Reconstructing the South: A Theoretical Reflection on the Iconography of New South Mythmaking

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The **Myth of Lost Cause** arose from the material and social devastation wrought by the Civil War, as white Southerners sought to rationalize, justify, and glorify their crushing military and political defeat and the bleak aftermath that faced them. As the lost cause myth became more thoroughly elaborated in the post-Reconstruction South, it also temporally reconfigured collective memories of the Old South's destruction. Southern historians and political leaders all espoused the idea that the Old South's architectural and artistic history had been brutally pillaged by Union occupiers determined to punish the South for its temerity: a regional myth that continues to have currency in the region. According to leading historians, however, there is scant evident that such widespread plunder occurred during Congressional Reconstruction (Foner 1988). However, by chronologically displacing the destruction of the Old South from the Civil War to the Reconstruction, the South was able to assume the position of being an innocent victim of Union brutality and, hence, minimize its culpability in sparking the conflagration.

Ruins of Charleston, South Carolina (April 1865) after a Union military campaign.
Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Wade Hampton was a wealthy plantation owner and Confederate general who gained political fame for his influential opposition to Congressional Reconstruction reforms in South Carolina; one of two former Confederate states where African-Americans had gained a majority of seats in the state legislature (Louisiana being the other). While memorialized as a Redeemer of the South's revered traditions and virtues, these regional hagiographies omit Hampton's leadership role in re-establishing the segregated and disenfranchising social order of the Old South and implementing policies that also socio-economically disadvantaged poor Southern whites
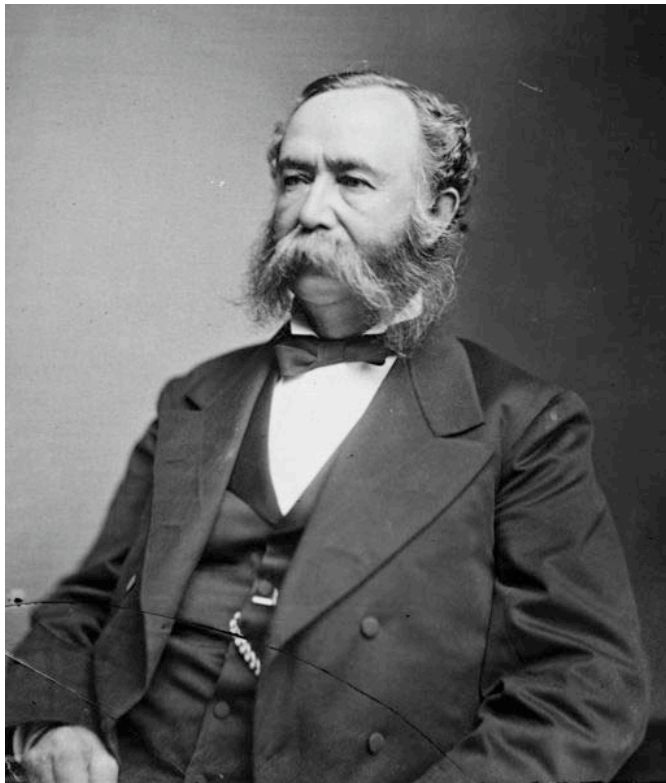
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Brady-Handy Photograph Collection.
http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cwpbh.05184.

Statue of Wade Hampton at South Carolina State House

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Wade_Hampton_statue.jpg

As leading Southern mythmakers sought to rebuild a regional identity that would link its white male citizenry in a common ideological project, despite radical intra-racial socio-economic division, they reconstructed the former Confederacy as a heroic lost cause motivated by ideals of valor, chivalry, Christian virtue, and freedom from the tyranny of a constitution defying Federal government (i.e., the states' rights justification for the Civil War).

Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and G. T. Beauregard with four versions of the Confederate flag surrounded by portraits of Jefferson Davis and Confederate Army officers. NY: Southern Lithograph Co., 105 & 107 Chambers St., c July 6 1896. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

The Conquered Banner" c. 1913. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The Lost Cause myth became a material memory through a wave of monument building and commemorative services—such as those organized by the United Daughters of the Confederacy—that canonized fallen Confederate soldiers and honored former Confederate generals. These regional rituals and sacralized spaces transformed the landscape of the South into indelible reminders of the Lost Cause and its rendering of the Confederacy as noble defenders of Southern virtues and higher ideals.

Confederate Veteran Memorial, with Veterans in uniform leaving the memorial in Arlington, VA., 1914. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Gen. Bennett H. Young at unveiling of Confederate Monument, Arlington, VA, June 4, 1914. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

D.W. Griffith's cinematic adaptation of Thomas Dixon's (1905) *The Clansman* portrayed Congressional Reconstruction as an unjust punishment waged on the South by Godless and punitive Northern occupiers. In Griffith's *The Birth of Nation* (1915), the South had been left at the mercy of marauding Union militias, diabolical Northern carpetbaggers, and demonic, African-Americans. The film cast the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan as the heroic saviors of besieged Southern womanhood and the South at large. The film, which is still heralded for its innovative cinematography, played to packed houses across the nation and it framed national perceptions of the Reconstruction and the Confederacy; it also sparked a revival of the Ku Klux Klan while generating nationwide protests by the NAACP who sought to contest this historical reconstruction with countermemories of the racial oppression and horrific violence against Southern blacks and white abolitionists waged by the Klan.

The original 1915 theatrical release poster for *The Birth of Nation*. Public domain image Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Birth-of-a-nation-poster-color.jpg

NAACP protests at a screening of *The Birth of a Nation*. Image source: http://www.africanamericans.com/images2/BirthofaNationProtest.jpg.

In the years following the 1960's Civil Rights movement—often referred to as the Second Reconstruction of the South—countermemories of racial oppression now haunt the Lost Cause myth. Contemporary expressions of this myth often occur through Civil War reenactments which feature the tactical details of battles and meticulous recreations of the weaponry, uniforms, pageant, and rituals of the Confederate and Union armies. These performative gatherings eschew references to the socio-political and racial divisions that precipitated the conflict in favor of unabashed celebrations of military acumen and valor. Civil War reenactments also as a general rule mask countermemories of the vitriolic regional enmities that once divided white Americans as well as underplaying the pivotal role that African American soldiers played in many of these battles. In so doing, white American Civil War re-enactors, regardless of their genealogical ties to the Union or the Confederacy, pursue a collective commemorative project, that echoing the ideology of Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, renders the North-South conflict as a blood ritual that finally united white Americans in a shared national identity.

Photos of Civil War re-enactment courtesy of Karl Pittlekau, (www.whitepostphotography.com)

Using the Lost Cause myth as a cultural resource for historical preservation. Image courtesy of Civil War Preservation Trust.

The Moonlight and Magnolias myth portrayed the Old South as a Golden Age of aristocratic manners and manors. Margaret Mitchell's best selling novel *Gone with the Wind* and its ensuing cinematic adaptation, catapulted this regional identity myth to national and international prominence. Scarlett O'Hara emerged as the perfect heroine for a world deeply mired in an economic depression and the pending prospects of World War II. Scarlett's steely (magnolia) resilience and indefatigable resolve to overcome tragedy transposed a Southern allegory of economic revival into a global myth assuring that better days lay ahead. Rather than demonizing African Americans, as in *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* represented the slave class as either childlike figure needing guidance from their benevolent white masters or as loyal servants who were supremely contended to perform their God-given roles. More positively, critics have noted that the character of Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel) displayed an aura of confidence, common sense wisdom, and moral authority unheralded in prior Hollywood representations of African-Americans. Hattie McDaniel became the first African-American to win an Academy Award for this path breaking portrayal. However, when the film made its highly publicized premier in Atlanta, Georgia on December 15, 1939, McDaniel was not in attendance at the behest of the Atlanta mayor's office which demanded the exclusion of black cast members from the fesitivities. For that grand event, souvenir programs had been printed that featured images of the film's lead characters, including Hattie McDaniel. In deference to outrage expressed by Atlanta's civic leaders, a new program was printed that omitted McDaniel's visage [See Jill Watts (2005), *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood*, New York: HarperCollins].

