WILLIAM FAULKNER AND THE SINGLE-TREE

Big Stone Gap, Va.
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This story begins as a personal note to which any country boy who has found himself out in the larger world can relate. It soon turns into an ancient odyssey of who we, as a people, are.

The fall of 1958 found two very different people in proximity at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. The first was this author, who was a seventeen year old first yearman, who had newly arrived from his home town of Appalachia, Virginia. The second was the world famous William Faulkner, Pulitzer Prize winning author, intellectual, and mystic savant. Faulkner was at the University that year unofficially as "Writer-In-Residence", a position he would officially fill a few years later.

Faulkner liked the horsy set around Charlottesville, who jumped and fox hunted like the English, on horseback and in bright red jackets. He wrote his last novel, The Rievers, while he was at the University. The English Department held him in awe, and hanged on to every word that passed out of his mustached mouth. This seemed to bemuse the great man, and he loved nothing better than to make great pronouncements to the assembled Department, with all its professors and graduate students in rapt attendance. He seemed to enjoy his role all the more if he could frame his pronouncements in oblique terms, much as the Oracle of Delphi of Ancient Greece had done. In short, Faulkner liked to run the egos of the English Department up the flag pole.

I found myself in very different waters. I was the alien from a different planet; the most hickish of all hicks, in danger of drowning in a sea of young urbane intellects from the cities of the Northeastern United States and from the Tidewater of Virginia. My English class was an especial embarrassment. Most of my classmates in it were from New York or New Jersey. I was especially intimidated by a fellow from Newark, who had read the entire works of Freud. My "professor" was a graduate student from Mississippi, himself a good-ole-boy trying to make it in the rarefied atmosphere of Mr. Jefferson's Academical Village. I was especially disturbed to see that my professor was visibly intimidated by my classmate from Newark, who had read the entire works of Sigmund Freud. You must understand that I had never heard of Sigmund Freud, and here I was, in a class and in competition for my life with a boy who had read everything that Freud had ever written, and who

intimidated our professor.

One morning our good-ole-boy professor came into class visible shaken. The assembled English Department had had a seance with Faulkner the evening before, and it had been a humbling experience. Faulkner had laid on them a great pronouncement: "Anyone who does not know what a single-tree is, is too far removed from his American heritage." And not a one of the assembled Tenured Professors, nor any of the lesser faculty, nor any of the graduate students had known. Faulkner refused to tell them, and they had dispersed into the evening determined to redeem their status as literate Americans. The next morning each had gone into his classroom to see if there might be some student among them who knew, and who could redeem the honor of the University of Virginia.

And so, our professor came, crest fallen, into our class that morning. He related his sad story, and asked if, by chance, there might be someone among us who knew what a single-tree was.

Well, there I was, the most hickish of all hicks - sitting in a sea of intellects from the cities of the Northeast. And I knew. I knew what a single-tree was. And I was in a quandary. As my classmates looked at our professor out of the corners of their eyes, I tried to decide what to do. Should I make the great revelation, and by so doing confirm what everyone already knew - that I was the most red necked ridge runner in the entirety of Mr. Jefferson's University; or should I keep quite and hide my rusticity in a display of ignorance?

Well, I decided that I would have good company, as William Faulkner also knew. And, I would show myself to be the only one in the Great University that measured up to Mr. Faulkner's standard. And, anyway, everyone already knew what a hick I was, and I could scarcely increase my notoriety. So, I raised my hand, and tried to make my professor understand what a single-tree was. He listened attentively, with his head cocked a little to one side, and with his face skrunched up in a quizzical knot. I wasn't making much headway, so I went to the black board, and drew a single-tree, and then a double-tree, and all the related regalia. And then I sat down. There was no applause, only silence. The class proceeded to its planned lesson. Later, our professor would go back to the assembled English Department of the University of Virginia, and relate his discovery. I am sure Faulkner laughed.

In the ensuing years I have been especially attentive to anything bearing on the single-tree issue. I found that some mountain people called the item a "swingle-tree". Indeed, life long neighbors would engage in a conversation with each using different terms; one calling

the item a "single-tree" and the other a "swingle-tree". Each mountaineer would understand the other's term, but would never use it himself. And they seemed be oblivious to their having used different terms.

I also found that my friends in Canada called the item a "whiffle-tree". Looking that term up in the dictionary, I find that a whiffle-tree is defined as a "whipple-tree", just as the dictionary says that a "single-tree" is a "whipple-tree", and a "swingle-tree" is a "single-tree". I have never heard either "whipple-tree" or "whiffle-tree" used in the United States.

To put an end to the coyness, a single-tree is a part of the harness of a horse. It is a bar of wood, sometimes backed by a strip of iron, and which is about two feet long. Each end has an iron eye into which can be hooked the ends of the trace chains, which are attached to the hames at their other ends. The hames are fastened to the horse collar, and the entire assembly is how one transfers the power of the laboring horse to the load to be pulled by it. If one is using a team, each single-tree is attached to a double-tree, which in turn is attached to the object being pulled.

Single-tree, swingle-tree, whiffle-tree, or whipple-tree; what do these terms tell us about ourselves?

The origins of "single-tree" are deep in German. In that language the word "Schwengel" means an item that flaps loose, such as the clapper of a bell, or the distal end of a flail, or a water pump handle, or as a "single-tree". To come full circle, the term is used in Germany as a slang reference to a hick, or a hay seed, or a country rustic.

The terms come into American English in two ways, the first being by way of Saxon English. The Saxons, of course, were Germanic settlers who occupied Britain in prehistory. The inhabitants of Britain were originally Celtic, but almost nothing of their language persists in English today. So, the most ancient origins of English are German. "Schwengel" came into Saxon English as "single-tree".

Later the French speaking Normans conquered England, and their language became the language of the upper class of Britain. With them came the term "whipple-tree". "Whipple" or "whiffle" in French refers to an object that flutters or flaps in the wind.

America was settled by mostly lower class British, who used the ancient Saxon terms for agriculturally related items. What upper class British there were in His Majesty's North American Colonies at the time of the

American Revolution were usually Tories, and who were driven out of the country, and who resettled in Canada. Their vocabulary tended to be Norman French; thus the "single-tree" in Canada is called either the "whipple-tree" or the "whiffle-tree".

Next to the British, the Germans were the largest group of settlers in America. Bypassing the Anglo-Saxon experience, these settlers introduced the term into America closer to its German form, and referred to the item as a "swingle-tree".

So, there you have it all. America was settled primarily by the British and the Germans. The British, themselves, were a linguistic mix of Saxon German and Norman French. Really, the "mix" was more of a stratification socially and linguistically. As an oversimplification, the lower class Saxon English became Americans, and the upper class Norman English became Canadians. Then came the Germans, straight from the Continent. Each brought his own terminology for the most ubiquitous of implements. And, by so doing, each defined our heritage. One who knows it is, indeed, as Faulkner said, close to his American Heritage.

ILLUSTRATION CAPTION - In this sign from Ontario, one can see the two single-trees and their attachment to a double-tree.