

# Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

## *How to Get Along in the South: A Guide for Yankees*

Right now, down here, we seem to be experiencing an influx of Northern migrants. There are so many of them, and misunderstanding is so frequent, that I fear a new wave of sectional hostility may be shaping up. I offer as evidence the fact that some of my less tolerant brethren have taken to referring to Northerners as "rhoids"—short for hemorrhoids, from a rude joke with the punch line (approximately): "If they come down and stay down, they're a pain."

But these new invaders are friendlier than the last bunch, and some of them apparently want to fit in. So I surmise, at least, from the fact that the University of North Carolina at Charlotte sponsored a very well attended adult education course last spring on "The South for Non-Southerners." (This goes to show how thoughtful we are down here, by the way. When I lived in Boston and New York I don't recall anyone offering a course on the North for non-Northerners, although I could have used one a few times.)

If I were running that course, I think I could boil it down to elaboration of a single theme, and I offer it to readers of this magazine at no charge. Reed's Rule for Successful Adjustment to the South is simply this: *Don't think that you know what's going on.*

William Price Fox puts the basic problem well: "No lie, the average Yankee knows about as much about the South as a hog knows about the Lord's plan for salvation." Thing about the hog, though, is that he doesn't *think* he knows. Believing that they know what's happening is probably the most common mistake Northerners make. Most other problems stem from that. Heck, half the time *Southerners* don't know what's going on here—why should someone who just unloaded his U-Haul?

Oddly, *real* foreigners often seem to have an easier time of it than folks from Wisconsin or Massachusetts or California. Brits and Germans and Japanese and Kuwaitis are likely to

recognize that things in the South aren't what they're used to and can't be made that way by complaining loudly. Moreover, Northern migrants often ethnocentrically insist that we mean what they think we said instead of meaning what we mean. Choong Soon Kim, author of *An Asian Anthropologist in the South* (I'm not making this up), observes that Southerners very seldom say what they mean. He finds us, in a word, inscrutable.

Maybe Northern migrants should just accept that fact, as Kim does. But if you insist on trying to understand Southern conversation, here are a few examples that may be helpful.

Surely most of you all have been warned that "You all come see us" does not mean that you all should actually drop in. That should be Lesson #1 in any Introductory Southern course. An intermediate course, though, would teach that one thing it almost always *does* mean is "Come see us if you have to for some reason"—although that usually goes without say-

ing. And an advanced course would teach the student that sometimes it actually does mean you all should drop in. Depending.

Similarly, "Where's your husband today?" can be, as in the North, nosiness plain and simple—or, from a male, a cautious inquiry before making some moves. In the South, though, it can also be just a polite expression of interest in your kinfolks: The questioner may not really care.

See? These things are not simple. Take the question "What church do you go to?" Many newcomers find it offensive when brand-new acquaintances ask that. They assume that it is the prelude to some serious witnessing, and it may be. On the other hand, it can also be just a conventional pleasantry, like "What do you do?" (a question Southerners sometimes find offensive) or "What's your sign?" (a question I always answer "No Trespassing"). "What church do you go to?" can also be an insult, especially if the emphasis is on the word "you."

### BOOKS IN BRIEF—ECONOMICS

*Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective*, edited by Stephen V. Monsma, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; \$12.95. Six thoughtful Protestants join together in the spirit of Jacques Ellul and E.F. Schumacher in "reflecting upon modern technology and its implications for the Christian life."

*The Myth of the Plan: Lessons of the Soviet Planning Experience* by Peter Rutland, LaSalle, IL: Open Court; \$26.95. A Harvard economist explains why the Soviet economy has foundered and why things won't get better until Communist leaders abandon the centralized planning essential to their political power. The analysis, heavily dependent upon Hayek and Mises, turns not only against the Politburo but also against American and Western European bureaucrats who pay the Soviets the compliment of imitation.

*Consuming Fears: The Politics of Product Risks*, edited by Harvey M. Sapolsky, New York: Basic Books; \$18.95. Six authorities on food marketing outline the political struggles touched off by scientific research into the possible health risks of popular foods and additives. Not content with protecting us from cigarettes and pesticides, nutrition-minded zealots were trying to redefine beef, eggs, and milk as controlled substances until the Reagan Administration decided not to make cocaine pushers share their cells with cows.