Image source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:HattieandVivien.jpg

Image courtesy of
http://dept.kent.edu/museum/exhibit/gwtw/gwwcast.html

Image source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image
:Gonewiththewind1.jpg.
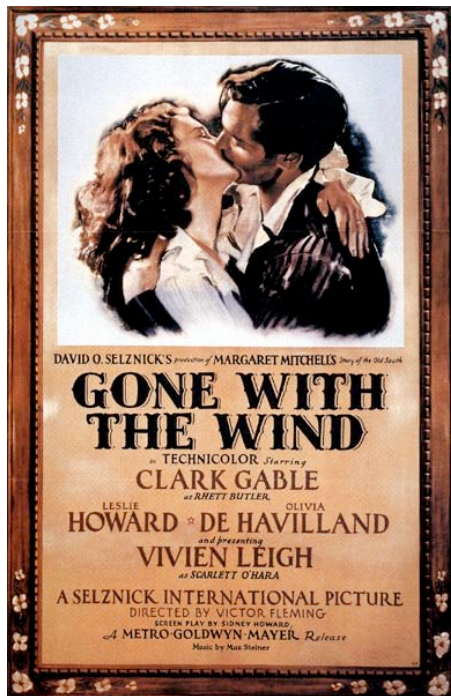
Iconic representations of the Moonlight and Magnolias myth have become cultural templates for recalling and enacting a romanticized vision of the Old South, translating the erasure of racial countermemories into complex interaction rituals and embodied collective memories.

Gone with the Wind still shots courtesy of Harry Ransom Film Collectio

Heritage Day, Warrenton, Virginia, Saturday, Sept. 30, 2006
Photos by Karl Pittlekau, (www.whitepostphotography.com).

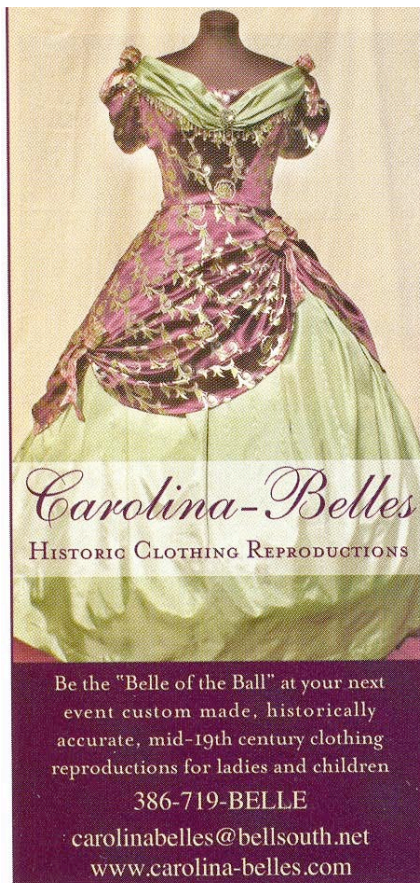The Moonlight and Magnolias myth continues to have appeal as a tourist generating device, as consumers seek to retreat into idyllic recreations and stagings of Old South grandeur and its timeless grace and glamour. These images are illustrative of the revisionist reclamation strategy, discussed in our analysis of *Southern Heritage* magazine, in that they gloss over the indelicate matters of slave capital and indentured servitude that sustained the plantation economy.

