



Backwoods Beano

ALIAS SIMON SUGGS: The Life and Times of Johnson Jones Hooper. By W. Stanley Hoole. University: University of Alabama Press. 283 pp. \$5.

By CARL CARMER

THE development of the distinctively American "original" in the first half of the nineteenth century was eagerly observed by those of his fellow citizens who, through background and education, could recognize a character so grotesquely amusing as to deserve literary recording. Few of these observers were professional writers, but among the doctors, lawyers, and newspaper editors in our growing towns were sophisticates who could turn a phrase with effect and who did so for the entertainment of themselves and other American readers.

Too little attention has been paid to these pre-Civil War amateurs of letters by historians of our culture, many of whom have failed to realize that some of our most respected later literature was attributable to the articulate tyros who had the taste to choose rewarding subjects and paint word-pictures of them which are surprisingly less primitive than might be expected.

Now W. Stanley Hoole has written and the University of Alabama Press has published an excellent biography of Johnson Jones Hooper, whose picaresque tales of Captain Simon Suggs of the Tallapoosa (Alabama) Volunteers were once greeted by the nation

with hearty delight. Suggs, described by editor Henry Watterson in 1882 as a "sharp and vulgar, sunny, and venal swashbuckler," ranks high in the company of popular comic characters which includes Sam Slick, Sut Lovin-good, Thomas Singularity, and other dubious heroes celebrated by early and not exactly professional humorists. From such as these came an approach and treatment which were not ignored by Bret Harte and Mark Twain and which find parallels today in the works of William Faulkner and other admired contemporaries.

While it might be suggested that Mr. Hooper's political career is not of as great interest to the general reading public as his writing activity, and while it is a pity that Mr. Hoole is inclined to assume that his subject's humor is unerringly and unquestionably funny without analyzing its quality, "Alias Simon Suggs" is an extremely valuable volume in a field that has had much too little recognition.

Particularly to be commended are Mr. Hoole's concluding remarks in his "Epilogue." Here he makes an original and valuable contribution to our understanding of our literary past with an essay which well carries out the line of thought suggested by the late Constance Rourke in her masterful study "The Roots of American Culture." Readers of "Alias Simon Suggs" will wish to place it on the shelf beside that volume.

Unhappily the words of the "blurb" printed on the jacket are as ridiculously fulsome and untrue as those to be found folded around a cheap historical novel. They might mislead the readers who would be eager for this book into passing it by because they could not believe such absurdities.

It Was Easy

JOE MEEK. By Stanley Vestal. Caldwell, Ida.: Caxton Printers. 336 pp. \$5.

By RICHARD L. NEUBERGER

JOE MEEK, black-bearded and broad of shoulder, cut a wide swath as he moved through the salons of Washington, D. C. Wasn't he the spokesman for legendary Oregon, then seeking territorial status? And didn't he sleep in a big bedroom at the White House as the guest of President James K. Polk?

One statuesque belle, wanting Meek for her own, sought to learn if he belonged to another.

"Are you married?"

"Yes, indeed," said Meek. "I have a wife and several children.

"Oh dear," exclaimed the lady, "I should think your wife would be so afraid of the Indians, out there in Oregon."

"Afraid of the Indians!" exclaimed Meek. "Why, madam, she is an Indian herself!"

This was Joe Meek all over. He was as rough and tough as any mountain man who ever fought the savages of the West. Yet he had qualities of leadership which made him the confidant of men like Polk and Thomas Hart Benton in the era when the United States and Great Britain were jockeying over possession of the strategic Oregon Country.

In the crucial debates at Chamboeg, on the banks of the Willamette River, Meek was the leader of the frontiersmen who favored joining up with the U. S. A. "All in favor follow me!" he shouted at the peak of his lusty lungs, and the United States won, fifty-two to fifty, over the Hudson's Bay Company group which thought that the Union Jack offered a safer refuge.

Stanley Vestal, skilled in chronicling the era when many Americans wore buckskin and went in danger of having their scalps lifted, has written an exciting and fast-moving story of the mountain man who was also a consummate politician in the period when America's claim to the Pacific seaboard hung in a delicate balance.

Meek was something of a rogue, as what mountain man wasn't? Pretending to be learned in the Scriptures, he persuaded Chief Kowesote of the Nez Perce that the Bible indorsed polygamy. Meek then was forgiven a previous wife and received one of the

(Continued on page 33)

Richard L. Neuberger, an Oregon state senator, formerly was on the Portland Oregonian.

