Mountain Humor: A Native American Legacy?

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"One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh."[1]

Vine Deloria, Jr., Native American Activist

I once worked with a woman who was a Sioux, living, at the time, in the mountains of western North Carolina. During a conversation, she made the comment that "Indians and mountain people have the same sense of humor." I found this observation intriguing because she was comparing us to Plains Indians, not Cherokee (who are, of course, mountain people too). It raised the questions: What is distinctive about mountain humor? and Is its relationship to Indian humor coincidental or is there some historical kinship that has remained covert over the years?

By mountain humor, I don't mean mountain-themed jokes, but rather the declarations of a mountain person or dialogue between people of Appalachia that they find humorous. It's reactions to everyday life or observations that come up in ordinary conversations, rather than joke-telling. It means sensing humor in various situations. For example, there's the sarcasm someone might have to a comment they find absurd. My grandmother was an excellent cook who never failed to put a perfect meal on the table. Once after she prepared dinner and the family was eating, she said, "I don't know if ya'll be able to

[1]Deloria, Jr., Vine. Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto. Macmillan Publishing, 1969, p. 146.

eat that chicken; I left it on the stove too long." One of her sons replied, "Yeah, Mama, it's pretty bad; we've been here gagging, trying to get it down." Anthropologist Jonathan Reyman says that Native Americans have "a well-developed sense of ...edgy sarcasm." Having trouble contacting a Hopi elder because he kept changing his phone number, Reyman asked him why he did it. The elder replied that so many young women call him for dates that he has to change his number to get anything done.[2]

Mountain people often use archaic words or phrases, or stilted language for humorous effect. I once walked into a store where I knew the clerk. She spread her hands across a table of merchandise and said, "Do you want any of my wares?" Someone who works in a clothing store might say that he sells dry goods. After seeing a friend who had been sick, someone said, "I see that you have arisen from your bed of affliction."

People from Appalachia often make statements that they know will provoke a humorous disparaging remark from the listener. A person with a reputation for being lazy told a hard-working friend that he was going to raise some sorghum cane and make molasses. The friend responded, "I'd like to see the sorghum you'd grow. The only cane you'll ever raise is the hell-raisin' kind." Comments such as the latter are usually delivered with a certain intonation and rhythm; beginning high-pitched and descending to a lower tone.

Mountain humor sometimes consists of practical jokes that involve deceit. My uncle once took his eight grandchildren to a local store to buy them ice cream. He struck up a conversation with another customer, and told an elaborate story of how his young wife had left him and now he had eight children to care for, and he didn't know how he was going to do it. She listened sympathetically and was so moved by the ruse that she bought all the children ice cream herself.

Stewart Shoemake told my grandfather, Howard Coffey, that Howard's cow had got in his corn because the Coffey children had left the gate open. It was a false accusation. Later, Orestus McClean told Howard that Stewart had accused him of the same thing. They decided to get even with him. One night, they put Howard's cow in the barn and took the bell off her. Then they went to Stewart's corn patch, ringing the bell like the cow was in there. Stewart jumped out of bed and told his wife Ethel, "Howard's cow is in my corn, sure as hell!" He ran outside and tried following Howard and Orestis, but could never catch up with them because it was dark. They walked out of the corn and into the woods, with Stewart following, thinking they were a cow. They had him going all over the woods, across the creek, and up and down the hollow. They tried to lead him into a place called Haint Hollow, hoping to scare him, but he finally gave up and went home. He couldn't believe his eyes the next morning

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[2]Reyman, Jonathan E. American Indian Humor, self-published, 2025, pp. 4, 38.

when he didn't see any tracks of a cow around. Ethel said it bothered him for several days. He moped around the house and wouldn't hardly say a word.

