



"Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch": The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry.

Author(s): Elliott J. Gorn

Source: *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (Feb., 1985), pp. 18-43

Published by: American Historical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1860747>

Accessed: 29/08/2009 19:27

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=aha>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



American Historical Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The American Historical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

“Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch”: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry

ELLIOTT J. GORN

“I WOULD ADVISE YOU when You do fight Not to act like Tygers and Bears as these Virginians do—Biting one anothers Lips and Noses off, and *gouging* one another—that is, thrusting out one anothers Eyes, and kicking one another on the Cods, to the Great damage of many a Poor Woman.”¹ Thus, Charles Woodmason, an itinerant Anglican minister born of English gentry stock, described the brutal form of combat he found in the Virginia backcountry shortly before the American Revolution. Although historians are more likely to study people thinking, governing, worshipping, or working, how men fight—who participates, who observes, which rules are followed, what is at stake, what tactics are allowed—reveals much about past cultures and societies.

The evolution of southern backwoods brawling from the late eighteenth century through the antebellum era can be reconstructed from oral traditions and travelers’ accounts. As in most cultural history, broad patterns and uneven trends rather than specific dates mark the way. The sources are often problematic and must be used with care; some speculation is required. But the lives of common people cannot be ignored merely because they leave few records. “To feel for a feller’s eyestrings and make him tell the news” was not just mayhem but an act freighted with significance for both social and cultural history.²

The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation provided generous support for my research on violence. Many people read and commented on the manuscript, among them David Brion Davis, Jean Agnew, Kai Erikson, Fred Hobson, Gerald Burns, John Endean, and Allen Tullos. I thank them all for their aid. I also wish to thank the anonymous readers and the editors of the *American Historical Review* whose comments proved invaluable. My wife, Anna, critiqued and edited the text, while our baby, Jade, gouged and chewed the pages—and those were the least of their contributions.

¹ Woodmason, “Burlesque Sermon,” in Richard J. Hooker, ed., *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953), xi–xxxvi, 158. The “Burlesque Sermon” was written in the late 1760s or early 1770s. For the quotation that appears in the title of the essay, see “A Kentucky Fight,” *New York Spirit of the Times*, December 12, 1835, p. 2.

² Harden E. Taliaferro, *Fisher’s River Scenes and Characters* (New York, 1839), 198. Let me state explicitly that this is a study in male culture, but it is informed by central insights of recent women’s history—that gender definitions are malleable, that they have a formative impact on the past, and that to ignore them is to misrepresent social and cultural development.

AS EARLY AS 1735, BOXING was “much in fashion” in parts of Chesapeake Bay, and forty years later a visitor from the North declared that, along with dancing, fiddling, small swords, and card playing, it was an essential skill for all young Virginia gentlemen.³ The term “boxing,” however, did not necessarily refer to the comparatively tame style of bare-knuckle fighting familiar to eighteenth-century Englishmen. In 1746, four deaths prompted the governor of North Carolina to ask for legislation against “the barbarous and inhuman manner of boxing which so much prevails among the lower sort of people.” The colonial assembly responded by making it a felony “to cut out the Tongue or pull out the eyes of the King’s Liege People.” Five years later the assembly added slitting, biting, and cutting off noses to the list of offenses. Virginia passed similar legislation in 1748 and revised these statutes in 1772 explicitly to discourage men from “gouging, plucking, or putting out an eye, biting or kicking or stomping upon” quiet peaceable citizens. By 1786 South Carolina had made premeditated mayhem a capital offense, defining the crime as severing another’s bodily parts.⁴

Laws notwithstanding, the carnage continued. Philip Vickers Fithian, a New Jerseyite serving as tutor for an aristocratic Virginia family, confided to his journal on September 3, 1774:

By appointment is to be fought this Day near Mr. *Lanes* two fist Battles between four young Fellows. The Cause of the battles I have not yet known; I suppose either that they are lovers, and one has in Jest or reality some way supplanted the other; or has in a merry hour called him a *Lubber* or a *thick-Skull*, or a *Buckskin*, or a *Scotsman*, or perhaps one has mislaid the other’s hat, or knocked a peach out of his Hand, or offered him a dram without wiping the mouth of the Bottle; all these, and ten thousand more quite as trifling and ridiculous are thought and accepted as just Causes of immediate Quarrels, in which every diabolical Strategem for Mastery is allowed and practiced.⁵

The “trifling and ridiculous” reasons for these fights had an unreal quality for the matter-of-fact Yankee. Not assaults on persons or property but slights, insults, and thoughtless gestures set young southerners against each other. To call a man a “buckskin,” for example, was to accuse him of the poverty associated with leather clothing, while the epithet “Scotsman” tied him to the low-caste Scots-Irish who settled the southern highlands. Fithian could not understand how such trivial offenses caused the bloody battles. But his incomprehension turned to rage when he realized that spectators attended these “odious and filthy amusements” and that the fighters allayed their spontaneous passions in order to fix convenient dates and places, which allowed time for rumors to spread and crowds to gather. The Yankee concluded that only devils, prostitutes, or monkeys could sire creatures so unfit for human society.⁶

³ William Gooch to the Bishop of London, July 8, 1735, in G. McLaren Bryden, ed., “The Virginia Clergy: Governor Gooch’s Letters to the Bishop of London, 1727–1749, from the Fulham Manuscripts,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 32 (1924): 219, 332; and Philip Vickers Fithian to John Peck, August 12, 1774, in Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, ed. Hunter Dickinson Farish (Williamsburg, Va., 1943), 212.

⁴ Tom Parramore, “Gouging in Early North Carolina,” *North Carolina Folklore Journal*, 22 (1974): 58; Jane Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play* (Williamsburg, Va., 1965), 166–67; and Jack Kenny Williams, *Vogues in Villainy: Crime and Retribution in Ante-Bellum South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C., 1959), 33. The South Carolina law included fingers and eyes but excluded noses and ears.

⁵ Fithian, *Journal and Letters*, 240–41.

⁶ *Ibid.*; and Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 44.

Descriptions of these “fist battles,” as Fithian called them, indicate that they generally began like English prize fights. Two men, surrounded by onlookers, parried blows until one was knocked or thrown down. But there the similarity ceased. Whereas “Broughton’s Rules” of the English ring specified that a round ended when either antagonist fell, southern bruisers only began fighting at this point. Enclosed not inside a formal ring—the “magic circle” defining a special place with its own norms of conduct—but within whatever space the spectators left vacant, fighters battled each other until one called enough or was unable to continue. Combatants boasted, howled, and cursed. As words gave way to action, they tripped and threw, gouged and butted, scratched and choked each other. “But what is worse than all,” Isaac Weld observed, “these wretches in their combat endeavor to their utmost to tear out each other’s testicles.”⁷

Around the beginning of the nineteenth century, men sought original labels for their brutal style of fighting. “Rough-and-tumble” or simply “gouging” gradually replaced “boxing” as the name for these contests.⁸ Before two bruisers attacked each other, spectators might demand whether they proposed to fight fair—according to Broughton’s Rules—or rough-and-tumble. Honor dictated that all techniques be permitted. Except for a ban on weapons, most men chose to fight “no holts barred,” doing what they wished to each other without interference, until one gave up or was incapacitated.⁹

The emphasis on maximum disfigurement, on severing bodily parts, made this fighting style unique. Amid the general mayhem, however, gouging out an opponent’s eye became the sine qua non of rough-and-tumble fighting, much like the knockout punch in modern boxing. The best gougers, of course, were adept at other fighting skills. Some allegedly filed their teeth to bite off an enemy’s appendages more efficiently. Still, liberating an eyeball quickly became a fighter’s surest route to victory and his most prestigious accomplishment. To this end, celebrated heroes fired their fingernails hard, honed them sharp, and oiled them slick. “‘You have come off badly this time, I doubt?’” declared an alarmed passerby on seeing the piteous condition of a renowned fighter. “‘Have I,’ says he triumphantly, shewing from his pocket at the same time an eye,

⁷ Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America*, 1 (3d edn., London, 1800): 191. Weld claimed he saw four or five men castrated and confined to their sick beds during his travels in Virginia and Maryland.

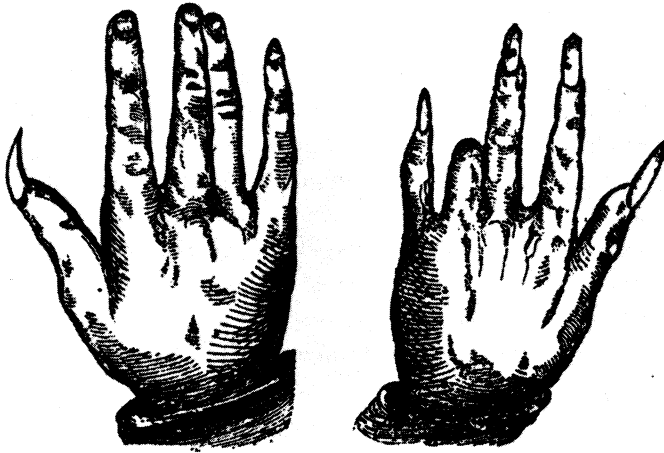
⁸ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York, 1971), 1: 1180, 2: 2582.