Promotional image for a tourist company that specializes in heritage tours of Old South landmarks and plantations. Courtesy of http://www.toursbyisabelle.com/

Photo courtesy of Carolina-Belles (www.carolina-belles.com)

The Moonlight and Magnolias myth also erases the segregationist legacy of the Jim Crow South. Jim Crow Laws, so named after a stereotypically slow witted and buffoonish black-face vaudeville character, legally, materially, and symbolically kept African-Americans in their (ideologically imposed) socio-economic place. The ideological rationale for the Jim Crow South was twofold: African-Americans had retrogressed since being removed from the solicitude of their white masters and most resonantly of all, that God had designed the races to be separate, as evinced by this 1884 editorial in the *Richmond Times*: "It is necessary that this principle be applied in every relation of Southern life. God Almighty drew the color line and it cannot be obliterated. The negro must stay on his side and the white man must stay on his side, and the sooner both races recognize this fact and accept it, the better it will be for both" [quotation from http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~aas405b/intro.html]. Jim Crow laws also impeded efforts by labor organizers to forge socio-economic alliances between poor Southern whites and blacks and to enhance educational opportunities for Southerners (black and white alike) at the lower tier of socio-economic ladder. In this segregated social milieu, African-American churches necessarily functioned as critical sites for education and political organizing.

Vending-machine in Jackson, Tennessee circa 1955

http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAjimcrow1.jpg

African American students attend segregated school in a black church. Black Belt 1938. Photo by Arthur Rothstein. Courtesy of Alabama Department of Archives and History.

From the antebellum years to well into the twentieth century, poor Southern whites were stigmatized as the descents of an inferior Celtic blood line and their presumed character flaws were deemed to be the natural reasons for their socio-economic impoverishment. This understanding began to change in 1936 when *Fortune* magazine commissioned James Agee to write a story on white Southern share croppers. Accompanied by friend and documentary photographer Evan Walker, this journalistic project, which would later become the documentary novel *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* reframed the cultural identity of poor Southern whites in far more sympathetic terms, suggesting they possessed a salt of the earth dignity in the face of perpetually trying circumstances. National perceptions of poor Southern whites were also impacted by a romanticized vision of the Appalachian region (which linked the Celtic myth to the hillbilly archetype) which became de rigueur among journalists, educators, and philanthropists, and ballad collectors during the 1930's (Malone 2002). In an age marked by unprecedented levels of social change and growing concerns over race miscegenation (fueled by rising tides of immigration and the emergence of the Eugenicist movement), this idea of an isolated enclave of white ethnic purity struck a resonant chord in the national consciousness. Philanthropic preservationists, such as Edith Vanderbilt, and entrepreneurs seeking to promote travel to the region and the sale of Appalachian handcrafts glommed onto this myth, going so far as to establish trade schools to teach indigenous Appalachians the handicraft skills that were fast disappearing in the region (and that were not incidentally needed to support a burgeoning market for authentic home spun cloth and hand-crafted furniture) (Martin 2000). This cultivated image of Appalachia as an atavistic and authentic culture whose traditions remain unsullied by the forces of modernization became increasingly central to the region's tourist trade. Over the ensuing years, a comical variation of the Appalachian hillbilly would rise to cultural prominence and gain a significant foothold on America's popular imagination.

Hale County, Alabama cotton sharecroppers. Photographer Walker Evans, 1936. All photos courtesy of the Library of Congress.


Hand crafts of the South's poor whites. (left) A man spins threads while his daughter-in-law cards wool in a Tennessee mountain cabin. Photo by Carter C. Poland. Courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

