

Eight Grades Plus the Pre-Primer

BACKWOODS TEACHER. By Joseph Nelson. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 288 pp. \$3.

By HARRIETTE SIMPSON ARNOW

THOUSANDS of pages of history, both straight and fictionized, have been written about the backwoods-men who, even in the earliest days of our country, refused to live in the comparative safety of the small settlements bordering the coast but went out, each to his separate holding, and farmed and hunted alone. Descendants of such men were great fighters in all our early wars; always they spearheaded the trek westward, sometimes as settlers but often as hunters, explorers, and Indian-fighters.

Today, the direct descendants of these same English-Scotch-Irish Americans crossed with Huguenot, living in the Southern Appalachians and the Ozarks, inheriting the same characteristics as their honored ancestors, speaking much the same language, singing the same hymns, playing the same games, are usually referred to as hill-billies and serve endlessly as material for comic strips, Grade-B motion pictures with a humorous angle, and the kind of jokes that appeal to people who confuse wisdom with "American know-how."

However, Joseph Nelson's story of his work as a rural teacher in a backwoods Ozark community is a happy exception to this rule. Mr. Nelson neither distorts nor ridicules; he sees the world around him not with the eyes of a social worker or the hasty note-taking glances of a rubberneck writer in search of story-book material, but as one man looking at other men. Soon he grew to think of his patrons as his "contemporary ancestors," and says of them: "Spiritually, morally, mentally, the people were about like people anywhere: bright, dull, retarded, 'queer.' The Big Piney folks had as much knowledge as the people anywhere; it was just of a different kind."

Mr. Nelson makes his reader realize this, and at the same time produces an entertaining story of how it was to teach eight grades plus the pre-primer in one room during the latter part of the Depression when the old ways were giving way to new that brought graded roads, WPA, and AAA. The book covers only the one eight months' term, yet one feels that the author must have spent years in such a community to have gained so much un-

derstanding, to reproduce the backwoods dialect so truly, and write with clarity and conviction of life through all the seasons—molasses-making, fall plowing, the early "spring" when it rained and snowed and froze but it was spring for the groundhog had not seen his shadow, and the real spring when even a jay bird sang.

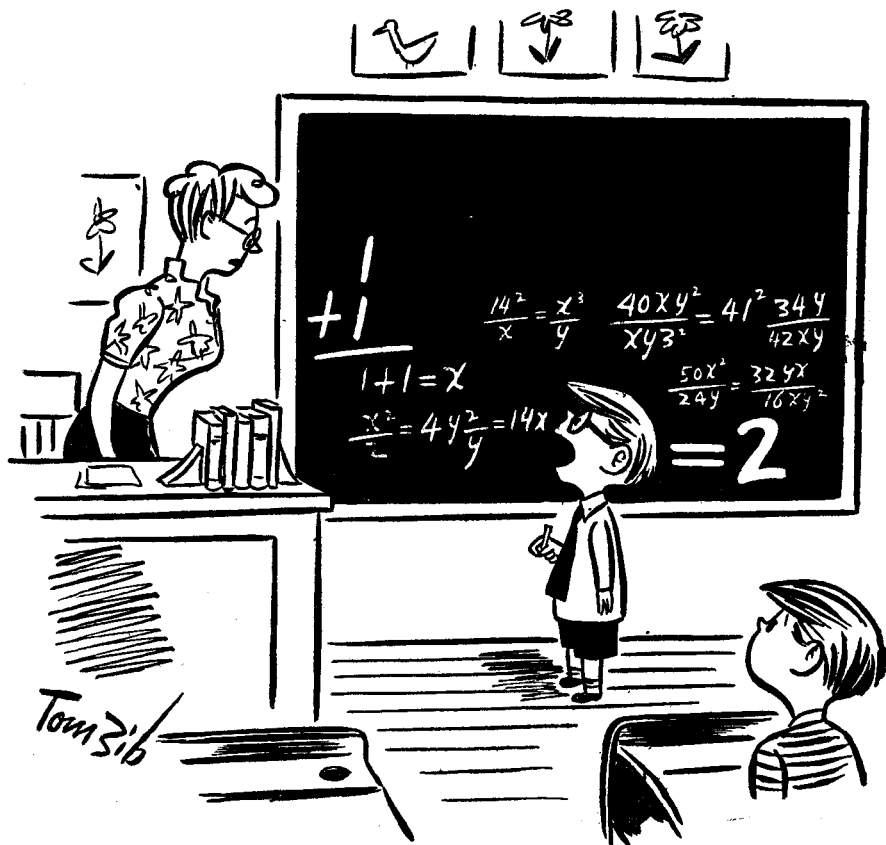
He tells enough of phonology, semantics, superstitions, religions, social customs, and farming practices as governed by the zodiac to make "Backwoods Teacher" an interesting and important work for students of Americana. Yet seldom do his descriptions of Ozark customs interfere with the story, and never do they submerge the characters; instead such strange practices as telling the bees of a death in the family, or carrying a boar's tusk to protect a male from dire consequences that might result from the mumps going down instead of up, seem quite ordinary and fitting when coupled with the people who perform them.

