



**Charles Gowen Spalding
Student Response to**

**“Damn, Brother! I Don’t Believe I’d a Told That!”
Humor and the Cultural Identity of the American South**

by

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Good afternoon everyone. First of all, I’d like to thank Dr. Cobb and the UGA Alumni Association for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. Often when I am asked about my experience at UGA, I highlight the incredible opportunity I have had this year to conduct research under one of the most preeminent Southern historians. Now, after I have sung his praises to anyone who cares to listen, I am rewarded with the challenge of speaking after one of the most preeminent southern historians – about southern humor nonetheless. While it is certainly a challenge, it is an opportunity that I relish, and my thanks again to all who have made it possible.

As Dr. Cobb has already mentioned, much of Southern humor has depended upon the resonance of stereotypes. I would suggest that no single humorist has better continued this tradition into the modern day than Georgia’s own Jeff Foxworthy. In fact, when one considers the state of southern humor today, Foxworthy and his ever more ubiquitous “redneck” jokes are often the first things that come to mind. I assume that many of us are already familiar with these jokes, so I will refrain from a recitation of examples. After all, much of Foxworthy’s humor lies in his manner of delivery, and I am confident that my attempt to replicate this would not yield near as many laughs. However, there is one of Foxworthy’s jokes that I believe is worth considering, especially because it encapsulates many of the themes about southern humor that we have discussed already. So, despite my reservations, here it goes:

“If you have ever used an ironing board as a buffet table...you might be a redneck”

It is easy to see how such a joke could appeal to those who hold the stereotype of Southerners as an impoverished subculture uninterested in the finer things in life, like ornate dining room furniture. Foxworthy developed the jokes while at a show in Detroit, suggesting that, at least initially, they were intended to appeal to Northerners with a most uninformed perception of the region. However, Foxworthy is just as popular, if not more popular, inside the South. His regional popularity suggests two possible explanations for the resonance of his joke. Firstly, the joke could be a representation of the increasing cleavages among Southerners themselves. As urban areas of the South become ever more cosmopolitan, it is not difficult to imagine the more cloistered residents of a city like Atlanta holding similar stereotypes about their fellow Georgians in a place like Alma.

The second, and what I believe to be the more interesting explanation for Foxworthy’s popularity in the South, is derived from the context he later provides to his audience. In fact, this particular “redneck” joke comes from Foxworthy’s personal experience at his mother-in-law’s home in Louisiana. From this perspective, Foxworthy’s joke certainly represents the affinity that Southerners have often shown for laughing at their own peculiarities and unfortunate circumstances. However, this explanation entails the fact that Foxworthy is aware of the more, to use a scholarly term, “rednecky” aspects of his life, like his mother-in-law’s unique taste in

dining room furniture. Furthermore, it suggests that Foxworthy recognizes that such a peculiarity is amusing in the eyes of outsiders.

This alternative raises some important questions. Is Foxworthy simply a down-home Georgia boy innocently relating aspects of his life to an enthralled audience, wholly unaware as to why they seem so amused? Or is it something else entirely, namely a recognition of the cultural subtleties that distinguish the lives of Southerners and a commoditization of such subtleties? I would contend that it is in fact the latter. In many respects, Foxworthy has commoditized his identity as a southern redneck and all the peculiarities that it entails, and has sold it to willing consumers, making him the best selling comedy artist of all time and boosting his net worth to the very “un-rednecky” figure of \$100 million. If this is in fact the case, and Foxworthy is consciously aware of the southern redneck aspects of his life and selling them for commercial gain, to what extent is he actually a Southerner?

As a matter of fact, Jeff Foxworthy’s credentials as a bona fide southern redneck are not entirely beyond reproach. Foxworthy was born into a middle-class family in an Atlanta suburb, the son of a computer engineer. He had worked for five years at IBM with his father before he began his comedy career. Foxworthy, the champion of the redneck, actually got his education at a particular technological trade school on Atlanta’s North avenue, dare I say its actual name on this solemn day. I would argue that this particular trade school may in fact be the antithesis of everything redneck.

On the subject of dubious redneck credentials, I would be remiss not to mention Larry the Cable Guy, one of Foxworthy’s co-performers on the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. Some of us may already be familiar with Larry the Cable Guy – he is a stereotypical, overweight, unshaven redneck character best known for his entirely inane catchphrase of “Git-R-Done!” When I was in about the sixth grade, my best friend and I were two of Larry’s biggest fans (which should tell you a lot about the level of sophistication of his particular brand of humor). We loved hearing the ridiculous stories of greased pig wrangling at his incestual family reunions, all conveyed through one of the most absurd southern accents the world has ever heard.

We must have watched his performances dozens of times before we learned that Larry the Cable Guy, who we thought of as the quintessential redneck, was actually not a redneck at all. Larry the Cable Guy was a much more benign Nebraskan by the name of Daniel Whitney, who had the ability to cue his southern affect for entertainment purposes. I was truly taken aback, and as an eleven year old didn’t quite know what to make of it all. More recently, only to add insult to injury, I learned that Whitney’s Larry the Cable Guy character was partially inspired by his college roommate, a Georgia native. How was it that I had been so convinced, hook line and sinker, of Larry the Cable Guy’s authenticity? Clearly, Whitney is a gifted entertainer, but what was it about his artificial southern persona that managed to elevate him to such levels of stardom? Why did the History Channel, when developing the show *Only In America*, dedicated to understanding the “customs, communities and traditions that make America great” select Larry the Cable Guy as the host? And finally, what are the implications of the importance of entertainers like Foxworthy and Whitney to the way others understand Southerners, and to the way Southerners understand themselves?

One of the most important questions that face those who study culture in general is whether or not someone can *genuinely* espouse the unique characteristics of their respective culture while simultaneously being aware of the characteristics in the first place? With the increased popularity of Foxworthy’s “redneck” jokes, Larry the Cable Guy and publications like *Southern Living* and *Garden and Gun* this question is particularly important for those who study southern culture. In some ways, these entities, undoubtedly aware of the cultural characteristics they are selling, represent a last bastion of southern uniqueness in a country that is rapidly homogenizing in terms of culture. Therefore, the answer to the question of whether or not such things are truly authentic has enormous implications for southern historians and culturalists. However, this question, and others that I have previously posed, cannot be answered by historians alone (as much as we may want to believe so). As previously mentioned, they truly require a cross-disciplinary approach that incorporate fields like

anthropology, psychology, sociology, English, economics, and women's studies to achieve a comprehensive answer and a more holistic understanding of the South.

I'm sure that many of y'all are thinking, "Wow, is there really that much to glean from these simple, rather mindless forms of entertainment?" or perhaps even, "Man, that poor undergraduate has been spending way too much time in the basement of the library looking at microfilms!" Admittedly, after having been under the tutelage of Dr. Cobb for a couple of semesters now, I have come to find the relevancy of southern history and culture in places I would have never thought to look. I regret also that I have posed so many questions but, when studying the South, this is often an inescapable outcome. As a matter of fact, I think I can safely say that my four years at the University of Georgia have yielded more questions than answers while also changing the way that I view the world. However, I am confident that the thirst for more answers and the discomfort associated with challenging your own beliefs are two of the most fundamental aspects of a higher education. I can certainly say that for those students studying southern history here at the University of Georgia, this tradition is alive and well, even more than two hundred years after our first class was conducted. My hope is that other students from all disciplines can share in the sometimes frustrating, but always enriching study that is southern culture. Indeed, the Greek intellectual Plutarch once wrote, "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled." I for one believe that there is no fuel more potent than the study of the American South.

Thank you.