Eye-gouging in Antebellum Popular Fiction

Jozef Pecina

Abstract

Early nineteenth century visitors of the Appalachian frontier were shocked by the violence they encountered. In the antebellum backcountry, a "rough and tumble" fight was the accustomed method for settling even minor disagreements. What made this fighting style unique was the emphasis on maximum disfigurement of the opponent and amid pulling hair, biting off lips, tearing off noses and choking, gouging out an opponent's eye became the essence of rough and tumble. The popularity of this fighting style was attested by the presence of numerous one-eyed men along the Appalachian frontier and the winners of such fights were celebrated in the region's oral folklore. The article traces the reflection of this violent phenomenon in various works of antebellum popular fiction, including a series of humorous pamphlets known as Crockett Almanacs *which were published between 1835 and 1856.*

Keywords

Appalachia, *Crockett Almanacs*, eye-gouging, rough and tumble, violence

In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was not uncommon to meet large numbers of one-eyed men in Kentucky, Tennessee and other parts of the Appalachian region of the United States. This bodily deficit was not a consequence of some strange disease. It was a manifestation of extremely violent culture brought to the American frontier by the settlers from the borderlands of Britain. This violent culture enabled men to engage in gory brawls provoked by the slightest insults, brawls that often resulted in maiming one or both of the contestants. The article focuses on the origins of so-called rough and tumble fighting with an emphasis on eye-gouging, probably the best-known fighting technique. Its second part reflects this unique phenomenon in antebellum popular fiction.

Immigrants who settled in the outer frontier of English colonies and introduced a culture far more violent than that of the Jamestown gentlemen were of Scotch-Irish origin. They originally came from war-torn lowland Scotland and the northern part of Ireland, and between 1717 and 1775 as many as 200,000 of them arrived in America.[1] These immigrants were proud and violent and instead of settling in the growing cities of the Atlantic seaboard, they immediately headed for the backcountry. From Pennsylvania, they spread down through the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains as far as northern Georgia, seizing any sort of land they could find. Their settlements were isolated, the nearest courthouse was often several days' journey away and the settlers fell back on their old practice of taking the law into their own hands.[2] In the backcountry, central authority was weak and vengeance was part of daily life. By clinging to the violent way of life, the frontiersmen exhibited characteristics of their ancestors from Ireland and Scotland.[3] Moore

1 Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind. The Cultural Analysis of the Kentucky Frontiersman* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), 52.

2 Colin Woodard, *American Nations. A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 104.

3 Elliot J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (1985): 39.

claims that by the end of the eighteenth century, Appalachian backwoodsmen have achieved an unequaled reputation for savagery.[4]

The level of physical violence in frontier regions was astonishing and visitors to these territories noted the sharp rise in violence south of the Potomac River.[5] Violence that would be considered disreputable in both the North and the Midwest earned one honor and respect on the frontier because there, men were judged by their toughness, ferocity and brawling prowess. When a group of frontiersmen got together, a fight of some kind might climax their meeting. It could be a court session, a military parade, a horse race or a funeral. Taverns on crossroads were often a setting for a brawl when good fellowship and high spirits suddenly turned to violence. Any gathering of men might lead to a quarrel that could result in a fight, since a fight was the respected and accustomed method for settling all disagreements because it usually did not involve taking human life. On the other hand, a duel, the method for settling disputes in the North or among the planter class of the Deep South very likely ended with the death of one of the involved parties.

Trouble resulting in a loss of an eye or an ear could be ignited by the slightest insult. Name calling, displays of poor manners or breaches of decorum could provoke gory brawls since the concept of honor was highly developed in frontier regions. Elliot J. Gorn in his influential and often reprinted study of antebellum fighting called "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry" claims that if a man's good name was his most important possession, then any slight offense hurt him deeply. To call a man a "buckskin" or a "Scotsman" was reason enough to start a bloody fight.[6]

The contestants had a choice between fighting with clenched fists only under rather strict rules, breach of which could lead to the intervention of the seconds, or they could engage in what was generally called across the entire region "rough and tumble." The former option was a gentlemanly form of boxing brought by the settlers from Hanoverian England, while the latter became a frontier phenomenon recorded both in rich oral folklore and by a number of travelers to the region. What made rough and tumble style unique was the emphasis on maximum mutilation of the opponent.

