

Poor Whites and Rustics¹

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FROM HER CHILDHOOD, Margaret Bryant has been aware of American social classes and of the epithets used to designate them. She grew up in Edgefield County, South Carolina, a meeting ground of three cultures – plantation, small farming, and cotton mill – and often a bellwether in state politics.² As a graduate of Winthrop – the state college for women, founded shortly before she was born – she encountered students from all parts of South Carolina, with their sensibilities and prejudices. Despite her long residence in New York City, she has never lost her Southern sensitivity to social differences and the words reflecting them. Consequently, it is fitting to offer in her honor a discussion of such designations as recorded in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (Kurath *et al.* 1939–43), and the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States* (R. McDavid, *et al.* 1974–).

All of the linguistic atlases in the United States have sought the epithets for persons whose dress and behavior mark them as conspicuously rural. In addition, for the South Atlantic States the investigators sought epithets for poor whites, particularly in communities dominated by the plantation system; of these epithets, informants were asked to indicate which terms were used by whites and which by blacks.³ However, up to now there has been only one general discussion of such names, dealing with the Upper Midwest (Allen 1958, recapitulated in Allen 1973–)⁴ and

¹ Permission to use the materials examined in this study has been given by the American Council of Learned Societies, sponsors of the original scheme for a Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada (which has developed into a series of autonomous regional surveys), by the AMS Press, publishers of the reprinted (1972) *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (Kurath *et al.* 1939–43) and (for the Kentucky records, plus ten in Ohio and three in Ontario) by Albert H. Marckwardt, editor-in-chief of the Linguistic Atlas of the North-Central States (in progress).

² As a result, Edgefield County has provided ten governors, more than elected from any other rural county in America. Two of these have been particularly active in fighting the oligarchy that long dominated the state Democratic party: Benjamin Tillman (1890–1894) and J. Strom Thurmond (1946–50), now senior senator from South Carolina (1955–) and a Republican since 1964.

³ Designations for blacks, also elicited, constitute another problem. Apparently, urban blacks use many of the same epithets for rural blacks that whites use for rural whites.

⁴ Allen's use of *farmer* as his general term is perhaps unfortunate: (1) many of his epithets designate part-time or marginal cultivators; (2) in recent years the Middle Western farmer has competed with the New York banker as a symbol of affluence and power.

two which treat the specific terms *hoosier* and *cracker*, associated primarily with the South and South Midland (R. McDavid 1967, R. and V. McDavid 1973). This study summarizes the findings for the Atlantic Seaboard, from southern New Brunswick to northeastern Florida, plus a number of interviews from Ontario (16), eastern Ohio (44) and eastern Kentucky (20) – a total of over 1,600 informants.⁵

For the purposes of this study the responses for the three items are considered together: whites' terms for poor whites, blacks' terms for poor whites,⁶ terms for rustics. Although one may draw some fine technical distinctions between rustics and poor whites,⁷ in fact the two groups and their designations overlap: a number of epithets – such as *cracker* and *hoosier* and their compounds – were elicited for all three items. Appendix A – an alphabetical list of all designations recorded – indicates the applications for particular epithets.

Interpretation of the data inevitably involves an appraisal of the practices of field workers, especially where more than one participated in gathering the data. Kurath *et al.* 1939 (50–53) is ruthlessly honest about differences in the practices of those who did the work in New England; R. McDavid *et al.* (in progress) does the same for the Middle and South Atlantic States. In contrast, Orton *et al.* 1962–71 officially recognizes no differences, though they may be inferred from charting the data for particular items.⁸ Sixteen field workers participated in the investigations of the Atlantic Seaboard; the most important differences are those between the two principal investigators, Guy S. Lowman, Jr., and Raven I. McDavid, Jr. Lowman did the largest part of the work in New England, conducting interviews in every state except Connecticut and Rhode Island – and all from the Mohawk Valley through North Carolina. McDavid did most of the work in Upstate New York, Ontario, Kentucky, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Between them they account for more than four-fifths of the field work.

⁵ Marckwardt's North-Central materials have not been consulted, except for the eastern fringe, since it was desirable to set up a sharp contrast between the primary settlement areas of the Atlantic Seaboard and the tertiary areas surveyed by Allen.

⁶ These include not only the items obtained from black informants but those which white informants associate with blacks.