Mr. Nelson, who seems to have an almost instinctive eye for the foibles of mankind, including those of himself, never made the mistake that so many others have made—the mistaking of a simplicity in culture for simplicity in character. The Big Piney

folks were never simple; Sister Viny, the religious lady of light virtue in Dollar Hollar, could exhaust the powers of half a dozen psychiatrists. Brother Helms is a still more enchanting blend of Machiavelli, Abraham Lincoln, Shylock, and Jeeter Lester; he was forever scheming and one of the funniest passages in the book is an account of how he finagled himself into plowing the teacher's garden when he had planned only to teach the teacher. Other characters will arouse the reader's compassionate anger: the Nolans, who, because they were black, could never be allowed to learn to read; the Tibos, who worked in the cedar swamps; Martha, who began as a pupil and ended as a wife, and Clyde, who got religion.

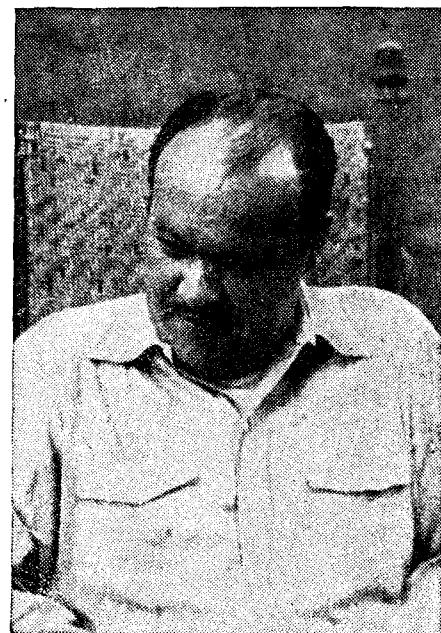
Not the least of the characters are the Nelsons themselves; we hear a lot about the author's wonderful wife, Sally, and are always with the author when he is teaching or performing some one of his many duties such as decorating the schoolhouse for the box supper or taking his cow to the "brute," but so skilfully are they kept in the background that after finishing the book it is hard to believe it was told in the first person.

Harriette Simpson Arnow is author of "Hunter's Horn," a novel dealing with Kentucky mountain life.



"What's the difference *how* I did it? It's right, isn't it?"

Fiction. The writers of war novels have taken a long time to get around to the fraction of our Army who went over the hill and stayed there. In "See If He Wins," Richard Spong, a Government investigator, tells the grim and hair-raising story of the courageous soldier who fled to Paris to become a black-market operator. It leads the reader to wonder why there were not more of them. From the other side of the world comes Sudhin N. Ghose's "And Gazelles Leaping," in which this distinguished, elderly Indian tenderly recreates his boyhood on the Ganges. The book has the fascination of an alien civilization and the universality of childhood memories. Among the scattering of late-season books, the past and the present meet nostalgically in Gwen Davenport's Southern novel, "Family Fortunes," and Ethel Wilson's partly factual portrait of a hundred-year-old lady, "The Innocent Traveler."



