpost, which did not permit slavery until fairly late in its

¹⁴ E. Bagby Atwood points out eastern Virginia influence in the southwestern counties. See “Some Eastern Virginia Pronunciation Features,” *English Studies in Honor of James Southall Wilson*, University of Virginia Studies 4 (1951) 111–24.

¹⁵ McDavid recalls that when his mother became irate over the children’s table manners, the most humiliating phrase at her disposal was “You’re eating like a *hoosier*.”

colonial existence (barely four decades elapsed between the founding of Savannah and the Declaration of Independence), and the unglamorous origins of the earliest Georgians no doubt encouraged the application of derisive epithets by the more affluent Charlestonians. In any event, the *cracker* poor white was closer to the principal settlements of the Lower South than he was farther north; when the Ulster Scots migration reached South Carolina, it could have reinforced *cracker* at the expense of *hoosier*. Perhaps documents will yield further evidence; at present the inferences seem reasonable.

A final note: in the North and the Middle West, *hoosier* is generally a neutral term but *cracker* still has overtones of the comic and loutish. Living next to Indiana and brought up next to Georgia – my family being of the stock from which the original *hoosiers* came – I can see no great intellectual or moral difference between the two subspecies of *homo boobensis Americanensis*. Nor are local politicians in Indiana more given to magnanimity and less to speculation than their Georgia counterparts; in fact, there is spectacular evidence to the contrary. But Indiana suffered a massive infusion of European genes in the nineteenth century, particularly of the Germans and German-Swiss; it has, perhaps consequently, developed more industry, more wealth, a more highly touted educational system, and a more adept public relations counsel.¹⁶ Kemp Malone, like his Baltimore neighbor and friend, H. L. Mencken, would probably concede that the accidents of history have not erased the underlying kinship between *cracker* and *hoosier*.

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¹⁶ It would not be surprising if someday the residents of California became proud to be known as *okies*.