Indians, too, are adept at this type of humor. Jonathan Reyman was interested in a Navajo community named Naschitti. Not knowing how to say it, he asked a couple of Navajo workers at an archaeological dig how to pronounce it. They told him, with a smile. On his way, he got lost, and stopped to ask a Navajo woman for directions. She flew into a rage and began berating him in Navajo. After returning, the anthropologist asked the workers again about the pronunciation, and they laughed, confessing that they had given him the pronunciation of a very vulgar term referencing the female anatomy.[3]

A common theme in mountain humor is teasing, which can take the form of sarcasm, provocation, humorous deceit, good-natured insults, or outright ribbing. Once I made plans to visit a co-worker's house and he told me to give him plenty of advance notice. He said he needed to take inventory before I came and he would take inventory after I left. There's the "they'll never let me forget it" stories where someone is caught in an amusing, sometimes embarrassing situation and friends continually remind them of the incident. When I was a boy, I left my bicycle behind my father's truck, and he backed over it. He lost his temper, picked up the bike, and threw it as far as he could. My uncle witnessed the incident, which he thought was hilarious, and ribbed my father about it for years. An Indian Reddit writer recalls the time when his mother burned the mealtime bread. The family found the incident humorous and fastened the bread to a wall where it hung for a month.[4] Sioux native Cynthia Lindquist observes, "It is understood in Indian Country that if you are being teased, you are 'in' and part of the family and community."[5]

In reference to Native American humor, teasing is mentioned frequently. Cynthia Lindquist tells that getting her Ph.D took so long that her uncles gave her an Indian nickname meaning "Old Lady Doctor."[6] Doug Cuthand observes, "Jewish humour is quick and direct and often couched in a question. The British like humour that is absurd…Indigeous humour varies from nation to nation, but teasing is a constant."[7] "For centuries…teasing was a method of control of social situations by Indian people," says Vine Deloria, "…people used to tease individuals they considered out of step…" In addition, Indians "tease themselves as a means of showing

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[3] Reyman, 23-25.
[4] https://www.reddit.com/r/IndianCountry/comments/8ge6z1/what_are_your_tribes_unspoken_rules_of_teasing/
[5] Lindquist, Cynthia. "Very Good Medicine: Indigenous Humor and Laughter." Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education, vol. 27, no. 4, Summer 2016, no page numbers.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Cuthand, Doug. Some Indigenous Cultures Feature Teasing as Humour, https://thestarphoenix.com/opinion/columnists/doug-cuthand-some-indigenous-cultures-feature-teasing-as-humour

humility."[8] An example in mountain humor is a response I hear often to the question, "Are you retired?" The person replies, "Yea, I'm retarded." Such play on words came about because, in mountain speech, "retired" is pronounced "retard."

Brevity is a characteristic of mountain humor. One-liners are common, but usually told in a dry manner. Wordplay and colorful expressions enrich the comedy. "He's so religious that he thinks it's a sin to slam a screen door on Sunday." I asked a neighbor the best time to prune an apple tree. He said, "The only time you shouldn't prune an apple tree is on a Sunday." The local funeral home had constructed a chapel addition and was holding an open house one Sunday afternoon. My grandmother, who thought the affair rather morbid, asked if we were going to the "morgue warming." If completing a job whose outcome wasn't totally what was intended but good enough, a co-worker of mine would say, "It's alright, you can't see it from the house." He would also say of someone who appeared sickly, "He looks like Death eating on a cracker." I once asked my grandmother how long an egg would keep. She said, "If it doesn't cackle when you break it, it should be OK."

Similarly, Native Americans are skilled at succinct humor. When asked how they came to occupy the North American continent, an Indian replied, "We had reservations." Responding to an inquiry about what Indians called America before the white man arrived, an Indian said, "Ours."[9] A Navajo woman named Helen pulled up to a fast food drive-thru where she was served by a woman she knew named Margaret. Margaret asked what she had in the seat beside her. Helen replied, "A bottle of wine. I got it for my husband." "Good trade," was Margaret's response.[10]

Appalachian humor is dry; not jolly, slapstick, or jovial. It is often expressed unsmiling, with a straight face. Outsiders find it hard to penetrate and frequently don't realize the person is joking. They often don't "get it." Native American humor is the same way. Indian humorist Tiffany Midge says, "Without shared context or insider knowledge of history or lived experience, certain ironies…can't be fully appreciated beyond the surface."[11] Responding to the 1960s-era War on Poverty governmental initiative, one Indian said, "Well, if they bring that War on Poverty to our reservation, they'll know they've been in a fight,"[12] referencing the privation found in Indian communities. Mountain humor seems to fit the no-nonsense character of mountain people, even when, ironically, they are talking nonsense. Humor is used to keep a friend or loved one in line. It often has a "don't be ridiculous" message, that