But even rough and tumble had its rules, the most important being that weapons were strictly forbidden. The fight generally ended when one of the fighters either shouted "Enough!" or passed out.[7] When the men agreed to fight "no holts barred," all fighting techniques were permitted. Before the fight, an improvised ring was formed by the spectators and the contestants partially or completely stripped. The fight would usually start with fists but soon, there would follow "a gory struggle in which every human faculty might be brought into use."[8] Among the acceptable techniques were scratching, pinching, biting, throttling, gouging and, as Isaac Weld, an Irish explorer observed in his *Travels Through the States of North America* (1799), castration. He noted that "what is worse than all, these wretches in their combat endeavor to their utmost to tear out each other's testicles. Four or five instances came within my own observation, as I passed

4 Moore, *The Frontier Mind*, 54.

5 Tom Parramore, "Gouging in Early North Carolina," *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 22 (1974): 56.

6 Gorn, "Gouge and Bite," 19.

7 James Robertson, "Frolics, Fights, and Firewater in Frontier Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1958): 109.

8 Robertson, "Frolics, Fights and Firewater," 109.

through Maryland and Virginia, of men being confined in their beds from the injuries which they had received of this nature in a fight."[9] After the mayhem, when the bleeding and disfigured contestants had washed up, they often shook hands and adjourned to the nearest tavern.[10]

Gorn calls gouging "the sine qua non of rough and tumble fighting, much like the knockout punch in modern boxing."[11] Among all the mentioned techniques, gouging out an opponent's eye was the most well-known and its popularity was attested by the presence of numerous one-eyed men along the Appalachian frontier. Gouging one's eye was simply the most secure way to victory and at the same time, the most prestigious accomplishment of the fighter, when prominent gougers were celebrated in the rich oral folklore of Appalachia.

Artistry in this particular skill however was not achieved without attention to certain physical advantages which could prove decisive in a crucial moment of the fight. Thomas Anburey, the author of *Travels Through the Interior Parts of America* (1789), who wrote that "an English boxing match, though a disgrace to a polished nation, is humanity itself, compared with the Virginian mode of fighting,"[12] claimed that experienced gougers kept the nails of both thumbs and index fingers very long and pointed, they hardened them over a candle to prevent them from breaking and oiled them slick. This entire preparation enabled the gougers to remove an opponent's eye more easily.[13] As to the technique itself, Isaac Weld offers an authentic description in his *Travels Through the States*: "Whenever these people come to blows, they fight just like wild beasts, biting, kicking, and endeavoring to tear each other's eyes out with their nails. It is by no means uncommon to meet with those who have lost an eye in a combat, and there are men who pride themselves upon the dexterity with which they can scoop one out. This is called gouging. To perform the horrid operation, the combatant twists his forefingers in the side locks of his adversary's hair, and then applies his thumbs to the bottom of the eye, to force it out of the socket."[14] He adds that in North Carolina and Georgia, people are more depraved than in Virginia, and in some parts of these states, every third or fourth man appears without an eye.

The most frequent occurrence of gouging matches was limited to the Appalachian regions of western North Carolina and Georgia, upland parts of Alabama and Mississippi and entire regions of Kentucky and Tennessee. Particularly gougers in North Carolina and George achieved prominence across the country and according to Tom Parramore, these two states even developed a certain rivalry in gouging which was best manifested in local newspapers. The Raleigh *Star* was, for example, aware of the fact that there were visitors to the state who believed that "a North Carolinian cannot salute you without putting his finger in your eyes."[15]

The authorities in these regions were aware of the level of violence and one after another tried to enforce legislation that would prohibit rough and tumble fighting. In this, they were not

9 Isaac Weld, *Travels Through the States on North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796 and 1797* (London: John Stockdale, 1807), 192–193.

10 See Robertson, "Frolics, Fights and Firewater," 109.

11 Gorn, "Gouge and Bite," 20.

12 Thomas Anburey, *Travels Through the Interior States of America, in a Series of Letters Vol 2*. (London: W. Lane, 1789), 375.

13 See Anburey, *Travels*, 349.

14 Weld, *Travels Through the States*, 192.

15 Quoted in Parramore, "Gouging," 59.

successful. Already in 1749, colonial legislature of North Carolina enacted a law that made it a felony to "cut out the tongue, or pull out the eyes, of the King's Liege People."[16] But in the end, it was not the authorities that limited this unique manifestation of backwoods masculinity. Rough and tumble fighting gradually declined after the 1840s, when it succumbed to technology. In 1835, the first modern revolver appeared and increasingly, it settled more personal quarrels. So as Gorn concludes "violence grew neater and more lethal as men checked their savagery to murder each other."[17]

How did the authors of antebellum popular fiction reflect this unique frontier phenomenon? Since rough and tumble fighting was largely limited to the above-mentioned regions, it is not surprising that the further south and west the setting is, the more eye-gouging is to be found. Sensational novels, so popular in the 1840s and 1850s, published and set in Boston, Philadelphia and other cities of the North, contain only scarce references to gouging. In *City Crimes*, one of the most popular sensational novels written by George Thompson, the Dead Man, the novel's arch-villain begins to torture Frank Sydney, the main protagonist with the words "Sit up, and let me dig out your eyes, and cut off your nose, ears and fingers – for you must die by inches!"[18] In the best-selling sensational novel of the antebellum era, George Lippard's *Quaker City* (1843), there is a hideous hump-backed, one-eyed character called the Devil Bug, whose empty socket is constantly mentioned throughout the novel but the origins of his mutilation are never given.

