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January 30, 2017

KANSAS CITY, Mo.—Last week, when I outed myself as an Angry White Man, I got some of that dreaded “nativist” fan mail. (Is it my imagination or has the word “nativist” been used more times in the past two months than in all previous recorded history?)

Let me make this clear: I’m not a nativist, I’m a redneck. There’s a difference. A nativist would be one of those snooty New Englanders in the Mayflower Society. Blue bloods in ruffled shirts. Think Adlai Stevenson…Noah Webster…William Rehnquist. Congregationalists. Pointy-nosed moralizers. Some of them could be angry—Jonathan Edwards comes to mind—but they were angry in a sort of clench-jawed Connecticut debutante way. *Ewwwww, don’t talk to her, she’s such a Kappa.*

The nativist idea of a rebellion is to dress up like Indians and dump tea in the ocean—the 18th-century version of frat boys pranking the archrival football team.

The redneck idea of a rebellion is to lie in wait with a shotgun for the guy who’s trying to tax your whiskey.

Rednecks are scary. Rednecks are Presbyterian.

Now. Most of you have no idea what I’m talking about when I say Presbyterian. You’re thinking it’s the plain-vanilla church on the town square run by a pasty-faced pastor named Morrison who speaks twice a week on the virtues of thrift and charity. But I’m not talking about 21st-century namby-pamby Presbyterians.

I’m talking about *Cumberland* Presbyterians. Hard-shells.

The ones in Tennessee and Texas and that southern part of Ohio that’s in Appalachia.

These are the original rednecks. These are not people who left their cross-timbered homes in South Yorkshire after deciding the Anglican Church was becoming “a bit too *Catholic*, yes, a bloody shame.” These were people who felt like most churches were a con game. These people hated *all* the churches. These were people who wanted to be left the hell alone. These are our Angry White Man forebears.

A little history is in order:

The first recorded use of the word “redneck” was in 1830, and it was a sneering remark by our nation’s first female reporter, Anne Royall, who was kind of a bitchy would-be aristocrat, even though she was somewhat of a redneck herself. She had been a house servant for a rich landowner in Sweet Springs, Virginia—what is now West Virginia, middle of nowhere—and she started sleeping with her boss and eventually got him to marry her. He was much older, so when he died, the family made sure she didn’t get any of his money. She then spent the rest of her life (a) trying to get his Revolutionary War pension, and (b) writing travel journals about how uncouth everyone is in the South. So in 1830 she’s in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and she wants to get across how ignorant and worthless the Presbyterians are, and so she calls ’em rednecks.

“America was the first place in the world that could appreciate a redneck.”

Now. Why would their necks be red? And why would Presbyterian necks be redder than anyone else?

To understand why, you need to pull out your map of the British Isles in the year 1700.

I’ll wait.

Ready? I call your attention to that part of Ireland called Ulster. Not Northern Ireland. Ulster. *It’s not the same thing.* Notice that it looks like one of those maps of Antarctica or Saudi Arabia that used to say “Unknown Region” or “Empty Quarter.” This is the part of Ireland that was so wild it had no real boundaries for centuries. It was just “that part up north where everything is out of control.”

If you’re a white human, born and raised in the South, that’s where you’re from—but *you’re not really Irish*. I’ll explain that later.

So what do we know about the Ulster area of Ireland?

It’s full of *pissed off people* who own incendiary devices.

That’s our heritage.

Okay, don’t put away the map yet.

Now draw a straight line from Belfast, across the Irish Sea, north of the Isle of Man, to that deep indentation in the British mainland where it looks like some snaggletoothed monster took a giant bite out of the coastline.

That’s where the border between Scotland and England is, and we Angry White Men are also from here. Some of us are Scottish, some of us are English, but all of us are what is known as Lowlanders or border people.

What do we know about Lowlanders? Well, we know that they lived on the border of two countries that hated each other for most of their history, so what does that tell us?

They’re *also* pissed off, they own firearms, and they like to fight.

And they play fiddles and clog-dance.

But the main thing we know about people from both these areas, Ulster and the Lowland Borders, is that their skin is white.

Their skin is very white.

Their skin is so white they can go to a beach in northern Sweden and they’ll sunburn.

And so when people from these areas work in the sun, their necks don’t tan, they just break out in red rashes like somebody threw measles cooties all over ’em.

Hence, rednecks.

But that still doesn’t explain why the word “redneck” was considered a putdown.

And that’s all about being Presbyterian.

The first redneck in history is John Knox.

Founder of the Presbyterian Church. Hell-raiser.

Such a badass that, every time he would talk to Mary Queen of Scots, he would make her cry.

I won’t go into his whole history, but just a few of the redneck bona fides of John Knox:

From a small town. (Haddington, in Scotland.)