Since the 1920's heyday of Jimmie Rodgers, country musicians had donned stylized cowboy garb to present a more marketable image. This Country & Western hybrid symbolically invoked associations with white rural culture but it aligned Southern music with the more culturally revered iconography of the American West, rather than the Celtic myth and its stigmatizing portrayal of poor Southern whites. Hank Williams, Sr. and his backing band the Drifting Cowboys adhered to this tried and true convention of the country music establishment. Yet, Williams never shied from acknowledging his hillbilly roots and his songs unabashedly spoke to the lives and outlooks of poor Southern rural whites. Williams enjoyed a meteoric rise to stardom and an equally rapid descent into depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction. Williams' songs gave expression to his personal demons and, through his death at the age of 29, he became the prevailing icon for a culturally captivating version of the Celtic myth: a folk genius whose emotional volatility and innately preordained struggles between hedonism and piety provided a potent but ultimately self-destructive creative spark. Williams lives on as a country music legend and the father figure of the so-called alt country movement: an indie music genre that rejects slick Nashville production values in favor of a punkish take on traditional country music of the 1930's and 1940's, fueled by a sardonic infatuation with hard living and all varieties of sin.


Hank Williams in the Alexander City Jail, Alabama, August 1952 after being arrested for public drunkenness; 19 weeks before his death and 15 weeks before the release of his prophetic single "I'll never get out of this world alive" which would hit number one on the country charts after his mythically tragic death. Image source: http://www.johngilmore.com/Celebrities/images/hankwilliams_jail.jpg.
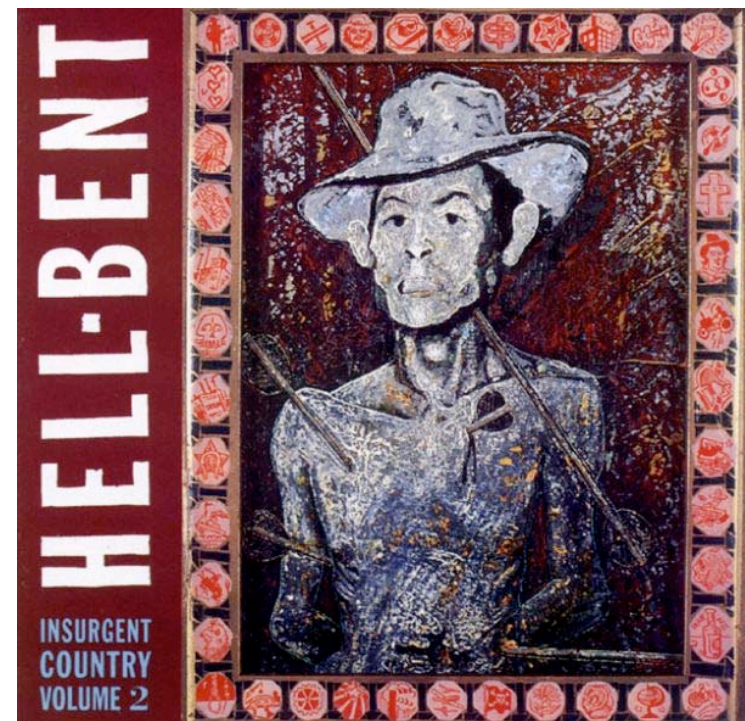
The legend of Hank Williams inspiring a new generation of hell raising, anti-establishment, roots rockers. Image courtesy of Blood Shot Records, http://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/bloodshotrecordscompilations/118

