



Gold in Them Thar Hillbillies

Humiliating a rural family on TV might be profitable, but that doesn't make it right.

TUCSON — I grew up a cliché: the ninth of nine children in the Kentucky hills, son of a man who made whiskey as his father and his father's father had done. My family made it legal until the government made it illegal, then we broke the law until the government changed its mind, and the big companies moved in and took over. When they did, my father went to work for Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, where he stayed until he retired in 1975. After more than 30 years, his salary (raised steeply in the last couple of years of his employment) was \$17,000 a year. On this he reared children, all of whom attended colleges, built one home and then a second, and gave time and money extravagantly to anyone who needed help.

A full-tuition scholarship from Seagram brought me to California, to Stanford University, a school about which I knew nothing except that it was as far from the Kentucky hills as I could get. There I learned many things: I learned that I was poor, though I had never thought of myself that way and my parents would have been outraged at the label. I learned that because I spoke well, I learned that I was racist and homophobic, though my mother defied convention by inviting black children into her home and I was a straight-A student. My classmates roared with

laughter whenever I opened my mouth, until I locked myself in my dorm room with a tape recorder and practiced talking as they did, as I was supposed to talk. I hit my head with a book each time I sounded like the hillbilly that was.

The prejudice of the fortunate against the ill-favored is among the oldest there is, but for me growing up, it had one primary progenitor: "The Beverly Hillbillies," which taught me to despise myself. I learned perfectly well that "The Beverly Hillbillies" originated in a world to which I aspired, and that the show described how that world viewed me. I got its message loud and clear. To succeed in that world I would have to reject an essential part of myself — me the one who I was. I felt such conflict at the prospect of that wound that when the show came on I changed the channel or left the room.

Now CBS is considering reinventing "The Beverly Hillbillies" as "The Real Beverly Hillbillies." Here is the plan: After an extensive search, network producers will find a family that exhibits the most marketable combination of accent, gullibility, ignorance and poverty. CBS will transport the family to a Beverly Hills mansion wired with cameras so that audiences will be able to watch and ridicule its every move.

CBS says its commitment to the show is dependent on finding the perfect family, but, if it does, I can predict some things about the family:

Its members will be white — we have made at least some progress regarding racial stereotypes. They will speak with an accent, the stronger the better, and they will have little or no education. They will be from the South — probably from Kentucky, as Kentuckians would most perfectly fit the producers' preconceived notions.

Above all, they will be desperate enough to sacrifice self-respect for money — that, after all, is the idea. I know this because I am a hillbilly, and I have endured those stereotypes for as long as I have traveled among the bland, colorless, striving world of prosperous suburbia.

And yet, who am I, comfortable and educated, to criticize a network for offering a poor and enterprising family the chance to get ahead? It's not, after all, as if this is the first show to offer that devil's bargain. But "The Real Beverly Hillbillies" differs from its predecessor "reality" programs in one critical aspect: The producers know, as the family they select cannot, that these people's lives will be unalterably changed, possibly devastatingly, by this experience. It's one thing for an educated, prosperous city dweller or suburbanite to choose to participate in such humiliation. It's another matter entirely for a rich and powerful institution to set out deliberately to find a family characterized by its vulnerability. Asked whether the network had given thought to what would happen to the family after the series conclusion

("Do you chuck them back to the mountains?" asked one critic), CBS Television President Les Moonves dodged. "I've made the statement I'm going to make on 'The Beverly Hillbillies,'" he said.

I write that I grew up a cliché but I was only a cliché to those who didn't look deeper. As every good writer knows, each human being has a unique story worth telling well. The producers of "The Real Beverly Hillbillies" are not interested, though, in telling their subjects' stories well.

The issue here is power and its attendant responsibilities. Education and money constitute power. They are not possessions but gifts, and we who are fortunate enough to come by them are charged with using them responsibly. The producers at CBS possess both and are using them in the most cynical fashion to bully the poor for the purpose of making the fantastically rich still richer.

The series may yet be snickered. The Center for Rural Strategies, led by veteran Appalachian organizer Dee Davis, has mounted a protest campaign and has at least forced CBS to comment on the matter. But producers of mainstream television are paid to anticipate and salivate at popular demand. Whether the series is scrapped or not, their pushing the idea ought to raise a question in all our minds.

At a time when the gap between rich and poor is widening, when President Bush proposes more tax relief for the wealthy as a solution to his administration's fiscal irresponsibility, when the single mothers demonized and single mothers forced to leave children unfed to make enough to survive, just how low are the privileged and prosperous willing to stoop to make a buck?

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