⁹ Thomas Ashe, *Travels in America* (London, 1809), 86. Thomas Anburey, who served in Virginia during the Revolution, observed that fighters agreed ahead of time on which tactics to allow, then abided by their own rules: Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 2 (1789; reprint edn., Boston, 1823), 215–18. Gouging another man’s eye was not native to the colonies but had antecedents in the mother country. A few reports placed the practice in Lancashire and Yorkshire; the lowland Scots and their descendants in Ulster also used these tactics. Gouging was common enough in English ring fights that the 1838 “Rules of the London Prize Ring” banned it. But what had been an occasional practice in Britain was elevated to a unique fighting style in the American South. See Dr. Beardsley, “On the Use and Abuse of Popular Sports and Exercises, Resembling Those of the Greeks and Romans,” *Nicholson’s Philosophical Magazine*, 15, excerpted in *Portfolio*, 1, ser. 4 (1816): 407–09; Jennie Holliman, *American Sports, 1785–1835* (Durham, N.C., 1931), chap. 10; *New York Spirit of the Times*, July 4, 1840, p. 207; Henry Adams, *The Formative Years*, ed. Herbert Agar (London, 1948), 28; “‘Kick and Bite’ in Lancashire,” *New York Sporting Magazine*, November 1834, p. 188; John Ford, *Prize Fighting: The Age of Regency Boximania* (New York, 1971), 116–18; J. C. Furnas, *The Americans: A Social History of the United States, 1587–1914* (New York, 1969), 216; James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch Irish: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1962), 263–66; Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind* (New York, 1957), 111; and Parramore, “Gouging in North Carolina,” 56.

which he had extracted during the combat, and preserved for a trophy."¹⁰

As the new style of fighting evolved, its geographical distribution changed. Leadership quickly passed from the southern seaboard to upcountry counties and the western frontier.¹¹ Although examples could be found throughout the South, rough-and-tumbling was best suited to the backwoods, where hunting, herding, and semisubsistence agriculture predominated over market-oriented, staple crop production. Thus, the settlers of western Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee, as well as upland Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, became especially known for their pugacity.¹²

The social base of rough-and-tumbling also shifted with the passage of time. Although brawling was always considered a vice of the "lower sort," eighteenth-century Tidewater gentlemen sometimes found themselves in brutal fights. These combats grew out of challenges to men's honor—to their status in patriarchal, kin-



The "Hands of Celebrated Gougers." Drawings reproduced from Richard M. Dorson, *Davy Crockett: American Comic Legend* (New York, 1939), 42.

based, small-scale communities—and were woven into the very fabric of daily life. Rhys Isaac has observed that the Virginia gentry set the tone for a fiercely competitive style of living. Although they valued hierarchy, individual status was never permanently fixed, so men frantically sought to assert their prowess—by grand boasts over tavern gaming tables laden with money, by whipping and

¹⁰ Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 203; Parramore, "Gouging in North Carolina," 57–58; and Adland Ashby, *A Visit to North America* (London, 1821), 73. In colonial days, an eye could be saved by calling out "king's curse"; Guion Griggs Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 16–17.

¹¹ The tradition lingered in pockets along the coast. A Florida grand jury member watched outside the courthouse as his son fought another boy. Not yet a decade old, the youngster received some manly advice when the battle ended: "Now you little devil, if you catch him down again bite him, chaw his lip or you never'll be a man." Henry Benjamin Whipple, as quoted in John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 11–12.

¹² Tom Parramore, the most thorough student of rough-and-tumble fighting, offered only southern sources and argued that gouging spread as far as the Louisiana Territory early in the century; "Gouging in North Carolina," 56, 58. Gouging was occasionally practiced above the Ohio, but it was not elevated to a characteristic fighting style. Lumbermen in the northern forests practiced some of the rough-and-tumbler's arts, but they were noted for marking a fallen opponent by stomping his face with caulked boots, leaving scars similar to those

tripping each other's horses in violent quarter-races, by wagering one-half year's earnings on the flash of a fighting cock's gaff. Great planters and small shared an ethos that extolled courage bordering on foolhardiness and cherished magnificent, if irrational, displays of largess.¹³

Piety, hard work, and steady habits had their adherents, but in this society aggressive self-assertion and manly pride were the real marks of status. Even the gentry's vaunted hospitality demonstrated a family's community standing, so conviviality itself became a vehicle for rivalry and emulation. Rich and poor might revel together during "public times," but gentry patronage of sports and festivities kept the focus of power clear. Above all, brutal recreations toughened men for a violent social life in which the exploitation of labor, the specter of poverty, and a fierce struggle for status were daily realities.¹⁴

During the final decades of the eighteenth century, however, individuals like Fithian's young gentlemen became less inclined to engage in rough-and-tumbling. Many in the planter class now wanted to distinguish themselves from social inferiors more by genteel manners, gracious living, and paternal prestige than by patriarchal prowess. They sought alternatives to brawling and found them by imitating the English aristocracy. A few gentlemen took boxing lessons from professors of pugilism or attended sparring exhibitions given by touring exponents of the manly art.¹⁵ More important, dueling gradually replaced hand-to-hand combat. The code of honor offered a genteel, though deadly, way to settle personal disputes while demonstrating one's elevated status. Ceremony distinguished anti-septic duels from lower-class brawls. Cool restraint and customary decorum proved a man's ability to shed blood while remaining emotionally detached, to act as mercilessly as the poor whites but to do so with chilling gentility.¹⁶

produced by smallpox. "The lumberjack code," as folklorist Richard Dorson called it, grew out of a pattern of living similar to that of the rough-and-tumblers. Drinking, treating friends, impulsive pleasure seeking, heroic labor, and vicious fighting were part of all-male peer groups in the northern woods; personal honor and valor were the touchstones of lumberjack life. See Dorson, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), chap. 9; Furnas, *The Americans*, 215–16; and Alan Lomax, *Folksongs of North America* (New York, 1975), 106–07, 119–20. Fred Harvey Harrington has pointed out in private correspondence that leaders of New York City gangs in the mid-nineteenth century were sometimes referred to as gougers or rough-and-tumblers. Moreover, in 1821, Ohio passed a law against gouging out eyes, biting off facial parts, and so forth. Nevertheless, men in the East and Middle West did not glorify mayhem and mutilation in practice and folklore to the same extent as did the southern backwoodsmen. See Gabriel Furman, "The Customs, Amusements, Style of Living and Manners of the People of the United States from the First Settlement to the Present Time," New York Historical Society, New York, N.Y., MS. 2673, typescript copy, pp. 303–05; and Elliott J. Gorn, "The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting and the Rise of American Sports" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1983), chap. 5.

¹³ Isaac brilliantly evoked life in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia. See *Transformation of Virginia*, chaps. 5, 6. On play, competitiveness, and prowess in southern culture, see T. H. Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen: The Cultural Significance of Gambling among the Gentry of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 34 (1977): 256–57; Carson, *Colonial Virginians at Play*, chap. 3; Holliman, *American Sports*, chap. 12; C. Vann Woodward, "The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World," in his *American Counterpoint* (Boston, 1971), 13–46; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982).

¹⁴ On these themes, see Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen," 256–57; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 94–104; and Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, chaps. 2, 3, 6, 11, 13.

¹⁵ Isaac traced this change; *Transformation of Virginia*, pts. 2, 3. Also see Louise Jordan Walmsley, *Sport Attitudes and Practices of Representative Americans Before 1870* (Farmville, Va., 1938), 26; and Gorn, "The Manly Art," 141–54.

¹⁶ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 319, 322. Also see Dickson Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979), introduction and chap. 1; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, chap. 13; and Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina*, 42–46.

Slowly, then, rough-and-tumble fighting found specific locus in both human and geographical landscapes. We can watch men grapple with the transition. When an attempt at a formal duel aborted, Savannah politician Robert Watkins and United States Senator James Jackson resorted to gouging. Jackson bit Watson’s finger to save his eye.¹⁷ Similarly, when “a low fellow who pretends to gentility” insulted a distinguished doctor, the gentleman responded with a proper challenge. “He had scarcely uttered these words, before the other flew at him, and in an instant turned his eye out of the socket, and while it hung upon his cheek, the fellow was barbarous enough to endeavor to pluck it entirely out.”¹⁸ By the new century, such ambiguity had lessened, as rough-and-tumble fighting was relegated to individuals in backwoods settlements. For the next several decades, eye-gouging matches were focal events in the culture of lower-class males who still relished the wild ways of old.

“I SAW MORE THAN ONE MAN WHO WANTED AN EYE, and ascertained that I was now in the region of ‘gouging,’” reported young Timothy Flint, a Harvard educated, Presbyterian minister bound for Louisiana missionary work in 1816. His spirits buckled as his party turned down the Mississippi from the Ohio Valley. Enterprising farmers gave way to slothful and vulgar folk whom Flint considered barely civilized. Only vicious fighting and disgusting accounts of battles past disturbed their inertia. Residents assured him that the “blackguards” excluded gentlemen from gouging matches. Flint was therefore perplexed when told that a barbarous-looking man was the “best” in one settlement, until he learned that best in this context meant not the most moral, prosperous, or pious but the local champion who had whipped all the rest, the man most dexterous at extracting eyes.¹⁹

Because rough-and-tumble fighting declined in settled areas, some of the most valuable accounts were written by visitors who penetrated the backcountry. Travel literature was quite popular during America’s infancy, and many profit-minded authors undoubtedly wrote with their audience’s expectations in mind. Images of heroic frontiersmen, of crude but unencumbered natural men, enthralled both writers and readers. Some who toured the new republic in the decades following

¹⁷ William Oliver Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces* (Boston, 1940), 33–37; George G. Smith, *The Story of Georgia and the Georgia People, 1732–1860* (Atlanta, 1900), 184; and “Jones’ Fight,” *New York Spirit of the Times*, January 25, 1840, pp. 559–60, reprinted in *ibid.*, June 15, 1844, p. 181. The author of “Jones’ Fight” was anonymous, but clearly the story was derived from oral tradition. Although dueling became a mark of gentlemanly status, social elites sometimes backslid into street brawling during the antebellum period. For examples, see Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 23.

¹⁸ Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 201–02. Gougers occasionally threatened their social betters. An English traveler in Virginia recalled that his party fled from a small gang—headed by a “veteran cyclops”—that tried to provoke a battle. In Kentucky, years later, Adland Ashby dared not object to the company of one he considered beneath him. To do so, he feared, might cost an eye; *Visit to North America*, 73. Also see the Marquis de Chastellux, *Travels in North America in the Years 1780–1782* (New York, 1828), which was “translated by an English gentleman who resided in America at that period” (translator’s note is on pages 292–93).

¹⁹ Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston, 1826), 97–98. The right and left banks of the Ohio became a common symbol of the contrast between slave and free states in the writings of foreign travelers. America’s most perceptive visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, included this motif. See *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York, 1945), 1: 376–79.

the Revolution had strong prejudices against America's democratic pretensions. English travelers in particular doubted that the upstart nation—in which the lower class shouted its equality and the upper class was unable or unwilling to exercise proper authority—could survive. Ironically, backcountry fighting became a symbol for both those who inflated and those who punctured America's expansive national ego.