⁷ The poor white is characteristically a tenant – sharecropper or renter. The rustic, such as the Southern mountaineer, tries to obtain and keep title to his own land – even when he moves out of the region to obtain work, as in the rubber shops of Akron (Udell 1966).

⁸ Orton rigidly prescribed the sequence in which responses were sought and the questions by which they were to be elicited. Most of the introductory volume of Orton 1962–71 is devoted to the questions used in eliciting. The American field workers were encouraged to develop their natural ways of eliciting, and to adjust to the culture of the community. Their substantial differences were actually rather few. See Pederson *et al.* 1972.

Although both Lowman and McDavid were generally successful as field workers, and enjoyed good rapport with most of their informants, there were certain differences in their procedures. Though thoroughly courteous, Lowman conducted his interviews aggressively – proceeding straightforwardly through the questionnaire, often suggesting responses, recording relatively few synonyms and few forms from free conversation. Furthermore, in the South Atlantic States he did not normally seek terms for rustics in the plantation country, or terms for poor whites in the uplands. In contrast, McDavid worked more by casual indirection, sought – but did not suggest – synonyms, and recorded many conversational forms.⁹ Furthermore, he had certain predispositions. He was a native South Carolinian like Miss Bryant, though brought up in the inner city of an industrial community rather than in a small town. He had been early sensitized to the implications of these designations (he had heard a large number of them) and to the often subtle differences between close synonyms, and had been constantly reminded of them by his father, an active politician and successful industrial lobbyist. He thus had a greater interest than Lowman in these items, and would have elicited a larger number of responses. Thus more terms, especially more compound terms, are reported from Upstate New York, South Carolina and Georgia than from Maine, Pennsylvania or Virginia. Lowman's comparatively minor interest in these items – which are particularly treacherous for an outsider – is also reflected in the data from New England: there are only 15 designations for rustics reported by Lowman from Maine, where he did 73 interviews; in Rhode Island, Rachel Harris recorded the same number in 23 interviews. On the other hand, there are also cultural differences operating: even where the same field worker was concerned, as Lowman in Pennsylvania and North Carolina, in each of which he did 155 interviews, the Southerners offer more terms.

Of the 479 terms recorded in a total of 3,516 responses, the commonest is *backwoodsman* (355 responses) found in every state and province.

The next most common is *countryman* (349 responses) found everywhere except New Jersey. There are also 51 compounds of which *country* is the first element.

Third most common is *hayseed* (203 responses) or its variant *hayseeder* (38 responses) which together are found almost everywhere. In only Kentucky, West Virginia and Florida is this term not recorded.

⁹ His procedures derived partly from personal diffidence, partly from an awareness of local sensitivities, partly from his training under Bernard Bloch, who made 88 field records and was himself skilled in getting responses in free conversation. As one soon finds out, free conversation is particularly important when dealing with grammatical items, about which even illiterate Americans have a morbid sense of propriety.

Poor white trash, the fourth most common term, is used by both blacks and whites to denote rustics and poor whites. White respondents were recorded 131 times using this term about poor whites; 56 responses by blacks speaking about the same group were recorded. The term was used once as an epithet for rustics, making a total of 188 responses.

The fifth most popular single term, used largely to refer to rustics, is *backwoodser* (108 responses). Its distribution is not as extensive as *backwoodsman*, being absent in all the states investigated except New Hampshire, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Ohio, Delaware, North Carolina, Maryland and West Virginia. There are 23 compounds in which *back* is an element, 17 of which involve the word *backwoods* in some form.

Hick (94 responses), the sixth most popular single term, appears in 13 of the 20 states under study. It is also the essential element of six compound terms.

As we have seen, many of the terms are compounds. There are 21 kinds of *cracker* (all but one associated with the South). There are also six kinds of *hoosier*, mostly confined to the South Uplands.

Certain adjectives appear congruently in these compounds. *Poor*, part of 37 terms, is not found in use north of the Mason-Dixon Line. *Common* as a component of 27 terms is also largely confined to the South and South Midland except for a few occurrences in New York. There are also 16 compounds using the word *low*, usually with *down* (*lowdown*). *Mountain* appears as the first element in 14 compounds. *Sorry* appears as an adjective in 11 compounds, largely in the South.

Of particular interest are the terms applied primarily to poor whites. Of these, 118 are described as used exclusively or primarily by whites. Described as exclusively used by blacks are 47 terms.