Always hiding out from the law.

Constantly in and out of jail.

Kicked out of the country twice.

Full of wild ideas that made sense only to him, but he would wallop your ass if you challenged him.

Talked too much.

Hated authority.

Thought the Pope was ridiculous.

Thought the English and Scottish monarchs were ridiculous.

Thought the Archbishop of Canterbury was beyond ridiculous.

Believed in the death penalty for all felonies.

Believed in the Second Amendment before there even *was* a Second Amendment.

Fought in a war on the rebel side.

Involved in at least one riot.

Always pissed off.

Had a *Duck Dynasty* beard.

And if there’s any doubt he was a redneck…

Took a 17-year-old bride when he was 50 and got her pregnant five times.

He would feel totally at home today in Bogalusa.

Who thought John Knox was cool? The Lowlanders. People who were tired of getting pushed around. People who never got any respect. People who didn’t go to school. Farmers. Brawlers. People who had eight children and wished they could have a bigger family. People who were always refusing to do what the king said. They liked John Knox because he said you didn’t have to read and write to know what God was saying. Besides, if the kings and queens and archbishops all hated him, he automatically qualified as a cool dude.

Now, pay attention, this part is complicated, and I don’t want any letters from aggrieved kilt-wearing gangstas:

John Knox is over in Edinburgh being a troublemaker. The English don’t like him. The Pope doesn’t like him. The Archbishop of Canterbury hates him so much he’s trying to bring him up on charges. The Scottish queen thinks he’s horrid because he refuses to bless her marriage.

But he has all these uneducated scum-of-the-earth followers in the Lowlands, and they’re even harder to control after Knox’s death in 1572 because now you can’t summon the ringleader to the palace and threaten him with prison.

Meanwhile, at the end of the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth is enforcing her presence in Ireland, trying to get rid of the Irish chieftains. She’s constantly fighting with them. And she gets rid of *almost* all of them.

But the last holdout of the Irish badasses is the Catholic land barons in—of course—Ulster.

These are the equivalent of Catholic serial killers.

She never does conquer Ulster. It takes England till 1607 to finally get rid of all the Irish chieftains in the north, and the ones who are still alive flee to France so they can be Catholic and plot their comeback.

Elizabeth has died by then, and so we have King James managing this mess. You *know* he doesn’t like Catholics because he translated that Bible that the Catholics hate to this day.

So King James says, “You know what? Let’s kill two birds with one stone. Take all these John Knox followers in the borders and send ’em over to Ulster to take over the land we just seized from the Irish chieftains.”

So he basically rounds up the Presbyterians—the farmers, the Lowlanders—and he ships ’em over to Ulster, gives ’em all the Catholic land, and creates what we now know as…

Scots-Irish.

Some people say *Scotch*-Irish, but it’s really Scots-Irish. Scotch is a whiskey.

Scots-Irish is a term that is unknown in England or Scotland. My grandmother used it all the time, saying that was our heritage, we were *Scots-Irish*, and I would say, “Grandma, it’s two different places, it’s either one or the other, Scots or Irish.”

It was years later that I learned why it’s called that. It was Scottish people living in Ireland. Some of them did intermarry with the Irish Catholics, thereby creating some hybrid DNA, but for the most part we’re talking about Lowland Scots surrounded by angry Irish who hate their guts. Plus a few English from the area right there on the west coast of Britain—don’t put up the map yet—called Cumberland. The Cumberland people were fiercely independent, and it was not a good time to be fiercely independent, so they were lumped in with the dyspeptic Scots.

By the way, when Southerners go over to Scotland to return to their roots and buy sweaters, they always go to the wrong place. They go up to the Highlands and watch the bagpipe parades and look for the Loch Ness Monster, when they should be going down to picturesque Carlisle, in the Lowlands, largest city in Cumberland. Carlisle is about as exciting as downtown Akron on a rainy Tuesday morning. Carlisle is actually not even *in* Scotland. It’s in northern England.

And it’s the traditional capital of Cumberland. Cumberland is known for…nothing. They don’t make movies about Cumberland. The only thing Cumberland is famous for is having the highest mountain in England. Scafell Pike. 3,209 feet. Saying you have the highest mountain in England is sort of like saying you have the warmest climate in Iceland, but they need *something* for the tourist brochure.

So, if there’s such a thing as an English hillbilly, *all* of ’em are in Cumberland.

Hillbilly, by the way, is a term that wasn’t coined until 1891. All hillbillies are rednecks, but not all rednecks are hillbillies.

There’s gonna be a test on this later, I hope you’re taking notes.