Carl Carmer, co-editor of the *Rivers of America Series*, has written several books including "Stars Fell on Alabama," "Listen for the Lonesome Drum," and "Genesee Fever."

The Saturday Review



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Escape Into Space

IF MODERN literature has any one basic conception, it is man's universal discontent with his life. It is a world-wide malaise that includes the natives of countries struggling against poverty, hunger, and disease, and the peoples of prosperous nations who should be enjoying the fruits of science and invention that have provided a longer life, release from back-breaking labor, and some assurance of a serene old age. It is impossible to blame this unrest on the loss of old traditions and habits of life, for every generation of man has in some small or great way moved forward or backward in a continual process of change and ferment. Nor is the loss of religious faith and the uncertainty of an afterlife sufficient to explain the moral disintegration of the twentieth century. These are primary causes, but they may not be more significant than man's failure to outlaw war, to put an end to revolutions, and to establish a world government.

One of the major culprits may be the technological revolutions of the last fifty years. It has fulfilled its promises and exceeded the wildest dreams of the imagination. The secrets hidden in nature have been revealed and used in a thousand ways to form a new pattern of life in the Western world. But the organized forces, the vast accumulations of capital that brought them into being as the servants of man, were principally created by two world wars and the threat of a third conflagration that might destroy all of us. Most of our major discoveries, from radar to splitting the atom, were brought to perfection and mass production by war. It was possible to believe that if this

was progress then the devil had a hand in it.

It is impossible now to relax, to say that we have had enough of robot machines, to be content with the motor car, the airplane, the automatic furnace, the clothes washer, motion pictures, television, and atomic power. We must advance in an ever-increasing spiral reaching no one knows where. If man has grown weary of the world, it is because he has either had enough technological progress or too little of it. We have become so accustomed to major and minor mechanical miracles that we accept them casually with all the ease, the economic burdens, and the dangers they may bring. But there is an angel as well as a devil in man and together they have conceived of an idea that has lived in fantasy for centuries. Why not fly from the world? It is, in a sense, man's first and last question and dream: to escape from the anxieties and the woes of life on earth in the form of a disembodied soul, or to leave a fearful and tiresome planet in what is now known to millions of readers of science fiction as a space ship.

Even before the German inventors created the first navigable rocket at Peenemund the writers of this somewhat crude form of entertainment had developed the rocket ships which cruised to the moon and the solar planets and then burst into outermost space and explored the galaxies of the Milky Way. Driven by atomic power these apparently mad devices were as well known to the devotees of science fiction as the liners that cross our oceans. Nevertheless, it remained unadulterated fantasy until

scientists contemplated the experiments with rockets that have proceeded since the last war. Man has always sought new frontiers and horizons; and when it became conceivable that a space ship could be built that would circle the earth beyond the force of gravitation, then the dream became a reality. And how real it is is evidenced by a recent book, "The Exploration of Space," written by Arthur C. Clarke, an astrophysicist who is chairman of the British Interplanetary Society. He has based the new science of astronautics on known facts and reasonable probabilities. In any other day than this he would be considered as mad as a march hare. His basic premise, well known to science fiction, is that it is possible to build a rocket that will pass through the gravitational force of the earth. "A rocket in a free orbit around the earth," he writes, "is in an ideal situation for the beginning of an interplanetary voyage. In the first place, it has an initial speed of 18,000 miles an hour, and therefore, as far as its fuel requirements are concerned, is more than half way to the planets. Secondly, it is in a vacuum, so that its motors can operate at maximum efficiency. And thirdly, it is in a condition of weightlessness." It appears that after that the job of the pilot is to coast around the celestial spheres drawn by the attraction of multitudinous suns and planets, after the ship has been refueled by a space tanker hovering between the moon and the earth.

CHAIRMAN Clarke's preface to his book displays the kind of free-wheeling logic that is familiar to this particular age. It is based on the theory that nothing is impossible if man desires to create it, except to bring peace to earth. He says, "I would ask those who find it hard to take seriously the idea of colonies on the moon and the planets to consider this question: What would their great-grandfathers have thought if, by some miracle, they could have visited London Airport or Idlewild on a busy day and watched the Constellations and Stratocruisers coming in from all corners of the earth?"

In 1952 we accept the prospect of colonies of human beings on the Moon or Mars. We have been lamenting that there are no terrestrial frontiers left except those created by our enemies. Here at last is our escape; if we or our children cannot find peace or happiness on earth, we may find it on some satellite of a remote star, providing that the space ships of a hostile power do not get there first.

—H. S.