Buckra, of African origin, has spread into white speech. Such terms as *poor barker*, *bucker* and *buckram* are probably to be considered as variants.

Several terms are identified with particular localities. *Cherston Hillers* from Cherston Hill, New York, is an example. In Connecticut, West Mountain, an imposing landform north of New Haven, has lent its name to the rustics living near it in *West Mountaineers*. A term used for any rural person in Rhode Island but which refers to a specific location is *Block Islander*.

The list which follows is of the first and second most frequently used epithets in each state. A blank indicates that there is no clear second term.

The term *hecker*, second most common in Pennsylvania, appears in only one other state, New Jersey, where it is the third most common term. Of greater interest is the uniqueness of the most popular term in

State	Most common term	Second most common term
New Brunswick	<i>countryman</i>	
Ontario	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>hayseed/hick</i>
Maine	<i>countryman</i>	<i>hayseed</i>
New Hampshire	<i>countryman</i>	<i>hayseed</i>
Vermont	<i>hayseed</i>	<i>backwoodsman</i>
Massachusetts	<i>hayseed</i>	<i>countryman</i>
Rhode Island	<i>hayseed</i>	<i>countryman</i>
Connecticut	<i>hayseed</i>	<i>backwoodsman</i>
New York	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>hayseed</i>
New Jersey	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>backwooder</i>
Pennsylvania	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>hecker</i>
West Virginia	<i>mountain hoosier</i>	<i>backwoodsman</i>
Ohio	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>hillbilly</i>
Kentucky	<i>hillbilly</i>	
Delaware	<i>backwooder</i>	<i>backwoodser/forester</i>
Maryland	<i>backwoodsman</i>	<i>poor white trash</i>
Virginia	<i>countryman</i>	<i>poor white trash</i>
North Carolina	<i>mountain boomer</i>	<i>countryman</i>
South Carolina	<i>countryman</i>	<i>poor buckra</i>
Georgia	<i>countryman</i>	<i>common people</i>
Florida	<i>cracker</i>	<i>white trash</i>

North Carolina, *mountain boomer*, in that it does not follow the general pattern of shared usage of a few core terms. The term is also found only in North Carolina.

A comparison of these terms with those recorded by Allen is interesting. The Atlantic Seaboard yields far more than the Upper Midwest. This is partly due to the larger number of informants, 1,600 to 200, though the number of terms, as one might expect, does not increase proportionately. It is also partly due to the fact that class and cultural differences are more clearly felt in the longer settled regions; nevertheless, local terrain and events have provided a number of terms that do not occur further east, such as *Kincaider*, from the Kincaid Homestead Act, *bronco buster*, *habitant*, *rail splitter* and *apple knocker*.

Allen 1958 does not sort out the Upper Midwest terms by states, though Allen 1973 does, nor by field workers. His vocabulary check lists – multiple choice instruments filled out by respondents – yielded 24 terms not recorded in field interviews. Whether check list evidence would have been so productive in the Atlantic states is a moot question; the relatively small number of terms in Wood 1971 suggests, perhaps, that in the South there is more diffidence about writing them down.

This preliminary analysis leaves a number of interesting questions unanswered.¹⁰ Do urban informants use as many of these terms as do

¹⁰ The list, of course, is not exhaustive. For instance, *Emmett*, a familiar epithet in New Hampshire, was not recorded. (S.A.W.)

rural ones? Are the terms used in a given region fairly constant for the various types of informants? Or do education and social class make a difference? Do men use the same epithets as women? How many of the terms recorded in the 1930's are now obsolete, and why (the 1945-56 records by McDavid suggest that the vocabulary of epithet was then alive and doing well)? And have new terms arisen, perhaps disseminated by mass media, like *honky* and *whitey*, current bywords among urban blacks and appearing in some of the last field records, but not in the earlier ones? There is room for a great deal of further investigation, both more intensive analysis of the Atlas evidence and by way of following up. As it stands, however, the list in Appendix A (like that in Allen 1958) provides interesting evidence of the prejudices of Americans toward their less affluent and less sophisticated fellow citizens.