In 1835, Augustus Longstreet, Georgia lawyer and future president of four colleges, published a collection of sketches named *Georgia Scenes* which several critics have considered as a prime example of Southwestern humor.[19] One memorable sketch is named "The Fight" and contains a scene which Tom Parramore calls "a milestone in the annals of literary pugilism."[20] Almost the entire chapter is dedicated to a faithful rendering of a bloody rough and tumble fight between two good friends, Billy Stallings and Bob Durham, who are intrigued into a brawl by a local low-life scoundrel. Through the middle of the fight, the following view presents itself to the narrator: "I looked, and saw that Bob had entirely lost his left ear, and a large piece from his left cheek. His right eye was a little discoloured, and the blood flowed profusely from his wounds. Bill presented a hideous spectacle. About a third of his nose, at the lower extremity was bit off, and his face so swelled and bruised that it was difficult to discover in it anything of the human visage, much more the fine features which he carried into the ring."[21] This state of affairs, however, does not prevent the two champions from stopping the mayhem and it continues for two more pages. Despite being a fight of truly epic proportions, disappointingly, none of the brawlers resorts to gouging and both contestants survive the fight with their eyes intact.

16 Quoted in Parramore, "Gouging," 58.

17 Gorn, "Gouge and Bite," 43.

18 George Thompson, *City Crimes*, in *Venus in Boston, and Other Tales of Nineteenth-Century City Life*, ed. David S. Reynolds and Kimberly R. Gladman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 257.

19 John Mayfield, "Being Shifty in a New Country: Southern Humor and the Masculine Ideal," in *Southern Manhood. Perspectives in Masculinity in the Old South*, ed. Craig Thompson and Lorri Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 132.

20 Parramore, "Gouging," 61.

21 Augustus Longstreet, *Georgia Scenes, Characters, Incidents & c., in the First Half Century of the Republic* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1850), 62.

The above-mentioned rivalry in reputation for gouging between Georgia and North Carolina was manifested in 1859, when the Southwestern humorist and Baptist minister Hardin Taliaffero, apparently inspired by Longstreet, published a book of sketches named *Fisher River (North Carolina) Sketches and Characters.* A chapter called simply "Fighting," includes a number of sketches depicting fights in Surry County of northwestern North Carolina. In one of the sketches, he claims that fighting in that part of the state was a common occurrence and the men used only such weapons that Nature had given them: "They would…kick with their feet like a horse, bite like loggerhead turtles, gouge like screw-augurs, and butt like rams; any method with the body was lawful. Bullies would keep their thumb-nails oiled and trimmed sharp as hawks' claws. Ask why and they would reply 'To feel fur a fellers eye strings, and make him tell the news.'"[22] He adds that the locals were very disappointed when a militia muster or public gathering went without a gouging or butting fight.

Though both Longstreet's and Taliaferro's books of sketches contain some epic backcountry blood orgies, rough and tumble scholars must turn to far more obscure artefacts of antebellum popular fiction to quench their academic thirst for eye-gouging. Between 1835 and 1856, a series of humorous pamphlets called *Davy Crockett's Almanacks* (or *Crockett's Almanacs*) were published in various American cities. The almanacs appeared first in Nashville and later they were published in Boston, Philadelphia or Baltimore but there is evidence that even the so-called Nashville series was printed in Boston.[23] They provided all kinds of astronomical and meteorological information for both eastern and western parts of the country but, what is crucial for the purpose of my paper, they also contained vernacular, often grotesque tall tales with the frontier setting. It is these pamphlets that yielded the most satisfactory results in terms of literary treatment of the most popular backcountry fighting technique.

Davy Crockett, the narrator and central figure in these pamphlets, was a fictional character created by scores of largely anonymous authors who wrote the stories of the *Crockett's Almanacs*.[24] He was of course based on a real life David Crockett, a famous frontiersman and a US Congressman for Tennessee (between 1827–1831 and again 1833–1835) who died at the Alamo in 1836. Already during his life, frontiersman Crockett became a larger-than-life figure, a reputation fabricated by a number of works including *Lion of the West* (1831), a play by James K. Paulding and extremely successful Crockett's ghost-written autobiography *Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* (1834). Soon after its publication, tales about his deeds began to spread in poems and by word of mouth. His heroic death at the Alamo only magnified his already mythical status and publishers of the almanacs, well aware of the popularity of Crockett, quickly seized the opportunity and incorporated the stories circulating about him into their publications. Thus, Davy Crockett became the embodiment of the rough spirit of the frontier, the first American superhero, and the *Crockett Almanacs* the longest running series of comic almanacs published in the antebellum United States.[25]

22 Hardin E.Taliaferro, *Fisher River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 198.

23 Catherine Albanese, "King Crockett: Nature and Civility on the American Frontier," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 88, pt. 2 (1979): 230.