Frontier braggarts enjoyed fulfilling visitors' expectations of backwoods depravity, pumping listeners full of gruesome legends. Their narratives projected a satisfying, if grotesque, image of the American rustic as a fearless, barbaric, larger-than-life democrat. But they also gave Englishmen the satisfaction of seeing their former countrymen run wild in the wilderness. Gouging matches offered a perfect metaphor for the Hobbesian war of all against all, of men tearing each other apart once institutional restraints evaporated, of a heart of darkness beating in the New World. As they made their way from the northern port towns to the southern countryside, or down the Ohio to southwestern waterways, observers concluded that geographical and moral descent went hand in hand. Brutal fights dramatically confirmed their belief that evil lurked in the deep shadows of America's sunny democratic landscape.

And yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss all travelers' accounts of backwoods fighting as fictions born of prejudice. Many sojourners who were sober and careful observers of America left detailed reports of rough-and-tumbles. Aware of the tradition of frontier boasting, they distinguished apocryphal stories from personal observation, wild tales from eye-witness accounts. Although gouging matches became a sort of literary convention, many travelers compiled credible descriptions of backwoods violence.

"The indolence and dissipation of the middling and lower classes of Virginia are such as to give pain to every reflecting mind," one anonymous visitor declared. "Horse-racing, cock-fighting, and boxing-matches are standing amusements, for which they neglect all business; and in the latter of which they conduct themselves with a barbarity worthy of their savage neighbors."²⁰ Thomas Anburey agreed. He believed that the Revolution's leveling of class distinctions left the "lower people" dangerously independent. Although Anburey found poor whites usually hospitable and generous, he was disturbed by their sudden outbursts of impudence, their aversion to labor and love of drink, their vengefulness and savagery. They shared with their betters a taste for gaming, horse racing, and cockfighting, but "boxing matches, in which they display such barbarity, as fully marks their innate ferocious disposition," were all their own. Anburey concluded that an English prize fight was humanity itself compared to Virginia combat.²¹

Another visitor, Charles William Janson, decried the loss of social subordination, which caused the rabble to reinterpret liberty and equality as licentiousness. Paternal authority—the font of social and political order—had broken down in

²⁰ Chastellux, *Travels in North America*, 292–93.

²¹ Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America*, 215–18. Also see George W. Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States from Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico*, 2 (London, 1844), 329–30, as cited in Jack K. Williams, *Duelling in the Old South* (College Station, Tex., 1980), 73.

America, as parents gratified their childrens’ whims, including youthful tastes for alcohol and tobacco. A national mistrust of authority had brought civilization to its nadir among the poor whites of the South. “The lower classes are the most abject that, perhaps, ever peopled a Christian land. They live in the woods and desarts and many of them cultivate no more land than will raise them corn and cabbages, which, with fish, and occasionally a piece of pickled pork or bacon, are their constant food. . . . Their habitations are more wretched than can be conceived; the huts of the poor of Ireland, or even the meanest Indian wig-wam, displaying more ingenuity and greater industry.”²² Despite their degradation—perhaps because of it—Janson found the poor whites extremely jealous of their republican rights and liberties. They considered themselves the equals of their best-educated neighbors and intruded on whomever they chose.²³ The gouging match this fastidious Englishman witnessed in Georgia was the epitome of lower-class depravity:

We found the combatants . . . fast clinched by the hair, and their thumbs endeavoring to force a passage into each other’s eyes; while several of the bystanders were betting upon the first eye to be turned out of its socket. For some time the combatants avoided the *thumb stroke* with dexterity. At length they fell to the ground, and in an instant the uppermost sprung up with his antagonist’s eye in his hand!!! The savage crowd applauded, while, sick with horror, we galloped away from the infernal scene. The name of the sufferrer was John Butler, a Carolinian, who, it seems, had been dared to the combat by a Georgian; and the first eye was for the honor of the state to which they respectively belonged.

Janson concluded that even Indian “savages” and London’s rabble would be outraged by the beastly Americans.²⁴

While Janson toured the lower South, his countryman Thomas Ashe explored the territory around Wheeling, Virginia. A passage, dated April 1806, from his *Travels in America* gives us a detailed picture of gouging’s social context. Ashe expounded on Wheeling’s potential to become a center of trade for the Ohio and upper Mississippi valleys, noting that geography made the town a natural rival of Pittsburgh. Yet Wheeling lagged in “worthy commercial pursuits, and industrious and moral dealings.” Ashe attributed this backwardness to the town’s frontier ways, which attracted men who specialized in drinking, plundering Indian property, racing horses, and watching cockfights. A Wheeling Quaker assured Ashe that mores were changing, that the underworld element was about to be driven out. Soon, the godly would gain control of the local government, enforce strict observance of the Sabbath, and outlaw vice. Ashe was sympathetic but doubtful. In Wheeling, only heightened violence and debauchery distinguished Sunday from the rest of the week. The citizens’ willingness to close up shop and neglect business on the slightest pretext made it a questionable residence for any respectable group of men, let alone a society of Quakers.²⁵

To convey the rough texture of Wheeling life, Ashe described a gouging match.

²² Janson, *The Stranger in America, 1793–1806* (1807; reprint edn., New York, 1935), 304–06, 310–11.

²³ *Ibid.* Edmund S. Morgan argued convincingly that the ideology of white equality was built on the material base of black slavery; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975), 376–87, 380–81. Also see George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York, 1971), chaps. 2, 3.

²⁴ Janson, *Stranger in America*, 308–09.

²⁵ Ashe, *Travels in America*, 82–85.

Two men drinking at a public house argued over the merits of their respective horses. Wagers made, they galloped off to the race course. "Two thirds of the population followed: —blacksmiths, shipwrights, all left work: the town appeared a desert. The stores were shut. I asked a proprietor, why the warehouses did not remain open? He told me all good was done for the day: that the people would remain on the ground till night, and many stay till the following morning." Determined to witness an event deemed so important that the entire town went on holiday, Ashe headed for the track. He missed the initial heat but arrived in time to watch the crowd raise the stakes to induce a rematch. Six horses competed, and spectators bet a small fortune, but the results were inconclusive. Umpires' opinions were given and rejected. Heated words, then fists flew. Soon, the melee narrowed to two individuals, a Virginian and a Kentuckian. Because fights were common in such situations, everyone knew the proper procedures, and the combatants quickly decided to "tear and rend" one another—to rough-and-tumble—rather than "fight fair." Ashe elaborated: "You startle at the words tear and rend, and again do not understand me. You have heard these terms, I allow, applied to beasts of prey and to carnivorous animals; and your humanity cannot conceive them applicable to man: It nevertheless is so, and the fact will not permit me the use of any less expressive term."²⁶

The battle began—size and power on the Kentuckian's side, science and craft on the Virginian's. They exchanged cautious throws and blows, when suddenly the Virginian lunged at his opponent with a panther's ferocity. The crowd roared its approval as the fight reached its violent denouement:

The shock received by the Kentuckian, and the want of breath, brought him instantly to the ground. The Virginian never lost his hold; like those bats of the South who never quit the subject on which they fasten till they taste blood, he kept his knees in his enemy's body; fixing his claws in his hair, and his thumbs on his eyes, gave them an instantaneous start from their sockets. The sufferer roared aloud, but uttered no complaint. The citizens again shouted with joy. Doubts were no longer entertained and bets of three to one were offered on the Virginian.

But the fight continued. The Kentuckian grabbed his smaller opponent and held him in a tight bear hug, forcing the Virginian to relinquish his facial grip. Over and over the two rolled, until, getting the Virginian under him, the big man "snapt off his nose so close to his face that no manner of projection remained." The Virginian quickly recovered, seized the Kentuckian's lower lip in his teeth, and ripped it down over his enemy's chin. This was enough: "The Kentuckian at length *gave out*, on which the people carried off the victor, and he preferring a triumph to a doctor, who came to cicatrize his face, suffered himself to be chaired round the ground as the champion of the times, and the first *rougher-and-tumbler*. The poor wretch, whose eyes were started from their spheres, and whose lip refused its office, returned to the town, to hide his impotence, and get his countenance repaired." The citizens refreshed themselves with whiskey and biscuits, then resumed their races.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

Ashe's Quaker friend reported that such spontaneous races occurred two or three times a week and that the annual fall and spring meets lasted fourteen uninterrupted days, "aided by the licentious and profligate of all the neighboring states." As for rough-and-tumbles, the Quaker saw no hope of suppressing them. Few nights passed without such fights; few mornings failed to reveal a new citizen with mutilated features. It was a regional taste, unrestrained by law or authority, an inevitable part of life on the left bank of the Ohio.²⁷

BY THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY, ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE fighting had generated its own folklore.²⁸ Horror mingled with awe when residents of the Ohio Valley pointed out one-eyed individuals to visitors, when New Englanders referred to an empty eye socket as a "Virginia Brand," when North Carolinians related stories of mass rough-and-tumbles ending with eyeballs covering the ground, and when Kentuckians told of battle-royals so intense that severed eyes, ears, and noses filled bushel baskets. Place names like "Fighting Creek" and "Gouge Eye" perpetuated the memory of heroic encounters, and rustic bombast reached new extremes with estimates from some counties that every third man wanted an eye.²⁹ As much as the style of combat, the rich oral folklore of the backcountry—the legends, tales, ritual boasts, and verbal duels, all of them in regional vernacular—made rough-and-tumble fighting unique.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of the spoken word in southern life. Traditional tales, songs, and beliefs—transmitted orally by blacks as well as whites—formed the cornerstone of culture. Folklore socialized children, inculcated values, and helped forge a distinct regional sensibility. Even wealthy and well-educated planters, raised at the knees of black mammies, imbibed both Afro-American and white traditions, and charismatic politicians secured loyal followers by speaking the people's language. Southern society was based more on personalistic, face-to-face, kin-and-community relationships than on legalistic or bureaucratic ones. Interactions between southerners were guided by elaborate rituals of hospitality, demonstrative conviviality, and kinship ties—all of which emphasized personal dependencies and reliance on the spoken word. Through the antebellum period and beyond, the South had an oral as much as a written culture.³⁰

Boundaries between talk and action, ideas and behavior, are less clear in spoken than in written contexts. Psychologically, print seems more distant and abstract than speech, which is inextricably bound to specific individuals, times, and places. In

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86–88. No doubt Ashe exaggerated the frequency of gouging matches.