The comical spin on the Appalachian primitive found common expression on the Vaudeville circuit and it become integral to WSM's landmar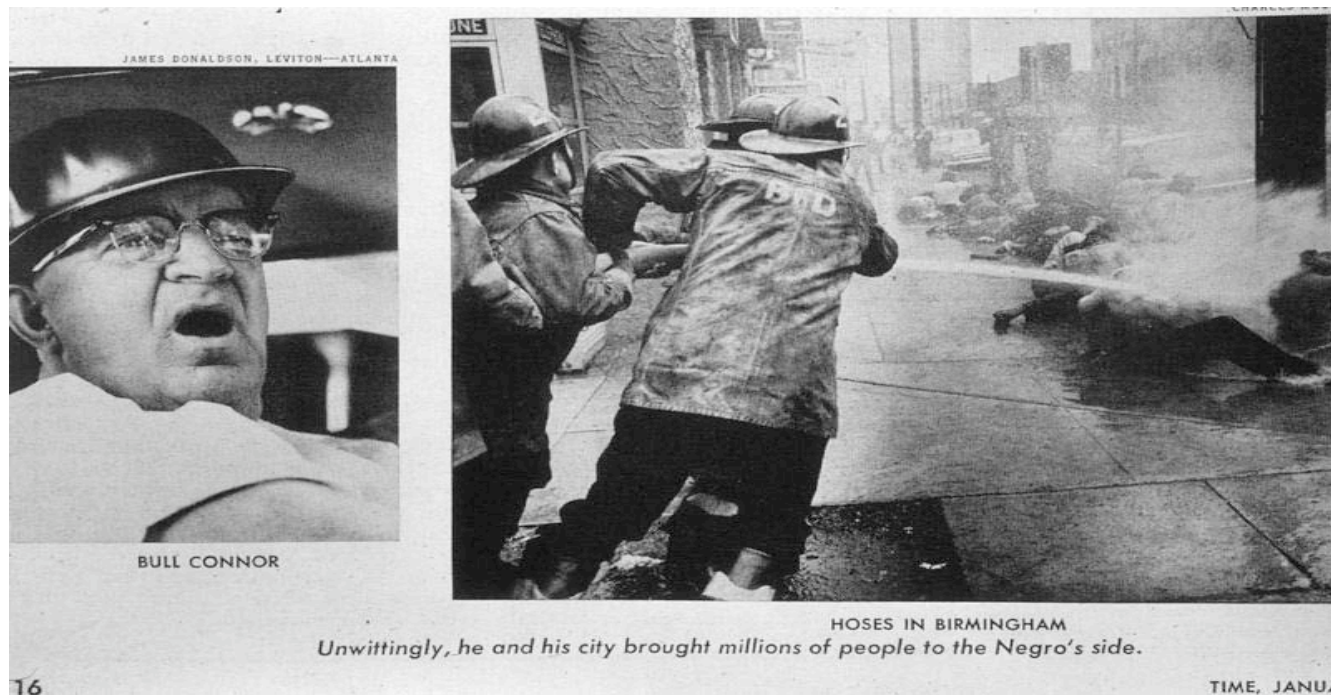k Grand Ole Opry Show through the crowd pleasing antics of the show's resident comedian Uncle Dave Macon. In 1934, the syndicated cartoon L'il Abner (whose titular character would later provide the template for "Jethro Bodine," played by Max Baer, Jr., in the 1960's hit television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*), featured the comical exploits of an Appalachian hillbilly clan, often spiced with a populist critique of greedy bankers and business tycoons, and it became one of the most popular comic strips in history. Appalachian hillbillies also provided the leitmotif for another major syndicated cartoon—Barney Google. At its inception in 1919, Barney Google had an urban setting and featured a near-to-do-well city slicker, with a fondness for horse racing, and a penchant for gambling. The strip enjoyed a moderate level of popularity when, in 1934, Barney's adventures took him to the North Carolina mountains where he encountered the shiftless, law dodging moonshiner Snuffy Smith and his hillbilly brethren. The Snuffy Smith character struck a resonant chord with the national readership and gradually assumed the starring role in the strip. The exaggerated hedonism and carefree lifestyles of these comical hillbilly icons—traits that echo the earlier, pejorative strains of the Celtic myth—likely had considerable therapeutic value in a historical context marked by material strife, geo-political turmoil, and incessant calls for saving and sacrifice.
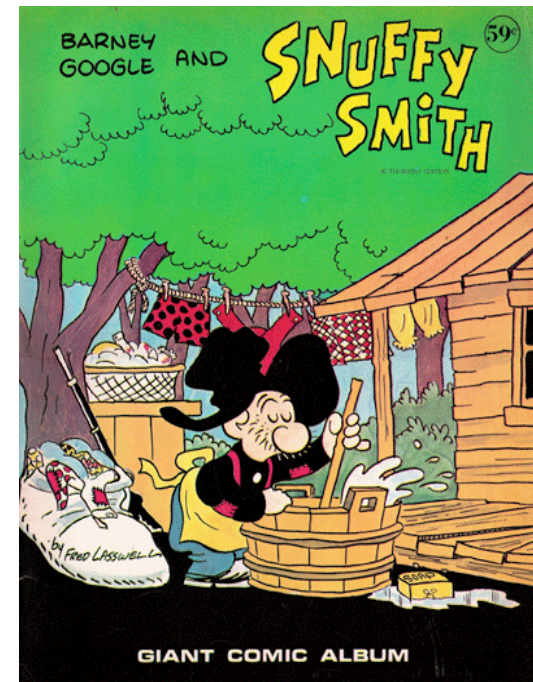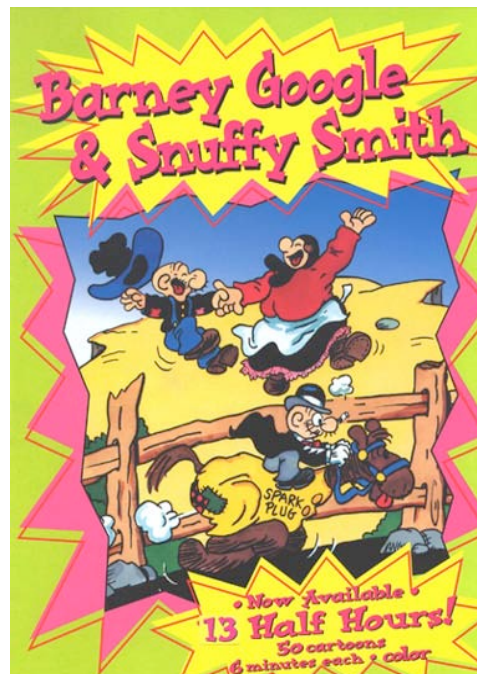
The South did rise again in commercial culture at least. Snuffy Smith and his hillbilly clan gradually assume top billing over Barney Google. Photos courtesy of King Features Syndicate.