APPENDIX A

Code: unmarked terms – rustic only; W – white term for poor whites; B – black term for poor whites; * – term also for rustics

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Abolitionist	1	beater B	1
Algereen B	1	Block Islander	1
back countryman	1	bog jumper	1
back hill	1	bohunk	1
back in the sticks	1	boob	3
back streeter	1	boomer	1
back squatter	1	bucker W B	4
back wooder	1	buck farmer	4
backward cracker	3	buckra W B	31
backward fellas	1	buckram B	1
backward hoosier	1	buckwheat	4
backwoods	2	buckwheater	5
backwoods cracker	1	buckwheat farmer	1
backwoodser	108	bunkin	2
backwoods farmer	4	bushman	1
backwoods fellas	4	bushwhacker	19
backwoods, in the	1	certain class W	1
backwoodsman	355	certain class of people W	1
backwoods people	8	chaw bacon	1
backwoods person	1	cheap John B	1
backwoods tacky	1	Cherston Hiller	1
backwoodster	1	Chodyites	1
backwoods Yankee	1	clay eater W B	4
barker W	6	clodhopper	14
barren townner	1	clod knocker	6

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
clown	1
codger	3
common W B	18
common buckra B	1
common class of folk W	1
common class of people W B	2
common class of white people W	1
common country children W	1
common cracker W	2
common elements W	1
common everyday people W	1
common farmer	1
common fellow W	2
common folks W	6
common land B	1
common liver W	1
common man W	3
common people W B	81
commoner people W B	1
commonest people W	1
common poor people W	1
common persons W	3
common old cur W	1
common run of people W	1
common trash W	2
common white B	1
common white folks B	1
common white people W	3
common white trash W	2
coof	1
corn tassel	1
cotton mill boy W	1
cotton mill worker W	1
counter jumper W	1
country	1
country boob	1
country boy	7
country-bred man	2
country bump	1
country bumpkin	11
country chap	1
country clod	1
country clodhopper	1
country cob	1
country come to town	2
country cousin	1
country cracker W *	37
country dude	2
country farmer	1

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
country fellow	2
country fogey	1
country folks	11
country, from the	1
country gawk	2
country gawky	1
country greenhorn	2
country guy	3
country hick	8
country hick from Sunday crick	1
country hoe buck	1
country hoosier	7
country hopper	1
country jack	1
country jake	15
country jay	1
country kid	1
country lady	1
countryman	349
country people W *	57
country person	2
country pumpkin	3
country punkin	1
country raised boy	1
country rube	1
country sager	1
country squash	1
country suck	1
country tack	2
country tacky	1
country white people W	4
country woman	2
cow cracker W	1
cracker W B *	108
cropper W	1
damned carpetbagger	1
damned Yankee	1
dirt digger	1
dirt farmer	1
down cricker	1
down easter	1
down east Yankee	1
drifter B	7
dude B	1
dummy	1
factory people W	1
farmer	50
farm people	1
Florida cracker W *	2

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
forester	8	linthead W	2
fur backer	1	loafer W	1
gaping countryman	1	low class W	2
gawk	1	low class of people W	1
gawkey	2	low down W	1
Geetchee	1	low down people W	3
Georgia cracker W B *	9	low down white W	1
gillian B	1	low down white man B W	1
goober	1	low down white people B W	2
goober grabber W	1	low down white trash B	1
greenhorn	25	lower class B W	4
greenhorn from the country	1	low grade people W	1
greenman	1	low trash B	1
greeny	3	low white trash W B	1
greyneck W	3	mean low-life rascal B	3
hayback	2	mean white people W	1
haymaker	1	mill children W	1
hay pounder	1	mill people W	1
hayseed	203	mountain boar	1
hayseeder	38	mountain boomer	29
hay shaker	1	mountain boorker	1
heck	3	mountaineer	20
hecker	28	mountain hoosier B *	112
hector W	1	mountain Hoover	1
hermit	3	mountain jack	2
hick	94	mountain people	2
hicker	2	mountain ranger	2
hillbilly W B *	42	mountain tack	1
hilliboy	4	mountain tacky	1
Hiram	1	mucker	1
honkey B	1	mud rooter	1
hoodlum	1	moss back	8
hoopy	3	mustang W	1
hoosier	30	Nassau Rangers	1
huckleberry picker	1	ne'er do wells W	1
hunky	1	nigger lover W	1
hosebird W	1	no-count folks W	1
ignerant	1	no-counts W	1
ignorant people W *	3	no-count white people W B	2
illiterate white W *	1	no-good people B	1
Italyites	1	no-good persons W	1
jackass W	1	North Carolina cracker	1
jackoak jumper	1	north woodsman	1
Jackson whites	2	not decent people W	1
jay	3	old country boy	1
jayhawk	1	old field sager	1
Jonathon	2	old pale face B	1
josh	1	old reb B	1
landlubber	1	old settler	1

