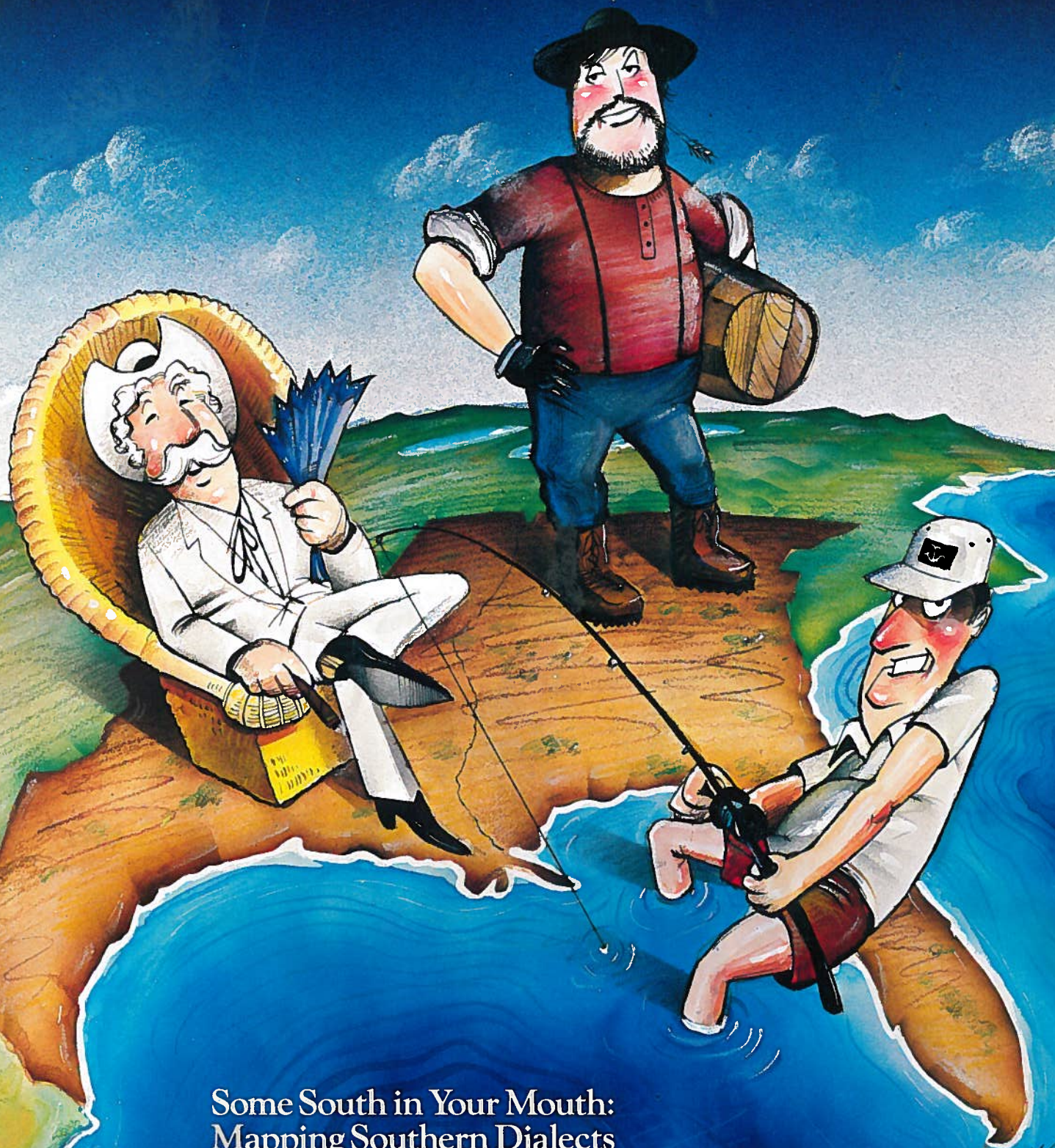


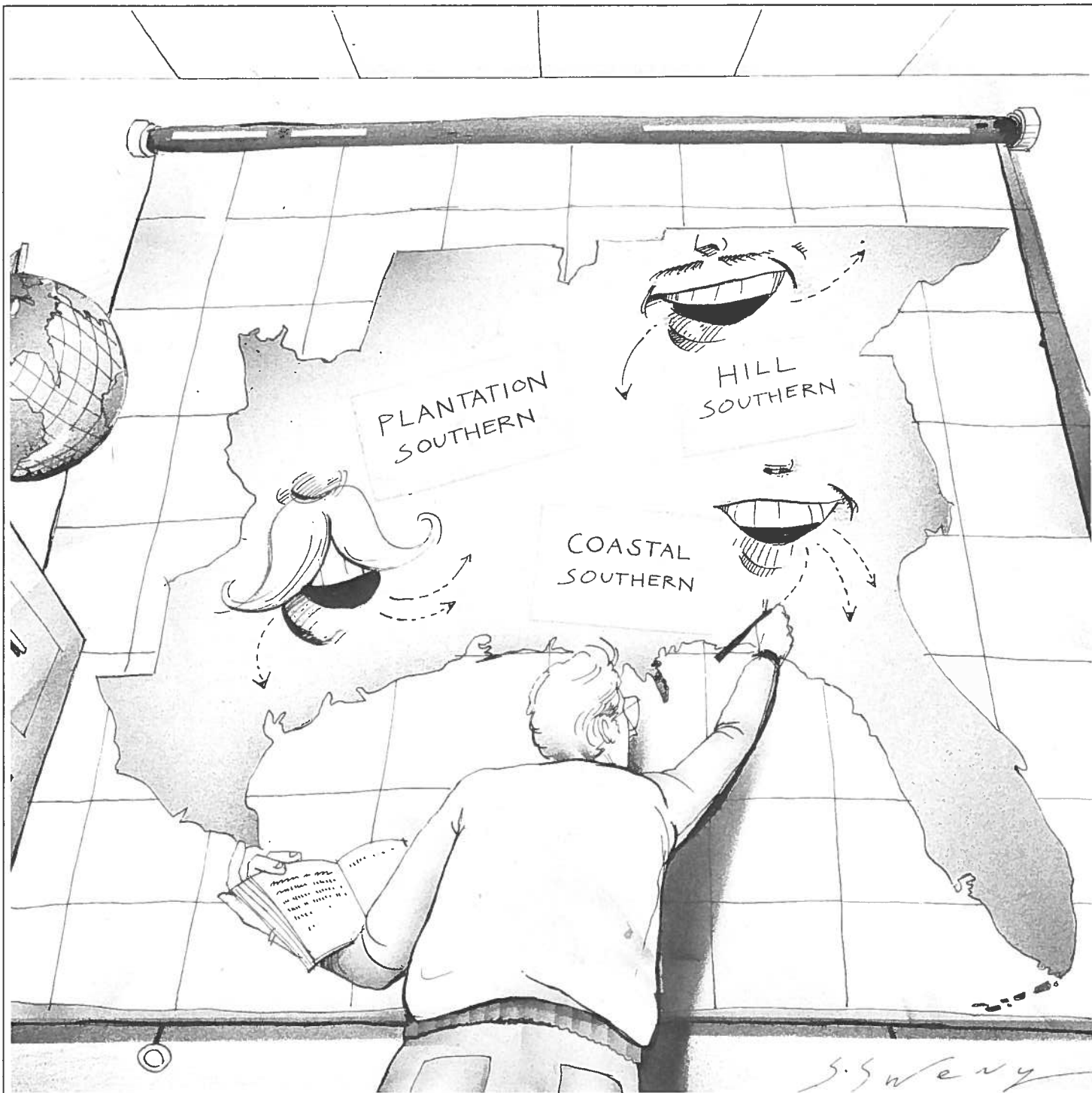
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Some South in Your Mouth:
Mapping Southern Dialects



MUMBO GUMBO

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Illustrations by Steve Sweny

Think of Southern dialect as a gumbo, chock-full of dangs and howdies, simmered over a slow flame until it blends into a tasty and decidedly Southern delicacy. Southern dialect is, in fact, as different from the speech patterns of *New Yawkahs* as gumbo is from clam chowder. But as more and more Northerners move to the Sun Belt, and more country folk head for the cities, it's rapidly losing its distinctive flavor, like an enchilada from a fast-food restaurant.