Richard Spong—"sharpness . . . verve [and] the shadow of existentialism."

One Segment of GI Life in Paris

SEE IF HE WINS. By Richard Spong. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 273 pp. \$3.

By HOLLIS ALPERT

RICHARD SPONG'S novel of an American GI who deserts his front-line unit while on leave in Paris and who then gets caught up in a series of black-market escapades manages to be a curious mixture of the credible and the incredible. If the author's intention had been merely to fashion a yarn of suspense and violence in a relatively exotic atmosphere there would be little to complain about. But the assumption is fairly clear that he wanted quite seriously to delve into the motivations that could lead an American soldier to cut himself off from what was, after all, the relatively protective hand of the Army, and also from the more or less tangible loyalties and responsibilities that went with being part of an outfit that faced a common danger. Mr. Spong could hardly have chosen a less likely deserter type than Tom Sword for his chief character.

That there were a large number of deserters who lived a hazardous and haphazard life within the black-market fringe of Paris is certainly true enough. A lot of them were ferreted out by the Army's CID agents, who

often enough found them holed up in sordid rooms or living with prostitutes or roaming fearfully through the shabbily elegant city of that winter and spring of 1945. Some became virtual criminals or tied up with French-American gangs that were a continual menace to the Army supply lines. They were aided and abetted by all too many who stayed within their Army units while trading PX commodities, rations, and gasoline for the inflated French currency.

But Tom Sword, as portrayed by Mr. Spong, was hardly the type to sell even his weekly PX rations. He is described as a relatively clean-cut Dartmouth graduate who is haunted by some inner weakness, some vaguely defined guilt that is worked out in too much drinking. It wasn't fear or cowardice which kept him from returning to his tank-destroyer battalion after getting drunk and spending the last night of his leave with a prostitute in Pigalle. He was a "good" soldier, had fought well, had taken a certain pride in the way he had handled his combat job. It is quite mystifying to see him choosing not to rejoin his tank-destroyer battalion and taking what was generally a mild punishment for a few hours' or a few days' overstay of a leave. The notorious disciplinary camps were reserved for more serious lapses and more hardened offenders.

For the number of GI's who drank themselves silly while whoring in that garish Montmartre section known as Pigalle was large indeed. Some of them, like Tom Sword, undoubtedly woke up after a heavy night to find that the trucks which had carried them on three-day passes to the then dismal city of light had already headed back to the combat

zones. But with so much available Army transport in the huge motor park near the Invalides it was never a problem finding one's way back. The thing was, Tom Sword didn't want to go back.

And you gather, after awhile, that what he wanted was a certain new kind of freedom; he wanted to be a "responsible man," free and capable of making his own choices. (The shadow of existentialism hangs heavy here.) But there is a peculiar irrationality about Tom's choosing the venal milieu he does for his freedom, and about his ganging up with Spud, the Negro soldier, and Buchain, the black marketeer, for the thievery he then engages in. Even the latter two seem a little too "nice" for the sort of thing they do.

The better and more authentic part of the novel deals vividly with the actual method of black-market operation. Mr. Spong, who was a CID operative himself, knows this well.

He has added the usual GI-French girl romance to his story, but there is undeniable pathos in the way Solange, the seventeen-year-old girl, calmly enters into a hotel-room liaison with Tom, with soap and cigarettes as a dividend.

It is unfortunate that the book has had to be entirely focused about Tom, who is consistently out of place in the situations the author has chosen for him. This flaw seriously disturbs what might otherwise have been a realistic picture of one segment of GI life in Paris during the latter phases of the war, for, beyond this, Mr. Spong has written his first novel with considerable sharpness and verve.

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Rhubarb. 2. Ophelia. 3. Bassanio. 4. Edwin Drood. 5. Raffles. 6. Titania. 7. Ben Gunn. 8. Eliza Doolittle. 9. Neptune. 10. Clementine. 11. Hester Prynne. 12. Littimer. 13. Excalibur. 14. Yorick. AMERICAN HUMORIST: Robert Benchley.