Okay, here’s my point. All these Presbyterian farmers are sent over to Ulster to colonize it—and they don’t like it there any better than they liked it in the Lowlands. For a simple reason: The Catholics are always trying to kill ’em. They’re fighting over the land all the time.

So where do they go?

Welcome to Appalachia. America was the first place in the world that could appreciate a redneck.

The first big migration of rednecks to America was between 1717 and 1770. And they didn’t go to New York. Screw that. And they didn’t want Philadelphia or Boston, either. They hated cities. What they wanted was the first land you came to where there were *no people*. So they chose Pennsylvania because they had freedom of religion there, and they struck out west until there were no more cities and no more Quakers and no more Amish people and when they got close to Indian territory, they stopped and cleared the land for farming. And built a Presbyterian meetinghouse. Not a church—don’t call it that. The word “church” was so odious that they couldn’t even say it, so they called it a meetinghouse.

Okay, normally we Southerners don’t think of these people out in the middle of Pennsylvania as our kinfolk, but the biggest concentration of Scots-Irish Presbyterians is in…Pittsburgh.

James Carville, the political adviser to Bill Clinton, used to say, “Pennsylvania is Philadelphia in the east and Pittsburgh in the west, with Alabama in between.” But he was only half right. Pittsburgh is as redneck as Tuscaloosa.

So where do you end up when you’re trying to get away from all the people and be by yourself?

You end up in the mountains.

Nobody wanted to go up into those mountains in Western Pennsylvania—except the Scots-Irish. The question is sometimes asked, were the rednecks already hillbillies? Or did they *become* hillbillies when they found the Appalachians?

As I pointed out before, the highest mountain in Cumberland is 3,200 feet. The Smokies are 6,600. They had to *learn* to be mountain people. The reason those backwoods shacks exist in West Virginia is that they were escaping, hiding, and putting out a sign that said “All Representatives of All Governments Will Be Shot on Sight.”

And so the rednecks flow down through the Appalachian range, south through the Carolinas and Tennessee and north Georgia, and then out west to where one of ’em names the Cumberland River—where Nashville is today, at that time the farthest extreme of “the West”—and they create what we now know as…the South. Southern states are, in fact, full of places and things named Cumberland—rivers, creeks, mountains, sausages, crossroads, farms, dairies, hotels, counties, towns—but the original Cumberland doesn’t even exist anymore, having been abolished in 1974! The former lands of Cumberland are included in the modern county of Cumbria, but it’s almost like the American rednecks *stole Cumberland* from England—or, more precisely, picked it up off the side of the road when England tossed it out.

And the rednecks didn’t *just* go south. They also flowed down through the Ohio River Valley, which is why you have rednecks in Kentucky and Southern Indiana and Illinois and Missouri, which are not technically Southern states.

By the way, I keep hammering on Presbyterianism, but if you’re a Baptist or a Methodist, you’re still Scots-Irish. You *used* to be Presbyterian. Your ancestors switched over.

What happened is, after the Scots-Irish crossed the mountains and spread out through Middle Tennessee and Western Kentucky, they couldn’t get enough preachers.

And that’s because the Presbyterians insisted that all preachers be educated.

And the place they were educated was Princeton University. Princeton was formed in order to train Presbyterian ministers. So you had to wait till Princeton turned one out and then persuade him to trek his ass over the mountains and find your little piddly congregation that probably wasn’t able to pay him.

Meanwhile, the Baptists and Methodists are coming through, and they say, “Screw that, anybody can preach, we’ll lay hands on the guy and he starts preaching.” And so it got kind of boring in the Presbyterian church waiting for your preacher to show up when, right down the road, the Methodists and Baptists were rolling around on the ground having ecstatic experiences, sometimes while drunk.

So all the Presbyterians jumped over to Methodist and Baptist, except for the *Cumberland* Presbyterians. They said, “We don’t give a flying frijole whether you went to Bible school or not.” They were perfectly happy to let anybody preach, they didn’t care. They especially didn’t give a diddly-squat about what a college in New Jersey was telling them to do, and that’s why when you get out as far as Texas, all you have, Presbyterian-wise, is Cumberland Presbyterians, you don’t have any regular Presbyterians whatsoever.

Now. That was 300 years ago that the rednecks started coming over here. And my point is that they weren’t native. They were just…*immigrant refugees refusing to give cops their ID*.

And even though they’re denigrated today as Angry White Men, they were recognized in their day as the only farmers who didn’t use slaves. It’s a little weird to be characterizing them as bigots when, all through the years when it mattered, it was the Anglican aristocrats who owned the slave plantations, not the redneck Presbyterians. The rednecks got *mistaken* for bigots, because it was true that they didn’t like black people, but only because they didn’t like *anybody*.

They actually didn’t *need* slaves because they harvested their main crop themselves, and that crop was whiskey.