²⁸ Walter Blair and Franklin J. Meine, *Mike Fink, King of Mississippi Keelboatmen* (New York, 1933), 105–25.

²⁹ *New York Spirit of the Times*, July 4, 1840, p. 207; Parramore, "Gouging in North Carolina," 62; Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 112; Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlands* (New York, 1929), 375; and Weld, *Travels Through the States of North America*, 193.

³⁰ See Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), esp. bk. 1, pt. 1; Frank Lawrence Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South* (Baton Rouge, 1949); Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, introduction and chaps. 1–3, 8; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 121–31; and Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism* (New York, 1983), chaps. 1, 2. Wyatt-Brown observed that honor and shame in southern culture reinforced the importance of the spoken word because they required personal confrontations; *Southern Honor*, 46–48, 56–58, and pt. 3.

becoming part of the realm of sight rather than sound, words leave behind their personal, living qualities, gaining in fixity what they lose in dynamism. Literate peoples separate thought from action, pigeon-holing ideas and behavior. Nonliterate ones draw this distinction less sharply, viewing words and the events to which they refer as a single reality. In oral cultures generally, and the Old South in particular, the spoken word was a powerful force in daily life, because ideation and behavior remained closely linked.³¹

The oral traditions of hunters, drifters, herdsman, gamblers, roustabouts, and rural poor who rough-and-tumbled provided a strong social cement. Tall talk around a campfire, in a tavern, in front of a crossroads store, or at countless other meeting places on the southwestern frontier helped establish communal bonds between disparate persons. Because backwoods humorists possessed an unusual ability to draw people together and give expression to shared feelings, they often became the most effective leaders and preachers.³² But words could also divide. Fithian's observation in the eighteenth century—that seemingly innocuous remarks led to sickening violence—remained true for several generations. Men were so touchy about their personal reputations that any slight required an apology. This failing, only retribution restored public stature and self-esteem. "Saving face" was not just a metaphor.³³

The lore of backwoods combat, however, both inflated and deflated egos. By the early nineteenth century, simple epithets evolved into verbal duels—rituals well known to folklorists. Backcountry men took turns bragging about their prowess, possessions, and accomplishments, spurring each other on to new heights of self-magnification.³⁴ Such exchanges heightened tension and engendered a sense of theatricality and display. But boasting, unlike insults, did not always lead to combat, for, in a culture that valued oral skills, the verbal battle itself—the contest over who best controlled the power of words—was a real quest for domination:

"I am a man; I am a horse; I am a team. I can whip any man *in all Kentucky*, by G-d!" The other replied, "I am an alligator, half man, half horse; can whip any man on the *Mississippi*, by G-d!" The first one again, "I am a man; have the best horse, best dog, best gun and handsomest wife in all Kentucky, by G-d." The other, "I am a Mississippi snapping turtle: have bear's claws, alligator's teeth, and the devil's tail; can whip *any man*, by G-d."³⁵

³¹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York, 1978), 157. Levine's work is indispensable for historians studying southern folk cultures, black or white.

³² Kenneth Schuyler Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston, 1960), 23–32.

³³ Harden Taliaferro created a character who incited others to fight by inadvertently uttering Latin phrases, making them feel intellectually inferior; *Fisher's River Scenes*, 193–94. Mike Fink once challenged a man who failed to laugh at his stories, claiming that the stranger's sullenness dampened everyone's spirits; Blair and Meine, *Mike Fink*, 112–13. For the theme of defending reputation, see Peter Berger *et al.*, *The Homeless Mind* (New York, 1973), 83–96; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 14–15; and Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice, Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York, 1984), chap. 1.

³⁴ For example, see C. F. Hoffman, *A Winter in the West, By a New Yorker*, 2 (New York, 1835), 221–24, as cited in James I. Robertson, Jr., "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater in Frontier Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 17 (1958): 97. Whites' sensitivity to affront can be contrasted with blacks who made ritualized insult into a dueling game commonly called "the dozens." Playing the dozens toughened blacks for the abuse that whites inevitably gave them. See, for example, Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 344–58; John Dollard, "The Dozens: Dialect of Insult," *American Imago*, 1 (1939): 3–25; and Roger D. Abrahams, "Playing the Dozens," *Journal of American Folklore*, 75 (1962): 209–20. Both articles are reprinted in Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), 277–94, 295–309.

³⁵ Thus, Christian Schultz, Jr., overheard two drunken riverboatmen arguing over a Choctaw woman;

Such elaborate boasts were not composed on the spot. Folklorists point out that free-phrase verbal forms, from Homeric epics to contemporary blues, are created through an oral formulaic process. The singer of epics, for example, does not memorize thousands of lines but knows the underlying skeleton of his narrative and, as he sings, fleshes it out with old commonplaces and new turns of phrase. In this way, oral formulaic composition merges cultural continuity with individual creativity. A similar but simplified version of the same process was at work in backwoods bragging.³⁶

A quarter-century after the above exchange made its way into print, several of the same phrases still circulated orally and were worked into new patterns. "By Gaud, stranger," said he, 'do you know me?—do you know what stuff I'm made of? Clear steamboat, sea horse, alligator—run agin me, run agin a snag—jam up—whoop! Got the prettiest sister, and biggest whiskers of any man hereabouts—I can lick my weight in wild cats, or any man in all Kentuck!'"³⁷ Style and details changed, but the themes remained the same: comparing oneself to wild animals, boasting of possessions and accomplishments, asserting domination over others. Mike Fink, legendary keelboatman, champion gouger, and fearless hunter, put his own mark on the old form and elevated it to art:

"I'm a salt River roarer! I'm a ring tailed squealer! I'm a regular screamer from the old Massassip! Whoop! I'm the very infant that refused his milk before its eyes were open and called out for a bottle of old Rye! I love the women and I'm chockful o' fight! I'm half wild horse and half cock-eyed alligator and the rest o' me is crooked snags an' red-hot snappin' turtle. . . . I can out-run, out-jump, out-shoot, out-brag, out-drink, an' out-fight, rough-an'-tumble, no holts barred, any man on both sides the river from Pittsburgh to New Orleans an' back ag'in to St. Louiee. Come on, you flatters, you bargers, you milk white mechanics, an' see how tough I am to chaw! I ain't had a fight for two days an' I'm spilein' for exercise. Cock-a-doodle-doo!"³⁸

Tall talk and ritual boasts were not uniquely American. Folklore indexes are filled with international legends and tales of exaggeration.³⁹ But inflated language did find a secure home in America in the first half of the nineteenth century. Spread-eagle rhetoric was tailor-made for a young nation seeking a secure identity. Bombastic speech helped justify the development of unfamiliar social institutions, flowery oratory salved painful economic changes, and lofty words masked aggressive territorial expansion. In a circular pattern of reinforcement, heroic talk spurred heroic deeds, so that great acts found heightened meaning in great words. Alexis de Tocqueville observed during his travels in the 1830s that clearing land, draining swamps, and planting crops were hardly the stuff of literature. But the

Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 115. Also see Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Davy Crockett, American Comic Legend* (New York, 1939), xv–xvii.

³⁶ Albert B. Lord and Milman Perry found that, despite the passage of decades, Serbo-Croatian epics changed in detail but not in plot or structure. Lord described their field studies in his *The Singer of Tales* (New York, 1971), chaps. 1–3. Also see William R. Ferris, Jr., *Blues from the Delta* (New York, 1978), sect. 2.

³⁷ Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, 27.

³⁸ Blair and Meine, *Mike Fink*, 105–06.

³⁹ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York, 1946), and *Motif Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington, Ind., 1955–58).



"A Street Fight," *The Crockett Almanac*, 1841 (Nashville, Tenn., [1840]). Woodcut reproduced courtesy of Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

collective vision of democratic multitudes building a great nation formed a grand poetic ideal that haunted men's imaginations.⁴⁰

The gaudy poetry of the strapping young nation had its equivalent in the exaggeration of individual powers. Folklore placing man at the center of the universe buttressed the emergent ideology of equality. Tocqueville underestimated Americans' ability to celebrate the mundane, for ego magnification was essential in a nation that extolled self-creation. While America prided itself on shattering old boundaries, on liberating individuals from social, geographic, and cultural encumbrances, such freedom left each citizen frighteningly alone to succeed or fail in forging his own identity. To hyperbolize one's achievements was a source of power and control, a means of amplifying the self while bringing human, natural, and social obstacles down to size. The folklore of exaggeration could transform even the most prosaic commercial dealings into great contests. Early in the nineteenth century, legends of crafty Yankee peddlers and unscrupulous livestock traders abounded.⁴¹ A horse dealer described an animal to a buyer in the 1840s: "Sir, he can jump a house or go through a pantry, as it suits him; no hounds are too fast for

⁴⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2: 75–83.

⁴¹ See, for example, Eugene W. Hollon, *Frontier Violence, Another Look* (New York, 1974), 21; "A Kentucky

him, no day too long for him. He has the courage of a lion, and the docility of a lamb, and you may ride him with a thread. Weight did you say? Why, he would carry the national debt and not bate a penny.'" The most insipid marketplace transactions were transfigured by inflated language, legends of heroic salesmanship, and an ethos of contest and battle.⁴²

The oral narratives of the southern backcountry drew strength from these national traditions yet possessed unique characteristics. Above all, fight legends portrayed backwoodsmen reveling in blood. Violence existed for its own sake, unencumbered by romantic conventions and claiming no redeeming social or psychic value. Gouging narratives may have masked grimness with black humor, but they offered little pretense that violence was a creative or civilizing force.⁴³ Thus, one Kentuckian defeated a bear by chewing off its nose and scratching out its eyes. "They can't stand Kentucky play," the settler proclaimed, "biting and gouging are too hard for them." Humor quickly slipped toward horror, when Davy Crockett, for example, coolly boasted, "I kept my thumb in his eye, and was just going to give it a twist and bring the peeper out, like taking up a gooseberry in a spoon." To Crockett's eternal chagrin, someone interrupted the battle just at this crucial juncture.⁴⁴

Sadistic violence gave many frontier legends a surreal quality. Two Mississippi raftsmen engaged in ritual boasts and insults after one accidentally nudged the other toward the water, wetting his shoes. Cheered on by their respective gangs, they stripped off their shirts, then pummeled, knocked out teeth, and wore skin from each other's faces. The older combatant asked if his opponent had had enough. "Yes," he was told, "when I drink your heart's blood, I'll cry enough, and not till then." The younger man gouged out an eye. Just as quickly, his opponent was on top, strangling his adversary. But in a final reversal of fortunes, the would-be victor cried out, then rolled over dead, a stab wound in his side. Protected by his clique, the winner jumped in the water, swam to a river island, and crowed: "Ruoo-ruoo-o! I can lick a steamboat. My fingernails is related to a sawmill on my mother's side and my daddy was a double breasted catamount! I wear a hoop snake for a neck-handkerchief, and the brass buttons on my coat have all been boiled in poison."⁴⁵

Fight," *New York Spirit of the Times*, December 12, 1835, p. 2; Richard M. Dorson, *America in Legend* (New York, 1973), 57–122; Neil Harris, *Humburg: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Boston, 1973), 67–89; and Lawrence W. Levine, "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation," *AHR*, 89 (1984): 53–54.

