



J. Blake Perkins. *Hillbilly Hellraisers: Federal Power and Populist Defiance in the Ozarks*. Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2017. Illustrations. xi + 277 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08289-4.

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Many historical works chart America's political conscience as either traditionally liberal or conservative. Historians from Richard Hofstadter in the 1950s to Jefferson Cowie in the present have determined that America's political ethos is a conservative anti-statism nurtured by the myth of rugged individualism. The New Deal is the only notable exception. J. Blake Perkins enters this debate with *Hillbilly Hellraisers: Federal Power and Populist Defiance in the Ozarks*. Although popular culture has long depicted Ozark inhabitants as anti-government, Perkins asserts that these depictions fail to acknowledge the often complicated local dynamics that have influenced behavior. Rather than a fixed intergenerational political culture adverse to federal authority, the Ozarks endured a political evolution between the late 1890s and mid-1900s. According to Perkins, this was the result of local conflicts between the elites and rural smallholders not a cultural proclivity toward anti-federal authority.

Avoiding the pitfall of national histories that aim to pinpoint America's political consciousness but often fail to acknowledge local conflicts that create nuance and complexity, *Hillbilly Hellraisers* reframes Ozark history by highlighting the divisions between Ozark elites and rural smallholders. Rather than an inherent cultural disposition

that fostered intergenerational antipathy toward federal authority, Perkins argues, what was often framed as anti-federal government was actually rural Ozarkers fighting against local elites. Perkins asserts that these mostly rural Ozarkers favored federal intervention when it worked for them. Often, however, federal programs and agencies worked through local elites instead and it was this that often outraged non-elites.

Central to his argument is that the rural Ozarkers who came to be synonymous with anti-federal government mentalities initially adopted the Populist ethos of the 1890s. By placing the Ozarkers within the political context of the Populist movement, Perkins illustrates that they were often pro-federal intervention when it came to issues such as railroad and utility regulation. This laid the foundation for rural non-elites to embrace a Populist rhetoric that guided them for the next several decades.

In part 2, Perkins reframes several issues to illustrate how the Populist ethos pervaded Ozark political culture well into the twentieth century. What has been deemed a deeply rooted antipathy toward federal intervention is reframed to depict how intraregional conflicts were the real cause for rural backlash. From World War I draft resistance to tick eradication, Perkins illustrates, most

of the rural opposition to federal programs stemmed from a distrust of local elites or an outright defiance of federal programs that benefited local elites but not non-elites, who stood little to gain.

Perkins uses part 3 to illustrate his assertion that Ozark political culture is not static. He evaluates what caused the Populist ethos to die and be replaced with the anti-federal sentiment that permeates Ozark political culture to the present. According to Perkins, federal poverty programs, such as Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the late 1960s, provided the new battleground between local elites and liberal reformers in the Ozarks. Perkins asserts that local elites felt slighted by federal programs that curtailed their traditional influence in the region while liberal reformers missed an opportunity to tap into the Populist ethos that had dominated Ozark relations for decades. This missed opportunity allowed local elites to construct an anti-government narrative that harped on racial and religious tension in the region. They stressed the importance of "local control" and "local heritage" to depict the federal government as a foreign entity attempting to subvert regional authority. That local elites were successful in not only creating this narrative but also convincing rural Ozarkers to believe it too signaled the end of the working-class populism that had dominated the region's political relationship since the 1890s.

Perkins successfully charts the political evolution in the Ozarks to illustrate that although it is a region known for its anti-federal sentiment in the present its history is far more complicated. By placing rural Ozarkers in context with the Populist movement of the 1890s, Perkins depicts a rural population with a political tradition that believed the federal government could *and should* work for them. That this mentality came to be replaced by the staunch anti-government sentiment of the present is attributed to the status anxiety of local elites who readily created—and successfully

disseminated—a narrative that depicted the federal government as the enemy. As historians continue to grapple with what constitutes America's political soul, works like *Hillbilly Hellraisers* illustrate that at the regional level it depends on who you ask and when.

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