

#66 -Raise 'Em Up On Honey. Notes on the etymology of the word cracker



The word Cracker has an interesting history one that I felt worthy of further elaboration. It's origination is widely disputed. Was it from the 'crack' of the whip of the white vaqueros that herded Spanish cattle in Georgia and Florida? Was it because they were such poor people they cracked and ate their seed corn?

The most interesting etymology of the word purports to illustrate a history of friction between the dominant English culture and Celtic subculture of the British Empire including North America. This is not my theory. It has been thoroughly researched and written about by several historians. Much is in dispute but clearly the word Cracker is intimately associated with Celtic culture in particular the [Scots-Irish](#) of the American frontier. The most notable author to propose this is [Grady McWhiney](#). In his book [Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways of the Old South](#) McWhiney argues that Cracker is synonymous with being of Celtic origin. Here is a brief summary of historical uses of the word.

Cracker as in a braggart or sharp and entertaining speaker. In Shakespeare's King John

"What cracker is this same that deafs our ears with this abundance of superfluous breath?"

Craic in middle english also was used to mean "to enter into" conversation. Especially loud boisterous conversation. Hence to "crack" a joke.

McWhiney points out that this is exactly the use and spelling of the Gaelic word *craic*. This and other uses of the word from this period generally reference the Scottish and other Celts of the British Isles. These included not just the well know Irish, Scottish and Welsh but also lesser known Celtic groups like the Cornish, The Manx and the Hebrideans. One must remember that at this time the British Isles had yet to be fully conquered much less anglicized. Later many of these troublesome un-anglicized groups were shipped overseas to the North American colonies. The southern American colonies and maritime Canada were prime destinations. Many of these wild celts arrived in the new world fully un-anglicized. Speaking their native tongue and chafing under the English ways.

Certainly by the time these Celts hit the new world at least some of them were being called "Crackers"

From Wikipedia:

As early as the 1760s, this term was in use by the English in the British North American Colonies to refer to Scots-Irish settlers in the south. A letter to the Earl of Dartmouth reads:

"I should explain to your Lordship what is meant by Crackers; a name they have got from being great boasters; they are a lawless set of rascalls on the frontiers of Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, who often change their places of abode."

First a little curious fact about the state of Florida. It was a Spanish colony from 1513-1763. It then became an English colony for a brief 20 years. In 1783 it was handed back to Spain after the American revolution. But during those 20 years, many colonists from Georgia and colonies to the north were encouraged to settle in Florida. When the Spanish regained control they continued to encourage American settlers to move there by offering land grants. About 20 thousand American immigrants and 40 thousand Spanish colonists lived in Florida at the time it was ceded to the United States in 1819.

The white cowboys who herded cattle in Spanish Florida alongside the Spanish Vaqueros were purportedly called "Quáqueros." A corruption of the Spanish word for Quaker which was also a generic insult for any Protestant. Others say they were given the name "Crackers" by other white Floridians and Georgians because of the crack of their Spanish whips.

McWhiney and others argue since these were mostly freed Scots-Irish indentured servants they were already called Crackers. Further the pan-Celtic preference (at that time) for ranging cattle on common land (in this case sparsely populated Spanish Florida) as opposed to the English preference for penned sheep and hogs, lends some credibility to the account. Cattle herding was the preferred livelihood of many of these immigrants.

As a footnote the battle between the advocates of private land for grazing and the advocates of a common free range often played out violently through American history. It ended in a stalemate. East of the Rockies most grazing activities happen on private land. In the West, the Federal Government owns much grazing land through the BLM or Bureau of Land Management. Historically this agency then doled out grazing rights.

I have often wondered if the Scots-Irish had such a deep seated ideological preference for ranging and common grazing land as McWhiney proposes, what did those in Texas think as the US Army methodically killed and subdued their Native American analogues? By this I mean the Comanches and other buffalo herding plains Indians. For ultimately the Indian Wars were a process of converting the Indian common lands to private land. Yes they may have been happy to see the murderous cattle rustling Comanche vanquished and confined to reservations. But were they not saddened by the following influx of settlers? For it were these settlers that destroyed the greatest commons the world ever knew. It was settlers from the east that divided the great sea of grass into a patchwork of poor farms and meager homesteads. Did the Texan Scots-Irish descendants secretly prefer the commons loving Comanches to their new neighbors?



Allow me to divagate for a moment so that I can make perhaps my most glancing reference yet to a song from our catalogue. *Raise 'Em Up on Honey*. This is the opening track from my Solo Album *The Palace Guards (Feb 1st 2011)*. In this song the protagonist proposes a very Cracker-like return to the *common*. Although for the purposes of marijuana cultivation.

*Go up on the mountain build a little shack just over the line
well BLM they won't complain cause no one surveyed this in a while
home school the children give them weapons training
just in case the DEA comes snooping round again
go up on the mountain where the water comes from glaciers blue.*

With my red beard, cowboy hat and preference for the wild frontier I could easily pass for one of these Scots-Irish “lawless rascals” so detested by the English overlords. And why not? My murky family history would support this. Lowery is a common enough name not only in Celtic parts of the British Isles but very common through the main Cracker heartland. Indeed my great grandfather came from “somewhere in Georgia” and settled deep in the [Piney Woods](#) of Southwestern Arkansas. The Piney Woods are a distinct ecoregion covering 54,000 square miles of eastern Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, southern Arkansas and extreme southeastern Oklahoma. But it must also be somehow culturally tied to the Georgia and Florida Cracker heartland. And for a simple reason. Spanish Cattle.

Those Crackers herding cattle in Spanish Florida were herding a type of cattle that is still referred to today as “[Cracker Cattle](#)“. This is somewhat of a misnomer as this breed of cattle is a Spanish breed that the Conquistadors brought to Florida. Cracker Cattle had a very close cousin further west known as Pineywoods Cattle. These also were remnants of the Spanish herds. Whether they were brought west by Florida Crackers or whether Florida Crackers followed them to the piney woods is immaterial. There is somehow a connection. Indeed some historical sources equate the term “pinelander” and “cracker”. But *This Is Pinelander Soul* doesn't have the same ring.

Finally the Piney woods immediately reminds me of another Pejorative. Peckerwood. My grandfather used to endearingly refer to me as his little Peckerwood. Years later I looked it up and was shocked to find it was probably the only known slur for red haired white people.

In 1999 I returned to the Piney Woods for my grandmothers funeral. There was a sea of people at the small church graveyard. More than 100 people. Most of these were my blood kin. The majority direct descendants of my grandmother. There were 90 year olds and nursing great-great grandchildren. It was impressive and beautiful spring day. The children were beginning to run in a pack. My wife at the time, Mary was pregnant with our first child. She looked out at the crowd and gestured with her head "I want one of those". I looked at where she gestured but i didn't understand. "One of those" she pointed at a flaming redhead of a boy that bounded past us barefoot and freckled. Two more followed. I looked across the churchyard and realized that my clan was full of these redheads. I laughed. "Careful what you wish for".

My grandmother was of course famous for saying of her red-haired progeny. "red-hair is how god marks the crazy ones".

We must have seemed exotic to Mary. Her family also of Celtic origin are textbook [Black Irish](#). The Black Irish largely from counties in the west of Ireland, are not "Black". They almost look spanish with their black curly hair and dark brown freckles. And as it turns out for good reason. The Black Irish do appear to be from the Iberian peninsula as they share common genetic markers with the Galicians, Basque and Portuguese. I reference Mary, her sisters and their love of broken, old and decrepit houses in this track I recorded with Mark Linkous.

[16 Eyes Of Mary](#)