⁴² *New York Spirit of the Times*, May 30, 1846, p. 159. Legends of frontier fighting found their way into comic almanacs and dime novels and onto the urban stage. Grandiose boasts and legendary fights fed a national tradition celebrating larger-than-life heroes. See Blair and Meine, *Mike Fink*, 105–25; Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York, 1931), 53–55; Dorson, *Davy Crockett*, xv–xxvi, 34–35, 38–42, 60–61, 127–30; and Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater," 97–99.

⁴³ For the most wide-ranging discussion of violence in American fiction, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (Middletown, Conn., 1973), esp. chaps. 9–13. Also see David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction, 1798–1860* (Ithaca, 1957); and Kenneth Schuyler Lynn, "Violence in American Literature and Folklore," in Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York, 1969), 226–45.

⁴⁴ James B. Finley, as quoted in Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 87; and Dorson, *Davy Crockett*, 83. Another Kentuckian fought an alligator and insisted that his comrades stay back and "give the fellow fair play." The alligator, of course, lost both eyes. Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 87.

⁴⁵ "An Arkansas Fight," *New York Spirit of the Times*, February 18, 1843, p. 611. For an analysis of the graphic realism of such stories, see Norris Yates, *William T. Porter and the Spirit of the Times* (Baton Rouge, 1957), 118–22.

The danger and violence of daily life in the backwoods contributed mightily to sanguinary oral traditions that exalted the strong and deprecated the weak. Early in the nineteenth century, the Southwest contained more than its share of terrifying wild animals, powerful and well-organized Indian tribes, and marauding white outlaws. Equally important were high infant mortality rates and short life expectancies, agricultural blights, class inequities, and the centuries-old belief that betrayal and cruelty were man's fate. Emmeline Grangerford's graveyard poetry—set against a backdrop of rural isolation shattered by sadistic clan feuds—is but the best-known expression of the deep loneliness, death longings, and melancholy that permeated backcountry life.⁴⁶

At first glance, boisterous tall talk and violent legends seem far removed from sadness and alienation. Yet, as Kenneth Lynn has argued, they grew from common origins, and the former allowed men to resist succumbing to the latter. Not passive acceptance but identification with brutes and brawlers characterized frontier legendry. Rather than be overwhelmed by violence, acquiesce in an oppressive environment, or submit to death as an escape from tragedy, why not make a virtue of necessity and flaunt one's unconcern? To revel in the lore of deformity, mutilation, and death was to beat the wilderness at its own game.⁴⁷ The storyteller's art dramatized life and converted nameless anxieties into high adventure; bravado helped men face down a threatening world and transform terror into power. To claim that one was sired by wild animals, kin to natural disasters, and tougher than steam engines—which were displacing rivermen in the antebellum era—was to gain a momentary respite from fear, a cathartic, if temporary, sense of being in control. Symbolically, wild boasts overwhelmed the very forces that threatened the backwoodsmen.

But there is another level of meaning here. Sometimes fight legends invited an ambiguous response, mingling the celebration of beastly acts with the rejection of barbarism. By their very nature, tall tales elicit skepticism. Even while men identified with the violence that challenged them, the folklore of eye gouging constantly tested the limits of credibility.⁴⁸ “Pretty soon I got the squatter down, and just then he fixed his teeth into my throte, and I felt my windpipe begin to loosen.”⁴⁹ The calculated coolness and understatement of this description highlights the outrageousness of the act. The storyteller has artfully maneuvered his audience to the edge of credulity.

Backwoodsmen mocked their animality by exaggerating it, thereby affirming their own humanity. A Kentuckian battled inconclusively from ten in the morning until sundown, when his wife showed up to cheer him on:

“So I gathered all the little strength I had, and I socked my thumb in his eye, and with my

⁴⁶ For two examinations of the deep pessimism and melancholy pervading backwoods life, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 29–34; and Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chap. 4. Also see Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884; reprint, New York, 1959), 104–07.

⁴⁷ Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, 23–32.

⁴⁸ Rourke, *American Humor*, chap. 2. Neil Harris argued that stretching the limits of credulity was precisely the appeal of P. T. Barnum. In a democratic society, individuals must distinguish sham from truth, the very game Barnum played with his audience; *Humbug*, 67–89.

⁴⁹ Dorson, *Davy Crockett*, 83.

fingers took a twist on his *snot box*, and with the other hand, I grabbed him by the back of the head; I then caught his ear in my mouth, gin his head a flirt, and *out come his ear by the roots!* I then flopped his head over, and caught his other ear in my mouth, and jerked that out in the same way, and it made a hole in his head that I could have rammed my fist through, and I was just goin’ to when he hollered: ‘Nuff!’”⁵⁰

More than realism or fantasy alone, fight legends stretched the imagination by blending both. As metaphoric statements, they reconciled contradictory impulses, at once glorifying and parodying barbarity. In this sense, gouging narratives were commentaries on backwoods life. The legends were texts that allowed plain folk to dramatize the tensions and ambiguities of their lives: they hauled society’s goods yet lived on its fringe; they destroyed forests and game while clearing the land for settlement; they killed Indians to make way for the white man’s culture; they struggled for self-sufficiency only to become ensnared in economic dependency. Fight narratives articulated the fundamental contradiction of frontier life—the abandonment of “civilized” ways that led to the ultimate expansion of civilized society.⁵¹

FOREIGN TRAVELERS MIGHT EXAGGERATE and backwoods storytellers embellish, but the most neglected fact about eye-gouging matches is their actuality.⁵² Circuit Court Judge Aedamus Burke barely contained his astonishment while presiding in South Carolina’s upcountry: “Before God, gentlemen of the jury, I never saw such a thing before in the world. There is a plaintiff with an eye out! A juror with an eye out! And two witnesses with an eye out!” If the “ringtailed roarers” did not actually breakfast on stewed Yankee, washed down with spike nails and epsom salts, court records from Sumner County, Arkansas, did describe assault victims with the words “nose was bit.” The gamest “gamecock of the wilderness” never really moved steamboat engines by grinning at them, but Reuben Cheek did receive a three-year sentence to the Tennessee penitentiary for gouging out William Maxey’s eye.⁵³ Most backcountrymen went to the grave with their faces intact, just as most of the southern gentry never fought a duel. But as an extreme version of the common tendency toward brawling, street fighting, and seeking personal vengeance, rough-

⁵⁰ Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 112.

⁵¹ In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Slotkin argued that this contradiction was the very font of literature and folklore on the American frontier. Also see Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, 23–32.

⁵² Folklorists and literary scholars, primarily interested in textual analysis, too readily dismiss the reality of these battles. See, for example, Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America’s Humor from Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York, 1978), 113–32; and Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, 23–32.

⁵³ Benjamin F. Perry, as quoted in Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 33; Dorson, *Davy Crockett*, xv–xvi; and Robertson, “Frolics, Fights, and Firewater,” 109. Perry’s diary, 1832–60, is in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Williams also recounted the case of a judge who sentenced two defendants—one missing his lip, the other an ear—to the same cell: “[Now] you may bite one another as much as you please”; *Vogues in Villainy*, 33. Wyatt-Brown included the following account: “In Davidson County, North Carolina, a drunken young mountaineer named William Tippet had bitten off a large piece of old Arthur Newsome’s chin, almost plucked out his left eye, and grasped Newsome’s right eye with his other hand. A witness at the tavern scene reported that Tippet ‘felt the eyeball slip around his fingers,’ and said with a laugh before the crowd watching that ‘he reckoned the fire flew mightily’ out of that eye. Indeed, the old man was left with just one, badly injured, eye when the right one popped out some days later.” *Southern Honor*, 393.

and-tumbling gives us insight into the deep values and assumptions—the *mentalité*—of backwoods life.⁵⁴

Observers often accused rough-and-tumblers of fighting like animals. But eye gouging was not instinctive behavior, the human equivalent of two rams vying for dominance. Animals fight to attain specific objectives, such as food, sexual priority, or territory. Precisely where to draw the line between human aggression as a genetically programmed response or as a product of social and cultural learning remains a hotly debated issue. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to make a case for eye gouging as a genetic imperative, coded behavior to maximize individual or species survival. Although rough-and-tumble fighting appears primitive and anarchic to modern eyes, there can be little doubt that its origins, rituals, techniques, and goals were emphatically conditioned by environment; gouging was learned behavior. Humanistic social science more than sociobiology holds the keys to understanding this phenomenon.⁵⁵

What can we conclude about the culture and society that nourished rough-and-tumble fighting? The best place to begin is with the material base of life and the nature of daily work. Gamblers, hunters, herders, roustabouts, rivermen, and yeomen farmers were the sorts of persons usually associated with gouging. Such hallmarks of modernity as large-scale production, complex division of labor, and regular work rhythms were alien to their lives. Recent studies have stressed the premodern character of the southern uplands through most of the antebellum period. Even while cotton production boomed and trade expanded, a relatively small number of planters owned the best lands and most slaves, so huge parts of the South remained outside the flow of international markets or staple crop agriculture. Thus, backcountry whites commonly found themselves locked into a semisub-sistent pattern of living. Growing crops for home consumption, supplementing food supplies with abundant game, allowing small herds to fatten in the woods, spending scarce money for essential staples, and bartering goods for the services of part-time or itinerant trades people, the upland folk lived in an intensely local, kin-based society. Rural hamlets, impassable roads, and provincial isolation—not growing towns, internal improvements, or international commerce—characterized the backcountry.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ On the remarkably high rate of interpersonal violence in the South, see Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 9–33, 98–101, 111–16, 263–76; Michael S. Hindus, *Prison and Plantation: Crime, Justice, and Authority in Massachusetts and South Carolina, 1767–1878* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 42–49, 63–67, 96–98; and Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 6–7, 11–14, 31–38.