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
old time people	1	poor scrub W	1
old timer	1	poor tack W *	2
old white rebel B	1	poor trash W B	11
one gallus boy	1	poor white W B	26
one gallus crowd	1	poor white ashes W	1
onery B	1	poor white backra B	2
ordinary W	4	poor white buckra W	2
ordinary class of people W B	1	poor white devil	1
ordinary white man W	20	poor white dog W	1
outlaw W B	1	poor white folks W B	15
outsider	2	poor white hellions W	1
outskirt	2	poor white herrings W	3
pale face B	1	poor white man B	6
pauper W	7	poor white people B	4
peapicker	1	poor white reb W B	2
peck B	1	poor white trash W B *	187
peckerwood W B	2	punkin	1
pine hawker	1	punkin chaser	1
pine lander W *	3	punkin thrasher	1
pine lander people	1	raglegs W	1
piner	1	rascal W	1
piney	2	reb B	3
piney woodsman	1	rebel B	1
pin hook tagers	1	redleg W	1
plain country folks	1	redneck W B *	9
plain folks W	1	renter W	3
the plainer class B	1	renter class W	1
the plainer people B	1	reuben	4
plain lousy folks B	1	revel B	1
plain people B	29	rice eater	1
poor Arab W	1	ridge runner	2
poor backer W	1	riffraff W	2
poor barker W	6	roog	1
poor buck W B	2	root	1
poor buckra W B	98	rooze	1
poor bucker W B	7	rough neck W	1
poor class W	2	rube	84
poor class of people W B	4	ruby	1
poor countryman	1	rustic	12
poor country people	1	sager B *	3
poor cracker W B	7	sand hill tack	1
poor farmer	1	sandlapper	2
poor folks W	5	scab W	1
poor heater W	1	scalawag W	1
poor ignorant people W	1	scrub W	1
po-its B	1	scum W B	2
poor man W	2	scum of the earth W B	3
poor people W B	34	second class people B	1
poor reb W	1	shanty white W	1

<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Term</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
sharecropper W	1	trash W B	1
shit pitcher	1	trash people W	1
shrimp dipper	1	trash white people W	1
soda cracker B	1	up country	1
sod buster	2	very sorry man W	1
sorry W	2	very sorry white man W	4
sorry class of white folks W	1	way back	1
sorry people W	1	way back farmer	2
sorry persons W	1	West Mountaineer	1
sorry white folks W	2	wharfinger W	1
sorry white man W	3	white Arab B	1
sorry white people W B	2	white barker W	1
sorry white trash W B	2	white buck	12
stickman	1	white buckra W B *	1
sticks, the	10	white cracker B	2
swamp angels	4	whitey B	1
swamp boy	1	white nigger	1
swamper	1	white soda cracker	1
swamp rabbit W	1	white sons of bitches B	1
squatter B *	2	white trash W B	60
swamp rat	3	wood hick B *	20
swamp Yankee	2	wood rat	1
tack B *	4	woodsman	3
tacky	4	woodster	1
tack B	1	wool hat W *	2
tallow face B *	6	wool hat boy W	1
tenant W	2	working class people B	1
tenant farmer W *	5	yank	1
tenant people W	1	yankee	3
that element W	1	yap	3
thin people B	1	yellow barker W	1
tit puller	1	yokel	6
Tivertowner	29		

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APPENDIX B

State	No. of Informants	Total No. of Terms	No. of Terms Unique to State
New Brunswick	8	6	2
Ontario	16	14	1
Maine	73	15	2
New Hampshire	51	16	2
Vermont	57	21	4
Massachusetts	138	38	10
Rhode Island	23	15	3
Connecticut	57	24	12
New York	181	65	31
New Jersey	47	22	7
Pennsylvania	155	18	1
West Virginia	111	24	6
Ohio	44	20	3
Kentucky	20	14	3
Delaware	13	13	4
Maryland	61	16	4
Virginia	147	68	42
North Carolina	155	51	19
South Carolina	144	174	113
Georgia	107	160	89
Florida	8	31	4

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