The 1960's Civil Rights struggles placed the Southern states, and gripping images of recalcitrant segregationists, at the forefront of America's national consciousness. Historian Howard Zinn (1964, *The Southern Mystique*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf), writing at a time of this social unrest, observed that the South could have easily served as a national mirror reflecting pandemic discrepancies between the American Dream and the everyday realities of racism, prejudice, and class-based inequities that existed in all quarters of society. By constructing this gamut of societal ills as moral failings unique to the Southern region, however, the national media and much of the nation had a rhetorical means to circumvent these unsettling national self-reflections. From this standpoint, a prominent ideological function of the South, in the broader national discourse, has been to play the role of the symbolic other upon whom problematic aspects of American society could be projected. At this historical juncture, the vilified icon of the racist redneck became a prominent cultural counterpart to the endearing representations of the comical hillbilly.

JAMES DONALDSON, LEVITON—ATLANTA

BULL CONNOR

HOSES IN BIRMINGHAM
Unwittingly, he and his city brought millions of people to the Negro's side.

16   TIME, JANUA

Birmingham, Alabama's Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor gained national (and historical) notoriety for his heavy-handed responses to Civil Rights protests organized by Martin Luther King in May 1963. The brutality of the police action, including the use of attack dogs on children, provoked national outrage and is widely credited with building political support for the Civil Rights movement. After the Birmingham conflict, President Kennedy remarked "the civil rights movement should thank God for Bull Connor. He's helped it as much as Abraham Lincoln" (quoted in *Bull Connor* by William A. Nunnelly. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1991, p. 164). Image source: http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/USPics42/59244.jpg.