⁵⁵ The nature or nurture debate rages on. For examples, see Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York, 1973), pts. 1, 2; Clifford Geertz, “The Growth of Culture and the Evolution of the Mind,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), chap. 3; Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (New York, 1969); Richard G. Sipes, “War, Sports, and Aggression: An Empirical Test of Two Rival Theories,” *American Anthropologist*, new ser., 75 (1973): 64–86; Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); Charles J. Lumsden and Edward O. Wilson, *Promethean Fire: Reflections on the Origin of Mind* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Daniel G. Freedman, *Human Sociobiology* (New York, 1979); Ashley Montagu, ed., *Sociobiology Examined* (New York, 1980); Michael S. Gregory *et al.*, *Not in Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, and Human Nature* (New York, 1984); Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (Ann Arbor, 1976); Stephen Jay Gould, “Genes on the Brain,” *New York Review*, June 30, 1983, pp. 5–10; and Peter Marsh and Anne Campbell, eds., *Aggression and Violence* (Oxford, 1982).

⁵⁶ Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 114–18; Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, chap. 3; and Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, esp. chap. 2. Several recent studies have emphasized the premodern, localistic social and cultural

Even men whose livelihoods depended on expanding markets often continued their rough, premodern ways. Characteristic of life on a Mississippi barge, for example, were long periods of idleness shattered by intense anxiety, as deadly snags, shoals, and storms approached. Running aground on a sandbar meant backbreaking labor to maneuver a thirty-ton vessel out of trouble. Boredom weighed as heavily as danger, so tale telling, singing, drinking, and gambling filled the empty hours. Once goods were taken on in New Orleans, the men began the thousand-mile return journey against the current. Before steam power replaced muscle, bad food and whiskey fueled the gangs who day after day, exposed to wind and water, poled the river bottoms or strained at the cordelling ropes until their vessel reached the tributaries of the Missouri or the Ohio. Hunters, trappers, herdsmen, subsistence farmers, and other backwoodsmen faced different but equally taxing hardships, and those who endured prided themselves on their strength and daring, their stamina, cunning, and ferocity.⁵⁷

Such men played as lustily as they worked, counterpointing bouts of intense labor with strenuous leisure. What travelers mistook for laziness was a refusal to work and save with compulsive regularity. "I have seen nothing in human form so profligate as they are," James Flint wrote of the boatmen he met around 1820. "Accomplished in depravity, their habits and education seem to comprehend every vice. They make few pretensions to moral character; and their swearing is excessive and perfectly disgusting. Although earning good wages, they are in the most abject poverty; many of them being without anything like clean or comfortable clothing." A generation later, Mark Twain vividly remembered those who manned the great timber and coal rafts gliding past his boyhood home in Hannibal, Missouri: "Rude, uneducated, brave, suffering terrific hardships with sailorlike stoicism; heavy drinkers, course frolickers in moral sties like the Natchez-under-the-hill of that day, heavy fighters, reckless fellows, every one, elephantinely jolly, foul witted, profane; prodigal of their money, bankrupt at the end of the trip, fond of barbaric finery, prodigious braggarts; yet, in the main, honest, trustworthy, faithful to promises and duty, and often picaresquely magnanimous." Details might change, but penury, loose morality, and lack of steady habits endured.⁵⁸

Boatmen, hunters, and herdsmen were often separated from wives and children for long periods. More important, backcountry couples lacked the emotionally intense experience of the bourgeois family. They spent much of their time apart and found companionship with members of their own sex. The frontier town or crossroads tavern brought males together in surrogate brotherhoods, where rough men paid little deference to the civilizing role of women and the moral uplift of the domestic family. On the margins of a booming, modernizing society, they shared an

patterns of the upland South and their transformation during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. See Hahn, *Roots of Populism*, pt. 1; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978), chaps. 1, 5; William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton, 1974), chap. 1; and Forrest McDonald and Grady McWhiney, "The South from Self-Sufficiency to Peonage: An Interpretation," *AHR*, 85 (1980): 1103–11.

⁵⁷ Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 117–21; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chaps. 4, 9; Owsley, *Plain Folk of the Old South*, chap. 3; and Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier* (New York, 1978), 283–84.

⁵⁸ Flint, as quoted in Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 115; and Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883; reprint, New York, 1961), 24.

intensely communal yet fiercely competitive way of life. Thus, where work was least rationalized and specialized, domesticity weakest, legal institutions primitive, and the market economy feeble, rough-and-tumble fighting found fertile soil.⁵⁹

Just as the economy of the southern backcountry remained locally oriented, the rough-and-tumblers were local heroes, renowned in their communities. There was no professionalization here. Men fought for informal village and county titles; the red feather in the champion's cap was pay enough because it marked him as first among his peers. Paralleling the primitive division of labor in backwoods society, boundaries between entertainment and daily life, between spectators and participants, were not sharply drawn. "Bully of the Hill" Ab Gaines from the Big Hatchie Country, Neil Brown of Totty's Bend, Vernon's William Holt, and Smithfield's Jim Willis—all of them were renowned Tennessee fighters, local heroes in their day. Legendary champions were real individuals, tested gang leaders who attained their status by being the meanest, toughest, and most ruthless fighters, who faced disfigurement and never backed down. Challenges were ever present; yesterday's spectator was today's champion, today's champion tomorrow's invalid.⁶⁰

Given the lives these men led, a world view that embraced fearlessness made sense. Hunters, trappers, Indian fighters, and herdsmen who knew the smell of warm blood on their hands refused to sentimentalize an environment filled with threatening forces. It was not that backwoodsmen lived in constant danger but that violence was unpredictable. Recreations like cockfighting deadened men to cruelty, and the gratuitous savagery of gouging matches reinforced the daily truth that life was brutal, guided only by the logic of superior nerve, power, and cunning.⁶¹ With families emotionally or physically distant and civil institutions weak, a man's role in the all-male society was defined less by his ability as a breadwinner than by his ferocity. The touchstone of masculinity was unflinching toughness, not chivalry, duty, or piety. Violent sports, heavy drinking, and impulsive pleasure seeking were appropriate for men whose lives were hard, whose futures were unpredictable, and whose opportunities were limited. Gouging champions were group leaders because they embodied the basic values of their peers. The successful rough-and-tumbler proved his manhood by asserting his dominance and rendering his opponent "impotent," as Thomas Ashe put it. And the loser, though literally or symbolically castrated, demonstrated his mettle and maintained his honor.⁶²

Here we begin to understand the travelers' refrain about plain folk degradation.

⁵⁹ Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater"; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, 94–98; and Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, esp. chaps. 2, 3, 6, 11, 13. For a speculative discussion of the transformation of male roles from premodern to modern times, see Peter N. Stearns, *Be a Man: Males in Modern Society* (New York, 1979), chaps. 2, 3.

⁶⁰ Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater," 109. Robertson noted that observers were so aroused during an 1816 fight in Elkton, Tennessee, that several rough-and-tumbles quickly commenced.

⁶¹ Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chap. 9. For a fine discussion of changing English attitudes toward animals, see Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London, 1983), esp. chaps. 3, 4. An American counterpart to Thomas's work remains to be written.

⁶² Moore described the group values of these men; *Frontier Mind*, 119–22. Intense loyalties and frightful intragroup competition at first seem contradictory. For an excellent discussion of how mutually exclusive norms, such as dependence and independence, coexist in the southern mountains, see Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path* (New York, 1976), 88–93. Also see Stearn's discussion of male values in hunting societies; *Be a Man*, chap. 2.

Setting out from northern ports, whose inhabitants were increasingly possessed by visions of godly perfection and material progress, they found southern upcountry people slothful and backward. Ashe's Quaker friend in Wheeling, Virginia, made the point.⁶³ For Quakers and northern evangelicals, labor was a means of moral self-testing, and earthly success was a sign of God's grace, so hard work and steady habits became acts of piety. But not only Yankees endorsed sober restraint. A growing number of southern evangelicals also embraced a life of decorous self-control, rejecting the hedonistic and self-assertive values of old. During the late eighteenth century, as Rhys Isaac has observed, many plain folk disavowed the hegemonic gentry culture of conspicuous display and found individual worth, group pride, and transcendent meaning in religious revivals. By the antebellum era, new evangelical waves washed over class lines as rich and poor alike forswore such sins as drinking, gambling, cursing, fornication, horse racing, and dancing. But conversion was far from universal, and, for many in backcountry settlements like Wheeling, the evangelical idiom remained a foreign tongue. Men worked hard to feed themselves and their kin, to acquire goods and status, but they lacked the calling to prove their godliness through rigid morality. Salvation and self-denial were culturally less compelling values, and the barriers against leisure and self-gratification were lower here than among the converted.⁶⁴

Moreover, primitive markets and the semisubsistence basis of upcountry life limited men's dependence on goods produced by others and allowed them to maintain the irregular work rhythms of a precapitalist economy. The material base of backwoods life was ill suited to social transformation, and the cultural traditions of the past offered alternatives to rigid new ideals. Closing up shop in mid-week for a fight or horse race had always been perfectly acceptable, because men labored so that they might indulge the joys of the flesh. Neither a compulsive need to save time and money nor an obsession with progress haunted people's imaginations. The backcountry folk who lacked a bourgeois or Protestant sense of duty were little disturbed by exhibitions of human passions and were resigned to violence as part of daily life. Thus, the relative dearth of capitalistic values (such as delayed gratification and accumulation), the absence of a strict work ethic, and a cultural tradition that winked at lapses in moral rigor limited society's demands for sober self-control.⁶⁵

Not just unconverted poor whites but also large numbers of the slave-holding gentry still lent their prestige to a regional style that favored conspicuous displays of leisure. As C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, early observers, such as Robert Beverley and William Byrd, as well as modern-day commentators, have described a distinctly "southern ethic" in American history. Whether judged positively as leisure

⁶³ Ashe, *Travels in America*, 82–88. Also see Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 26.