Emory linguist Lee Pederson might bristle at the gumbo analogy, but the fact is one particular dialect, the patois of Louisiana blacks and Creoles, is often called Gumbo. Pederson is concerned that the differences between various Southern speech patterns are not forgotten, but retain their flavor (like the individual ingredients of any really good gumbo). He once took an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter to task for quoting him as saying there was no such thing as a Southern drawl, when what he meant was that there was no such thing as a single Southern drawl.

Pederson is in charge of preparing a Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (LAGS), a 20-year project that is about half completed. Together with a staff that currently includes Guy Bailey, Marvin Bassett, and Susan Leas, Pederson is researching, cataloguing and, eventually, mapping the language patterns—including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary—of residents of Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and east

Texas. Similar projects have already been carried out in other parts of the country, including the pioneering Linguistic Atlas of New England, but LAGS is the first comprehensive study of Southern dialect.

Armed with tape recorders and detailed sets of questions that differed for city and country residents, Pederson and his colleagues gathered more than 5,500 hours of speech from 1,075 different "informants." All the interviews have been transcribed and will be microfilmed this month. A concordance, or index of terms, will be completed in the next year, followed by descriptive volumes in a dictionary format with 500 maps, in 1988. A computer-ready typescript of the field records, with an exhaustive index, will be completed by 1990.

Many of the words, or usages, Pederson and his team stumbled across do not appear in any dictionary. They are, in fact, new additions to the language and Pederson is responsible for preserving them from extinction.

There are, Pederson contends, as many dialects as there are people.

"It all depends on how close you want to look," he explains. "From a distance, you might classify people into two groups, men and women. Up close you'll see that some have blond hair, others are brunette. Some are short, others tall. You could carry it to extremes and say that no two people are exactly alike. It's the same with dialects."

If pressed further, however, Pederson is willing to classify the dialects of the South, which he's been studying for the past 12 years, into three broad categories—South Midland or "hill" Southern, Plantation Southern, and Coastal Southern. Pederson and a small group of dedicated researchers have been "mapping" the locations and differences of those dialects since 1968 for the LAGS project. Faced with the extraordinary and rapid changes in population patterns of the South, Pederson and his colleagues are the witnesses to a culture in transition and are racing to record linguistic characteristics before they are lost beyond recognition.

Geography plays a major role in dialect, but it is only one of the seven major factors that influence speech patterns. In this case, the South Midland accent is found in the hill country of Tennessee, Kentucky, western Virginia as well as West Virginia, and northern Georgia and Alabama. Plantation Southern developed on the plantations of the "Cotton Kingdom" in Georgia, Alabama, and the lower tiers of the South. Coastal Southern can be found along the coast from the Tidewater area of Virginia to the Gulf coast of Texas, with variations in between.

Other factors in the development of dialects include early influential elements of the population, migration patterns, political boundaries, the development of cultural centers, social structure, and recent immigration.

Early immigration patterns, for example, are responsible for the essential differences between Northern and Southern dialects, Pederson says. The South has retained the British, Scottish, and Irish pronunciations of English, a Germanic language, while the North has been subject to the languages of Continental Europe because Europeans flocked to the northern industrial cities, such as New York, where there was an abundance of factory jobs.

Regional differences are noticeable in more than just dialect. In the South, where settlers came largely from English-speaking countries and were therefore comfortable with the language, the oral tradition has been refined. Southerners are good story tellers. In the North, where the English language was learned and therefore less spontaneous, speakers tend to get to the point without much embellishment.