The battle flag of the confederacy became an important political symbol in the South soon after *Brown versus the Board of Education* (1954) created a federal mandate for integration and for dismantling Jim Crow laws. Southern political leaders formally and informally used the confederate flag to show defiance toward these federal integration initiatives. In 1956, the state of Georgia redesigned its State flag to incorporate confederate iconography and, in 1963, Alabama governor George Wallace flew the confederate flag over the State capital during a visit by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy to symbolize his strident commitment to a segregated education system. Festering animosities among a large bloc of Southern white voters over Federal enforcement of civil rights legislation, under the auspices of Democratic leadership, became an emotional and ideological resource leveraged by the 1968 Nixon presidential campaign through its so-called Southern strategy. [See Kevin P. Phillips (1969), *The Emerging Republican Majority*, New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House]

A confederate waving crowd protests the admission of the "Little Rock Nine" to Central High School on August 20, 1959. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

As the violent and combative days of the 1960's civil rights movement faded into history, white Southerners, particularly in the working class faction, glommed onto the Confederate flag as a symbol of a revered cultural heritage and as an expression of white pride (ideologically rendered as a necessary counterbalance to black pride). Southern rock artists, such as Lynyrd Skynyrd, Charlie Daniels, Molly Hatchet, and .38 Special, further embraced the banner of Southern white pride in promoting themselves as rock n'roll rebels. Whenever public displays of the confederate flag are challenged by civil rights groups, defenders almost invariably invoke this heritage justification, ideologically divorcing this iconography from its segregationist political history. While rifts over the meaning of the Confederate flag may lie dormant for a period of time, they are easily sparked by events that raise concerns over racial discrimination and inequity. After the Katrina disaster, for example, black student groups and the NAACP renewed and strengthened their calls for a ban on an unofficial school flag flown by students and fans at LSU sporting events. While Louisiana State University officials formally condemned the flag, they refused to ban it on grounds of protecting free speech. As with state flag controversies, attitudes toward the flag split along racial lines with African-American groups condemning it as a racist symbol and passionate white supporters defending it as a vital school tradition that was being sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.

White Georgian voters protest Governor Roy Barnes decision to redesign the state flag in 2001. Images courtesy of http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2671&sug=y

LSU students carry their purple and gold version of the confederate flag in defiance of calls by African-American student groups and other leading civil rights organizations for its banishment. Photo by Anthony Moore. Courtesy of Black College Wire. Image Source: http://www.blackcollegewire.org/news/051031_lsu-flag-protest.

The confederate flag's oft promoted symbolic meaning as a prideful symbol of Southern traditions has enabled it to attain a fair degree of social acceptability, despite its segregationist history and close associations with racial oppression. The Reverend Al Sharpton put this ideological consequence into sharp relief with his retort to Howard Dean's expressed goal of also being the candidate for "guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks." As Sharpton put the matter,"If I said I wanted to be the candidate for people that ride around with helmets and swastikas, I would be asked to leave" (quotes from www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/2003-11-02-dean-flag_x.htm). Yet, candidate Dean faced few if any demands to withdraw from the campaign, as would have likely been the case had he indeed proclaimed himself to be the candidate for guys who liked swastikas. The cultural and ideological distinction that exists in many quarters of white American society between the Confederate and Nazi flags is the by product of a nearly hundred year process of mythically reconstructing the South's racial history and managing countermemories encoded in this once unabashedly segregationist symbol. For better or worse, practices of commercial mythmaking have played a central role in refashioning popular memories of the Confederate legacy.

Bo, Luke, and Daisy Duke putting a "y'all come," down home, depoliticized (and comely) face on symbols of the Confederate Legacy. Image courtesy of Warner Brothers Entertainment Inc. Image used with permission.

NuSouth (noo'- south)
A philosophy of reinvention

The designers of the NuSouth logo believed that Confederate flag could be appropriated as an inclusive symbol that positively recognized countermemories of African-Americans' struggles for freedom and their role in shaping Southern history. The failure of the brand suggests that the confederate flag's deeply entrenched association with white identity myths, and the ideological suppression of African-American countermemories, severely curtailed its semiotic adaptability.