*Mayflower Madam: The Secret Life of Sydney Biddle Barrows* by Sydney Barrows with William Novak, New York: Arbor House; \$17.95. The world's oldest profession managed with today's business techniques. The author speaks contemptuously of "the moral code of Bourgeois society," but the immoral code of the *haut monde* does not seem to have elevated her perspective.

*Exchange and Power in Social Life* by Peter M. Blau, New Brunswick: Transaction; \$14.95. A timely reprint of a classic study investigating the patterns of monetary and nonmonetary exchange that create—and undermine—social order, from marriage to political parties. Particularly valuable is Blau's explanation of why egalitarian ideologies attract frustrated academics in a business-oriented culture like America's.

*The Anatomy of Power* by John Kenneth Galbraith, Boston: Houghton Mifflin; \$7.95. A leading liberal economist examines the roots of power—personality, property, and organization. Aside from a few insights borrowed from Joseph Schumpeter and James Burnham, the analysis is both superficial and misleading. Like most academics, Galbraith knows little about power, except how to abuse it.

Again, it depends. Migrants should just recognize that they don't have a clue and hope for the best.

Reed's Rule has an important corollary: Since you don't know what's going on, *be very careful about offering advice*. A story going the rounds down here illustrates that point: A Northern gentleman retires to the rural South. The first morning he's sitting on his porch enjoying the scenery when a farmer comes walking down the road with a hog beside him. The newcomer greets his new neighbor and asks him where he's going with the animal. The farmer says that he's taking the hog to a fine mudhole down the road to let him wallow some.

"What's the matter?" the Yankee asks. "Don't you have water at your house?" Slightly offended, the farmer replies that of course he has water.

"Well, couldn't you make a mud-

hole up there?"

"I expect I could, but why would I want to do that?"

"Good Lord, man, think of the *time* it would save!"

"Yeah," says the farmer, "but what's time to a hog?"

(Watch it: Don't be so sure who that joke is on.)

I have a similar story—a true one. Last fall I hired a couple of men to tear down our old garage (a job the termites already had well in hand). While they were slamming away with crowbars and sledgehammers, my neighbor's father, visiting from Michigan, came over to where I was watching. "You know, up North we'd get a front-end loader in there and we'd have that baby down in a half-an-hour."

Well, now. Here's another rule for getting along in the South. If you must give unsolicited advice, pretend it's something that just occurred to you.

*Never, under any circumstances, tell us how it's done up North.*

Never mind that you think the Northern way is superior. Even if it is—*especially* if it is—we don't want to hear about it. Even the most cosmopolitan Southerner is likely to bristle at that. Atlanta columnist Lewis Grizzard puts it eloquently: "Delta is ready when you are."

Now my neighbor's father meant well, and she and her husband are nice folks, and they *are* my neighbors. So I did not say "Eat hot lead, Yank."

Neither did I say: "Well, down here we get a couple of old boys in with crowbars and save us some money and keep 'em off the welfare." But I could have. It's true that heavy machinery could have done that job in half an hour instead of the three or four it took the fellows I hired. But I paid them \$60 instead of the \$75 minimum it would have cost me for a machine and an operator. And my county has an unemployment rate of about 3 percent. What's Lansing's?

As a matter of fact, though, I didn't say much of anything at all, just mumbled something.

I did a little better last summer when a New York acquaintance, thinking of retiring to our area, asked if there had been much Klan activity lately. Now that question is about as appropriate as my asking him about the Mafia—no less, no more. It's a fact that the Klan exists. It's an unpleasant feature of our cultural landscape. But there's less activity than there used to be; it doesn't affect most of us in our daily lives (we go whole months without thinking about it); and it's unobtrusive enough that most of us are content to let the police worry about it. I guess I could have said all that, but I actually said something like: "Well, some of the boys act up now and then, but if you keep your opinions to yourself and don't let 'em hear your accent, they won't bother you none."

I'm afraid that New Yorker now thinks he knows what's going on. That's his second mistake.

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