⁶⁴ Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, pt. 2; and Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago, 1977), chap. 3. For an exceptional discussion of the social and religious origins of the northern work ethic, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1979), esp. chap. 1. On crime patterns and social differences in the nineteenth-century North and South, see Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 34–36, 53–55, 96–98, 242–55; and Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 16–33, 119–23.

⁶⁵ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, chaps. 2, 3; Rodgers, *Work Ethic in Industrial America*, chap. 1; Hahn, *Southern Populism*, pt. 1; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, chap. 4; Thornton, *Politics and Power*, chaps. 1–5; and Barney, *Secessionist Impulse*, chap. 1.

or negatively as laziness, the southern sensibility valued free time and rejected work as the consuming goal of life. Slavery reinforced this tendency, for how could labor be an unmitigated virtue if so much of it was performed by despised black bondsmen? When southerners did esteem commerce and enterprise, it was less because piling up wealth contained religious or moral value than because productivity facilitated the leisure ethos. Southerners could therefore work hard without placing labor at the center of their ethical universe. In important ways, then, the upland folk culture reflected a larger regional style.⁶⁶

Thus, the values, ideas, and institutions that rapidly transformed the North into a modern capitalist society came late to the South. Indeed, conspicuous display, heavy drinking, moral casualness, and love of games and sports had deep roots in much of Western culture. As Woodward has cautioned, we must take care not to interpret the southern ethic as unique or aberrant. The compulsions to subordinate leisure to productivity, to divide work and play into separate compartmentalized realms, and to improve each bright and shining hour were the novel ideas. The southern ethic anticipated human evil, tolerated ethical lapses, and accepted the finitude of man in contrast to the new style that demanded unprecedented moral rectitude and internalized self-restraint.⁶⁷

THE AMERICAN SOUTH ALSO SHARED with large parts of the Old World a taste for violence and personal vengeance. Long after the settling of the southern colonies, powerful patriarchal clans in Celtic and Mediterranean lands still avenged affronts to family honor with deadly feuds.⁶⁸ Norbert Elias has pointed out that postmedieval Europeans routinely spilled blood to settle their private quarrels. Across classes, the story was the same:

Two associates fall out over business; they quarrel, the conflict grows violent; one day they meet in a public place and one of them strikes the other dead. An innkeeper accuses another of stealing his clients; they become mortal enemies. Someone says a few malicious words about another; a family war develops. . . . Not only among the nobility were there family vengeance, private feuds, vendettas. . . . The little people too—the hatters, the tailors, the shepards—were all quick to draw their knives.

Emotions were freely expressed: jollity and laughter suddenly gave way to belligerence; guilt and penitence coexisted with hate; cruelty always lurked nearby. The modern middle-class individual, with his subdued, rational, calculating ways, finds it hard to understand the joy sixteenth-century Frenchmen took in ceremonially burning alive one or two dozen cats every Midsummer Day or the pleasure

⁶⁶ Woodward, "Southern Ethic in a Puritan World," 36–37, 42. For a fine analysis of southerners' historic compulsion to discuss their region, see Fred Hobson, *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain* (Baton Rouge, 1983).

⁶⁷ For Old World examples, see Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1973), chap. 4; and Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), chaps. 7–9.

⁶⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 366–69; and Julio Caro-Baroja, "Honour and Shame: An Historical Account of Several Conflicts," trans. R. Johnson, in J. G. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame* (Chicago, 1966), 88–91.

eighteenth-century Englishmen found in watching trained dogs slaughter each other.⁶⁹

Despite enormous cultural differences, inhabitants of the southern uplands exhibited characteristics of their forebears in the Old World. The Scots-Irish brought their reputation for ferocity to the backcountry, but English migrants, too, had a thirst for violence. Central authority was weak, and men reserved the right to settle differences for themselves. Vengeance was part of daily life. Drunken hilarity, good fellowship, and high spirits, especially at crossroads taverns, suddenly turned to violence. Traveler after traveler remarked on how forthright and friendly but quick to anger the backcountry people were. Like their European ancestors, they had not yet internalized the modern world's demand for tight emotional self-control.⁷⁰

Above all, the ancient concept of honor helps explain this shared proclivity for violence. According to the sociologist Peter Berger, modern men have difficulty taking seriously the idea of honor. American jurisprudence, for example, offers legal recourse for slander and libel because they involve material damages. But insult—publicly smearing a man's good name and besmirching his honor—implies no palpable injury and so does not exist in the eyes of the law. Honor is an intensely social concept, resting on reputation, community standing, and the esteem of kin and compatriots. To possess honor requires acknowledgment from others; it cannot exist in solitary conscience. Modern man, Berger has argued, is more responsive to dignity—the belief that personal worth inheres equally in each individual, regardless of his status in society. Dignity frees the evangelical to confront God alone, the capitalist to make contracts without customary encumbrances, and the reformer to uplift the lowly. Naked and alone man has dignity; extolled by peers and covered with ribbons, he has honor.⁷¹

Anthropologists have also discovered the centrality of honor in several cultures. According to J. G. Peristiany, honor and shame often preoccupy individuals in small-scale settings, where face-to-face relationships predominate over anonymous or bureaucratic ones. Social standing in such communities is never completely secure, because it must be validated by public opinion whose fickleness compels men constantly to assert and prove their worth. Julian Pitt-Rivers has added that, if

⁶⁹ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), 200–04. While I find dubious Elias's argument on the recent evolution of man's brain, his contention that manners, customs, and etiquette become vehicles of status emulation is convincing. For brilliant recent discussions of routine cruelty to animals through the eighteenth century and beyond, see Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, chaps. 3, 4; and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York, 1984), chap. 2. For violence in British sports, see Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations*, chap. 3; and Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard, *Barbarians, Gentlemen, and Players: A Sociological Study of the Development of Rugby Football* (New York, 1979), 32–43.

⁷⁰ Charles Augustus Murray was especially struck by the quixotic character of Kentucky hunters. See Murray, *Travels in North America* (1840; reprint, London, 1854), 175–76. Grady McWhiney has kindly lent me a draft chapter entitled “Violence” from his forthcoming book on the Celtic origins of southern culture (coauthored with Forrest McDonald). McWhiney's manuscript vividly captures the raw texture of antebellum southern life. I am not persuaded, however, by the Celtic thesis because too much evidence, including works cited above, indicates that violence was endemic to much of Britain and the Continent. Moreover, even if descendants of Celts were more violent than others, class, not culture, may be the reason—a factor McWhiney fails to consider. For other examples of violence, see Darnton, *Great Cat Massacre*, chap. 1; and Lawrence Stone, *The Crises of the Aristocracy, 1558–1642* (New York, 1965), 223–34.

⁷¹ Berger et al., *Homeless Mind*, 83–94.

society rejects a man's evaluation of himself and treats his claim to honor with ridicule or contempt, his very identity suffers because it is based on the judgment of peers. Shaming refers to that process by which an insult or any public humiliation impugns an individual's honor and thereby threatens his sense of self. By risking injury in a violent encounter, an affronted man—whether victorious or not—restores his sense of status and thus validates anew his claim to honor. Only valorous action, not words, can redeem his place in the ranks of his peer group.⁷²

Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued that this Old World ideal is the key to understanding southern history. Across boundaries of time, geography, and social class, the South was knit together by a primal concept of male valor, part of the ancient heritage of Indo-European folk cultures. Honor demanded clan loyalty, hospitality, protection of women, and defense of patriarchal prerogatives. Honorable men guarded their reputations, bristled at insults, and, where necessary, sought personal vindication through bloodshed. The culture of honor thrived in hierarchical rural communities like the American South and grew out of a fatalistic world view, which assumed that pain and suffering were man's fate. It accounts for the pervasive violence that marked relationships between southerners and explains their insistence on vengeance and their rejection of legal redress in settling quarrels. Honor tied personal identity to public fulfillment of social roles. Neither bourgeois self-control nor internalized conscience determined status; judgment by one's fellows was the wellspring of community standing.⁷³

In this light, the seemingly trivial causes for brawls enumerated as early as Fithian's time—name calling, subtle ridicule, breaches of decorum, displays of poor manners—make sense. If a man's good name was his most important possession, then any slight cut him deeply. "Having words" precipitated fights because words brought shame and undermined a man's sense of self. Symbolic acts, such as buying a round of drinks, conferred honor on all, while refusing to share a bottle implied some inequality in social status. Honor inhered not only in individuals but also in kin and peers; when members of two cliques had words, their tested leaders or several men from each side fought to uphold group prestige. Inheritors of primal honor, the southern plain folk were quick to take offense, and any perceived

⁷² Honor has especially concerned anthropologists of the Mediterranean. In Peristiany's *Honour and Shame*, see, especially, "Introduction," 9–18; Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 19–77; and Caro-Baroja, "Honor and Shame," 81–137. All of the essays in this collection are informative. Also see Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Sechem or the Politics of Sex* (Cambridge, 1977), "Honor," in David Sills, ed., *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 6 (New York, 1968), 503–10; and J. Davis, *People of the Mediterranean* (London, 1977), 89–101.