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[8]Deloria, 39.
[9] Ibid, 53.
[10] Reyman, 21-22.
[11] Midge, Tiffany. "In the Good Way: Looking at Tribal Humor," www.indigenousperformance.org/post/in-the-good-wat-looking-at-tribal-humor, January 21, 2024
[12] Deloria, 161.

might be conveyed to (for example) a good cook thinking she is serving bad food, a lazy man proposing to grow a labor-intensive crop, or a neighbor who imagines a cow in his corn. Similarly, Natives "like to make fun of ourselves and to not take ourselves too seriously,"[13] says Cynthia Lindquist.

I asked my Native American friend, Annie Brown, to explain her comment about the likeness of Indian and Appalachian humor. She said, "It seems that Appalachian humor/Native American humor has much to do with being of a place. You are with your tribe. You are in it together. Appalachia and Indian country remained more isolated and more tribal for longer. When you feel that kind of familiarity, humor feels different. Teasing becomes an important tool in pointing out behavior and allows folks to self-correct without insult."

Her answer confirmed what I suspected. Although the isolation of Appalachia is sometimes overstated, both mountain people and Indians have been marginalized and viewed as out-of-step with the rest of the country. This situation has produced a humor that is not cheerful, but dry and taunting, with a don't-take-yourself-too-seriously attitude. It fosters a humor that only those within the group can fully appreciate.

Perhaps the explanation goes deeper, though. Perhaps the humor is totally native, and the white mountain people adopted native humor in the distant past. Colin G. Calloway, in New Worlds for All, states, "Early America was a cloth woven from many threads, but the Indian strands that ran through it have often been ignored, forgotten, and allowed to fade from the nation's history."[14] The source of a sense of humor would be something easily "ignored, forgotten, and allowed to fade," given its mental, incorporeal nature. But scholarship on more material "Indian strands" has improved in recent years. The Indian influence on European settlers, especially in the backcountry, is well-documented. Many settlers dressed, ate, and hunted like natives. Modern American English has more than a thousand words with their origin in Indian languages. "Eastern elites and European travelers who ventured into the American backcountry commonly remarked with repulsion the extent to which frontiersmen and their families resembled Indians in their way of life." Indian culture was often disparaged by Europeans, but at the same time they recognized that it had "extraordinary drawing power" on settlers.[15]

Besides adopting external characteristics, backcountry settlers also "acquired similar ways of thinking,"[16] which is more relevant to adopting a sense of humor. Common mental

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[13] Lindquist.
[14] Calloway, Colin G. *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 201.
[15] Ibid, 4, 177, 56, 158.

[16] Ibid, 4-5.

patterns would include ways of perceiving and reacting to the world, and thus seeing humor in situations and responding with comic intent.

On a personal level, I can attest to an Indian practice that survived in a family tradition. I helped my father plant a garden from the time I was very young. He learned gardening techniques from his grandmother, who lived in a remote section of Caldwell County. Only when I was grown did I realize that his gardening practices were, in fact, Indian techniques.[17] He planted vegetables in hilly patches rather than in rows. And corn, beans, and pumpkins were sown together. This was done with no overt knowledge of indigenous agriculture. He would have been surprised to learn of such a heritage. This incident illustrates how cultural practices can be stealthy and live on when their origin has been long forgotten.

Proving that mountain humor- something so intangible and ephemeral- originated with the natives is difficult, if not impossible. Documentation is nonexistent and we can only extrapolate from more tangible practices. However, Calloway cautions against "placing too much weight on the written record. Ideas and customs tend to seep subtly from one group to another rather than being formally acknowledged. Such indirect influences are difficult to establish with certainty, but they would be in keeping with the flow of Indian ways into Euro-American societies."[18]

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[17] Hudson, Charles. The Southeastern Indians. The University of Tennessee Press, 1976, p. 297.
[18] Calloway, 20.