Moonshine.

What today we would call “artisanal craft bourbon.”

The rednecks were, in fact, the only people in history to wage war over whiskey. The Whiskey Rebellion lasted from 1791 to 1795, and it all started because Alexander Hamilton decided to put a tax on whiskey.

You had all these Scots-Irish farmers in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia who had been turning their grain and corn and barley into whiskey for a whole century, and then centuries before that in Ulster and in Scotland. So they said, “Uh-uh, no way, we just fought a war to get rid of taxation without representation, and now you’re telling us that we’re supposed to pay money back east for one of our *crops*?”

So they refused to pay, mobs were formed, revenue agents got tarred and feathered, barns got burned down, and there were two armed battles. These were the guys who had fought the goldurn Irish chieftains, they weren’t afraid of a New York dandy like Alexander Hamilton. Eventually George Washington himself led a force into Western Pennsylvania to put down the rednecks. It’s the only time in American history that a sitting president has led an army into battle. Two of the rednecks were captured, tried, and sentenced to death. Later pardoned. One of those was a man named Philip Wigle, and today there’s a Wigle Whiskey, made in his honor at a Pittsburgh distillery—indicating that rednecks never forget. I’m especially proud of Kentucky in this war. No Kentucky whiskey maker ever paid a single dime to the government.

And, by the way, it wasn’t rotgut whiskey. It was smooth, because it was the tradition in the Lowlands to triple-distill.

Okay, so there’s a direct line from the Presbyterian Church to the Ulster wars to the Whiskey Rebellion to bib overalls to moonshine to country music to NASCAR to the ability to vote for Trump while simultaneously despising him. Which brings me to my ultimate point about redneck history.

The reason Bill Clinton coined the term “angry white men” in the first place is that he stood eyebrow to eyebrow with them. He grew up in Hope, Arkansas, went to high school in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and campaigned in places like Jonesboro, Arkansas, where they’re still complaining about the 2 a.m. closing time for bars. (A redneck believes that no bar should ever close.)

So Bill knows, and most Southern politicians know, that rednecks might be *just a little crazy*.

Because the redneck alpha male is paranoid. All these Scots-Irish whiskey farmers have been hounded by kings, presidents, and revenue agents for 400 years. They assume anyone they don’t know is probably gonna kill ’em. So they’re secretive, sneaky, and hair-trigger violent. This is why rednecks are always used as foils, enemies, and villains in the movies. (See: *God’s Little Acre*, *Tobacco Road*, *Cape Fear*, *Sling Blade*, and, for the purist, *Deliverance*.) There’s no such thing as a headline that says “Rednecks March on West Los Angeles, Demand the End of Stereotypes.” And I’ll tell you why.

Rednecks don’t need organizations. Rednecks are convinced that they’re protected by God.

To prove this, I refer you to the ultimate documentary on Southern redneck culture—*Smokey and the Bandit*. Not only the highest-grossing movie of 1977, but the eighth-highest-grossing movie of all time. Four hundred million at the box office.

The premise of *Smokey and the Bandit* is that Burt Reynolds and his sidekick, Jerry Reed, have to move 400 cases of illegal Coors beer from Texarkana, Texas, to the south side of Atlanta, and they have only 28 hours to drive from Atlanta to Texarkana and back. In the movie they say it’s 900 miles each way. This is the kind of casual redneck lie we tell all day long. In actuality it’s just 700.

*Smokey and the Bandit* pretty much sums up the past 400 years of redneck history. Illegal alcohol. Fast cars. Bad girls in cutoff shorts with a checkered past (Sally Field is a runaway bride). Defiance of the law. Twisted humor. “Insider” language so the authorities don’t know what you’re talking about. (Trucker CB lingo.) Our own genre of music. (“East Bound and Down.”) Risking your life rather than submit to a police officer. Lots and lots of twisted metal. And the whole theme of the movie is “We’re gonna drive 1,800 miles through enemy territory to enforce our right to drink illegal alcohol at a party.”

You may remember the scene where Burt and Sally get trapped on a dirt road where the bridge is out, and Sheriff Jackie Gleason and several deputies are in hot pursuit.

At the moment of truth, the deputy’s car goes bumper down into the ditch while Burt’s Trans Am sails so far over the creek that, as it enters the woods on the other side, it *appears to still be rising*, which would defy the laws of physics.

I like to think there’s a reason for that. Somebody looked down from heaven and saw a redneck fighting the government, the police, popular perception, the snooty opinions of motion-picture executives, and the accumulated snobbery of 400 years, and he said, “Bless you, my son.” It was John Knox, the original redneck, performing a little miracle.

God loves rednecks. Why else would He create the Trans Am in the first place?

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