⁷³ Wyatt-Brown's book is brilliant but occasionally exasperating. For example, he too often treated culture as something established millenia ago and barely modified until the nineteenth century—thus, his rather cavalier dismissal of slavery as the major formative fact of southern history. In his urge to trace broad themes, he sometimes oversimplified complex cultural diversity. Amid marvelous ethnographic detail and insightful analyses of kinship patterns, sexual roles, power relationships, and so forth, Wyatt-Brown frequently fell back on a static and superorganic concept of culture that failed to do justice to those immediate historical changes, particularities of social life, and specific material conditions that shape values, beliefs, and ideologies. Southerners were not Teutonic tribesmen; they were not even Celtic herdsmen. Thus, the concept of honor, as applied by Wyatt-Brown, is too all-encompassing. We need to know more about how and why honor varies across economic systems and cultures. Nevertheless, Wyatt-Brown asked the right questions, and his book is filled with probing discussions and brilliant insights. It is a seminal work because it will frame years of future debate. Orlando Patterson has written a penetrating critique of Wyatt-Brown's book. See *Reviews in American History*, 12 (1984): 24–30. For a probing discussion of the northern conscience versus southern shame, see Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, chap. 1.

affront forced a man either to devalue himself or to strike back violently and avenge the wrong.⁷⁴

The concept of male honor takes us a long way toward understanding the meaning of eye-gouging matches. But backwoods people did not simply acquire some primordial notion without modifying it. Definitions of honorable behavior have always varied enormously across cultures. The southern upcountry fostered a particular style of honor, which grew out of the contradiction between equality and hierarchy. Honorific societies tend to be sharply stratified. Honor is apportioned according to rank, and men fight to maintain personal standing within their social categories. Because black chattel slavery was the basis for the southern hierarchy, slave owners had the most wealth and honor, while other whites scrambled for a bit of each, and bondsmen were permanently impoverished and dishonored.⁷⁵ Here was a source of tension for the plain folk. Men of honor shared freedom and equality; those denied honor were implicitly less than equal—perilously close to a slave-like condition. But in the eyes of the gentry, poor whites as well as blacks were outside the circle of honor, so both groups were subordinate. Thus, a herdsman’s insult failed to shame a planter since the two men were not on the same social level. Without a threat to the gentleman’s honor, there was no need for a duel; horsewhipping the insolent fellow sufficed.⁷⁶

Southern plain folk, then, were caught in a social contradiction. Society taught all white men to consider themselves equals, encouraged them to compete for power and status, yet threatened them from below with the specter of servitude and from above with insistence on obedience to rank and authority.⁷⁷ Cut off from upper-class tests of honor, backcountry people adopted their own. A rough-and-tumble was more than a poor man’s duel, a botched version of genteel combat. Plain folk chose not to ape the dispassionate, antiseptic, gentry style but to invert it. While the gentleman’s code of honor insisted on cool restraint, eye gougers gloried in unvarnished brutality. In contrast to duelists’ aloof silence, backwoods fighters screamed defiance to the world. As their own unique rites of honor, rough-and-tumble matches allowed backcountry men to shout their equality at each other. And eye-gouging fights also dispelled any stigma of servility. Ritual boasts, soaring oaths, outrageous ferocity, unflinching bloodiness—all proved a man’s freedom. Where the slave acted obsequiously, the backwoodsman resisted the slightest affront; where human chattels accepted blows and never raised a hand, plain folk

⁷⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, chaps. 2, 3, 13. Also see Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chaps. 1–4; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, chap. 5; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 9–28, 99–101; and William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828–1856* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 69–74, 238–44. Growing numbers of evangelicals, a small bourgeois class, and transplanted foreigners and Yankees were the most conspicuous opponents of the southern concept of honor.

⁷⁵ By definition, bondsmen were “men without honor” in all slave societies. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 10–13, and chap. 3.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Duelling in the Old South*, 26–28; and Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 355–57.

⁷⁷ On the ambiguous position of poor whites with respect to slavery and equality, see William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York, 1972), 10–11, 42–43, 62–65, 136–37; Barney, *Secessionist Impulse*, 38–48; Frederickson, *Black Image*, chap. 2; Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 370–74; Thornton, *Politics and Power*, xviii–xx, 55–58, 320–21, 443–50; Morgan, *American Slavery*, 376–87; and Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 94–97. Ayers, unlike Wyatt-Brown, argued that slavery was essential to the southern honor ethic, a position I find persuasive; *Vengeance and Justice*, 26–27.

celebrated violence; where blacks could not jeopardize their value as property, poor whites proved their autonomy by risking bodily parts. Symbolically reaffirming their claims to honor, gouging matches helped resolve painful uncertainties arising out of the ambiguous place of plain folk in the southern social structure.⁷⁸

Backwoods fighting reminds us of man's capacity for cruelty and is an excellent corrective to romanticizing premodern life. But a close look also keeps us from drawing facile conclusions about innate human aggressiveness. Eye gouging represented neither the "real" human animal emerging on the frontier, nor nature acting through man in a Darwinian struggle for survival, nor anarchic disorder and communal breakdown. Rather, rough-and-tumble fighting was ritualized behavior—a product of specific cultural assumptions. Men drink together, tongues loosen, a simmering old rivalry begins to boil; insult is given, offense taken, ritual boasts commence; the fight begins, mettle is tested, blood redeems honor, and equilibrium is restored. Eye gouging was the poor and middling whites' own version of a historical southern tendency to consider personal violence socially useful—indeed, ethically essential.⁷⁹

ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE FIGHTING EMERGED from the confluence of economic conditions, social relationships, and culture in the southern backcountry. Primitive markets and the semisubsistence basis of life threw men back on close ties to kin and community. Violence and poverty were part of daily existence, so endurance, even callousness, became functional values. Loyal to their localities, their occupations, and each other, men came together and found release from life's hardships in strong drink, tall talk, rude practical jokes, and cruel sports. They craved one another's recognition but rejected genteel, pious, or bourgeois values, awarding esteem on the basis of their own traditional standards. The glue that held men together was an intensely competitive status system in which the most prodigious drinker or strongest arm wrestler, the best tale teller, fiddle player, or log roller, the most daring gambler, original liar, skilled hunter, outrageous swearer, or accurate marksman was accorded respect by the others. Reputation was everything, and scars were badges of honor. Rough-and-tumble fighting demonstrated unflinching willingness to inflict pain while risking mutilation—all to defend one's standing among peers—and became a central expression of the all-male subculture.

⁷⁸ On dueling, see Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chap. 1; Williams, *Duelling in the Old South*, chaps. 1–4; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 350–61; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, 42–48; and Stephen M. Stowe, "The Touchiness of the Gentleman Planter: The Sense of Esteem and Continuity in the Ante-Bellum South," *Psychohistory Review*, 8 (1979): 6–17. Symbolic inversion has received considerable attention recently from anthropologists. For a wide-ranging sample of its applications, see Barbara A. Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca, 1978). By the antebellum period, knife fights with opponents' arms tied together and quickdraw gun battles marked backwoods fighting, which again seems to mock, with outrageous brutality, the decorum of duels. See Williams, *Duelling in the Old South*, 7; and Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction*, 267–72.

⁷⁹ Rohrbough documented the unusually high level of violence on the southwestern frontier in contrast to the northwestern edge of settlement; *Trans-Appalachian Frontier*, 117–18, 275–84. Also see Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *AHR*, 74 (1969): 906–25; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, chap. 13; Isaac, *Transformation of Virginia*, chap. 5; Hindus, *Prison and Plantation*, chap. 3; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 98–101, 113–17; Williams, *Vogues in Villainy*, 31–38; Franklin, *Militant South*, chap. 3; and McWhiney, "Violence." For violence in the contemporary South, see John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South* (Lexington, Mass., 1972), chap. 5.

Eye gouging continued long after the antebellum period. As the market economy absorbed new parts of the backcountry, however, the way of life that supported rough-and-tumbling waned. Certainly by mid-century the number of incidents declined, precisely when expanding international demand brought ever more upcountry acres into staple production.⁸⁰ Towns, schools, churches, revivals, and families gradually overtook the backwoods. In a slow and uneven process, keelboats gave way to steamers, then railroads; squatters, to cash crop farmers; hunters and trappers, to preachers. The plain folk code of honor was far from dead, but emergent social institutions engendered a moral ethos that warred against the old ways. For many individuals, the justifications for personal violence grew stricter, and mayhem became unacceptable.⁸¹

Ironically, progress also had a darker side. New technologies and modes of production could enhance men's fighting abilities. "Birmingham and Pittsburgh are obliged to complete . . . the equipment of the 'chivalric Kentuckian,'" Charles Augustus Murray observed in the 1840s, as bowie knives ended more and more rough-and-tumbles. Equally important, in 1835 the first modern revolver appeared, and manufacturers marketed cheap, accurate editions in the coming decade. Dueling weapons had been costly, and Kentucky rifles or horse pistols took a full minute to load and prime. The revolver, however, which fitted neatly into a man's pocket, settled more and more personal disputes. Raw and brutal as rough-and-tumbling was, it could not survive the use of arms. Yet precisely because eye gouging was so violent—because combatants cherished maimings, blindings, even castrations—it unleashed death wishes that invited new technologies of destruction.⁸²

With improved weaponry, dueling entered its golden age during the antebellum era. Armed combat remained both an expression of gentry sensibility and a mark of social rank. But in a society where status was always shifting and unclear, dueling did not stay confined to the upper class. The habitual carrying of weapons, once considered a sign of unmanly fear, now lost some of its stigma. As the backcountry changed, tests of honor continued, but gunplay rather than fighting tooth-and-nail appealed to new men with social aspirations.⁸³ Thus, progress and technology slowly circumscribed rough-and-tumble fighting, only to substitute a deadlier option. Violence grew neater and more lethal as men checked their savagery to murder each other.

⁸⁰ "The next thing I knowed I was a comen down on him with my hands and my teeth like when I was young, fighten back home. I recollect a thinken, 'If I can't kill him, I'll mark him up good.' So's I gouged at his eye chewed on his yer. I'd know him now in a million." Thus, Clovis Nevels described a fight in the 1940s in Harriet Arnow's novel *The Dollmaker* (New York, 1954). The contemporary works of novelist Harry Crews also contain descriptions of mayhem resembling eye-gouging matches.

⁸¹ Leyburn, *Scotch Irish*, 264–67; Hahn, *Roots of Populism*, chaps. 1, 2, 4, 5; Barney, *Secessionist Impulse*, chap. 1; Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, conclusion; and Thornton, *Politics and Power*, 291–311, 318–21.

⁸² Murray, *Travels in North America*, 175–78; Hollon, *Frontier Violence*, 109–10; Franklin, *Militant South*, chap. 3; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 350–61; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chap. 1; Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction*, chap. 10; McWhiney, "Violence"; and Dorson, *Davy Crockett*, 84.

⁸³ Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina*, 46–47; and Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, chap. 1. Wyatt-Brown succinctly captured the social function of the code of honor: "Duelling was a means to demonstrate status and manliness among those calling themselves gentlemen, whether born of noble blood or not"; *Southern Honor*, 355. Williams also saw dueling as symbolic social climbing; *Duelling in the Old South*, chap. 3.