A rose is a rose is a rose, but a hillbilly can be anything from an Aggie to a yahoo. A slightly expurgated list selected from 222 monikers for rural dwellers follows, meant solely to demonstrate the richness of this language of ours.

Aggie
alligator catcher
bayou rat
bootlegger
bumpkin
Cajun
charcoal burner
clodhopper
cracker
Creole
goat roper
greenback
greenhorn
hardhead
hayseed
hermick
kicker
mountain boomer

mud turtle
redbone
ridge runner
river boomer
roughneck
snuff chewer
sodbuster
swamp angel
swamp rat
tarheel
webfeet
wild man
woodpecker
wood rat
wool-hat
yahoo
yokel



swamp angel

And because Southerners retain the pronunciation patterns of their ancestors, whose linguistic roots are Germanic (as opposed to Romance), they often place the accent on the first syllable of words that Northerners accent differently. Thus, we have *hotel*, *insurance*, *July*, and the like.

But dialect is too complex to be simply labeled "Northern" or "Southern." The gradations of dialect are very fine and can differ within a few miles of one another. One of the major dialect boundaries runs right through Georgia; it is, in fact, the Chattahoochee River. North of the Chattahoochee, "hill" Southern is prevalent. On the south side, Plantation Southern is spoken. The difference is more than just a physical boundary, Pederson points out. The Chattahoochee, he says, also serves as the isotherm marking the northern limit of the 180-day growing season. North of the river, cotton—and therefore, plantations—could not flourish, so residents of small farms were not exposed to some of the linguistic influences that were common to plantation dwellers.

Although it is tempting to draw a parallel between Lee Pederson and Henry Higgins, the fictional linguist of *My Fair Lady* fame who could quickly identify a speaker's birthplace by his accent, Pederson says it is becoming increasingly difficult to perform that feat in the South. The mobility of the American people is to blame, he says.

"Regional dialects are disappearing, but they are being replaced by social dialects," he explains. "Gradually, a uniformity is developing among Southern urban speakers. The dialects of Houston, Dallas, and Atlanta are gradually becoming closer to one another than the dialects of, say, Atlanta and rural Georgia. Black English is becoming a dialect, as well as Northern urban blue-collar speech is, for example."

Language reflects experience—it is quite literally the *voice* of experience — Pederson says. And when experience changes, as it is rapidly doing in the booming South these days, so does language. Therefore, it is important to record the language patterns of older people, especially those who have long been isolated from major cities, before they die, for with them will die their colorful and peculiar way of speaking.

"What we're doing, really, is laying the groundwork for future scholarly work on Southern dialects. We are compiling the information, making it available, and making sure it is as accessible as possible," Pederson says.

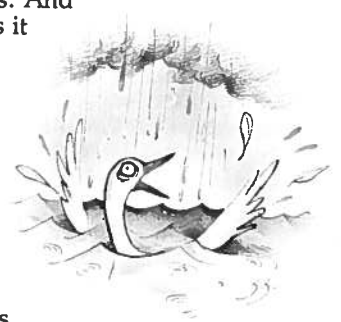
In another sense, what he's doing is making sure the recipe for that good old-fashioned gumbo isn't lost.



Smokey

A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but a policeman might not take too kindly to some of the 68 different terms for officers-of-the-law collected by the LAGS team. Herewith, a sample:

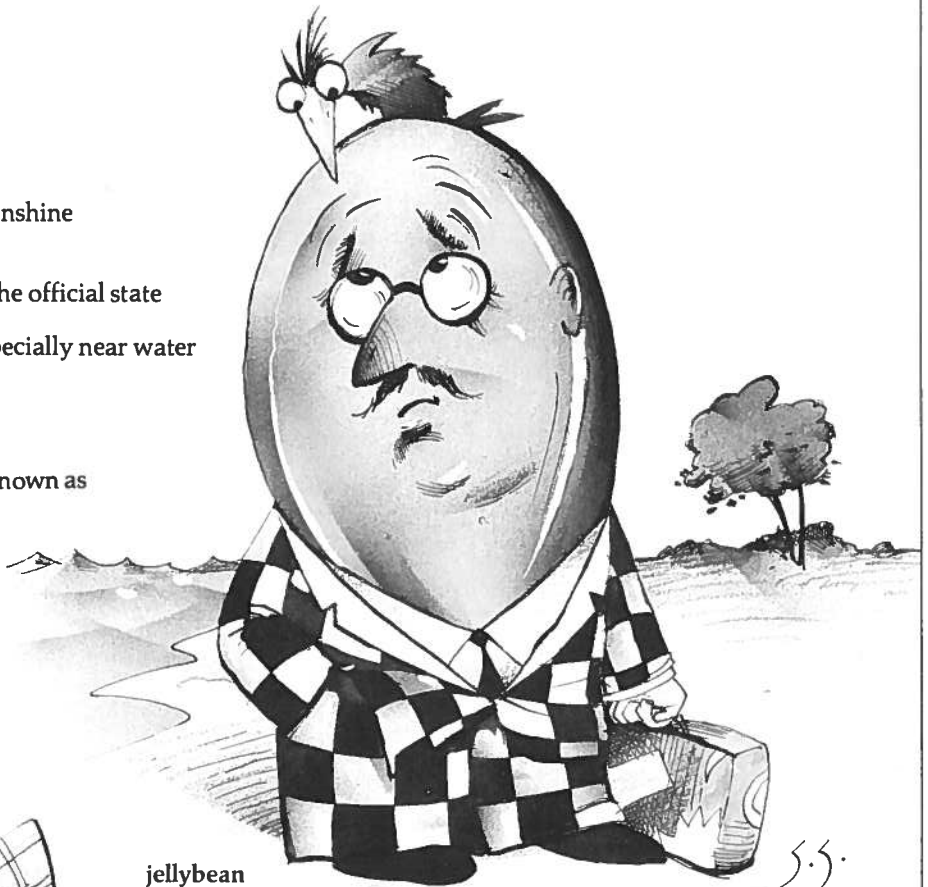
- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| bacon | hopper |
| bluecoat | Jason |
| bull | Jerry |
| Charlie | Johnny Law |
| cop | the man |
| copper | Mickey Metro |
| Dick | mob squad |
| dog | nab y'ns |
| do-right boy | narc |
| finger | oink |
| flatfoot | peace officer |
| fuzz | pig |
| gray boy | roller |
| head knocker | rookie |
| heat | Smokey |
| hog | |



goose drowner

DANGS AND HOWDIES: A GLOSSARY

barefoot—said of coffee served black
blind tiger—a drop site or dispensary for moonshine
blue John—skimmed milk
busthead—poor moonshine (also **popskull**)
Catahoula cur—a wall-eyed stock dog, now the official state animal of Louisiana
crawfishy land—porous, gumbo-like soil, especially near water
davenette—a small couch or davenport
fall out—to faint
fish-of-the-woods—mushrooms
flitters—pancakes
garden truck—homegrown vegetables (also known as **garden sass**)



jellybean



trading with Nancy

Georgia buggy—two-wheeled cart for moving cement
Go-devil—a large springtooth harrow, or a small two-wheeled cart, often pulled by a mule
goose drowner—a heavy rain
jellybean—a dude (especially in the lower Mississippi Valley)
Lord God—a large woodpecker (also known as a **shirt-tail**)
neutral ground—grass strip between sidewalk and curb
redbud land—rich, but rocky soil (East Tennessee)
shade-tree mechanic—part-time mechanic
shinny—moonshine (especially in the lower Gulf area)
splo—poisonous alcohol (especially in Knoxville)
tommy toes—small, salad tomatoes
trading with Nancy—purchasing moonshine
wildcat whisky—moonshine