24 Albanese, "King Crockett," 226.

25 See Michael A. Lofaro, "A Taste of Tales," in *Davy Crockett's Riproarious Shemales and Sentimental Sisters. Women's Tall Tales from the Crockett Almanacs (1835–1856)*, ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001), 2.

Crockett Almanacs are an example of subversive backwoods humor that appeared in the 1830s. The tall tales of the Almanacs are narrated in rough frontier vernacular and with their bear cooking, panther skinning and wild kitten stomping, they challenge all standards of gentility. David Reynolds claims that the humor of the Crockett tales "invited readers to snicker continually at the pornography of violence."[26] In these tall tales, Davy Crockett is virtually a demi-god whose deeds humiliate those of Superman, Flash Gordon and other 20th century comic book superheroes. As an infant, he is fed whiskey with rattle-snakes' eggs. When he falls to some icy water, he climbs a thirty-feet tree a hundred times and slides down to get warm. He rides his pet alligator up the Niagara Falls, he can drink up the Mississippi River and unfreeze the sun and the earth from their axes with hot bear oil.

Davy Crockett and other characters from the Almanacs enjoy eye-gouging like nothing else and together with out-screaming a panther or skinning a bear, it seems to be among the essential backwoods skills. Ben Harding, Crockett's mate born in Kentucky, for example, gouged four eyes before he was sixteen. In "Crockett's First Love," Davy courts a girl but after he puts one of her brother's eyes in his pocket after a quarrel she refuses him because he did not act like a friend to the family should. And Crockett himself almost comes one eye short in "Davy Crockett's Early Days, Severe Courtship, and Marriage" when his opponent in love "got a turn in my hair, and his thumb in my eye, and gave the ball such a start from the socket, that it has squinted ever since."[27]

Very often, minority groups like Mexicans, Indians and particularly African-Americans are not just satiric targets but also favorite victims of gouging. A good example of Crockett's blatant racism is a story named "A Scentoriferous Fight with a Nigger" where he simultaneously fights a "pesky great bull nigger" and a black bear while sitting in his skiff afloat on the Mississippi: "So we wrassled and jerked and bit for a long time, till I got a chance at one of his eyes with my thum nail. Then when I begun to put on the rail Kentucky twist, he knew it was all day with him, and he fell on his knees and begged for mercy. His eye stood out about half an inch, and I felt the bottom of the socket with the end of my thum. I telled him to confess everything or I would snap his eye right out."[28] At the end, Crockett adds that this was the first fight with a nigger he ever had. In *Crockett's Almanac* from 1847, there is a similar tale named "Fight with Negroes" which Crockett describes as "the most vociferous fight" he has ever seen. In an attempt to find a Yankee pedlar who had cheated him with a wooden clock, Crockett gets into a fight with two blacks. Somehow, he manages to free himself from their hold and what follows is one of the finest descriptions of gouging in antebellum fiction: "At last I got my thum crooked, and my finger in the wool of one of 'em, and then got my thumb-nale jest into the corner of his eye. That started 'em both. One give a scandaliferous yell, and jumped! out of the break and run. As for the tother, I put his eye in my pocket and showed it to the audience when I made my last 'lection speech. That's always harder

26 David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 450.

27 "Davy Crockett's Early Days, Severe Courtship and Marriage," in *Davy Crockett's Riproarious Shemales and Sentimental Sisters. Women's Tall Tales from the Crockett Almanacs (1835–1856),* ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001), 188.

28 "A Scentoriferous Fight with a Nigger," *The Crockett Almanac, 1839* (Nashville: Ben Harding, 1839), 18.

work in taking out a nigger's eye than a white man's, for I've had great experience in that line. The nigger's skull is so thick that it's like digging out a well to take out his eye."[29]

In the tales of the Almanacs, women are given equal status to men in terms of gouging. What they particularly enjoy is receiving eyes as gifts, wearing them as accessories or carrying them around in bags. The tales of *Crockett's Almanacs* intentionally mock conventional courting practices.[30] When Crockett's uncle falls in love, he gives his sweetheart a tame bear and two eyes he had gouged out at the last election. Crockett's aunt dries them, hangs one in each ear and wears them to church.[31] There is also a girl named Lotty Ritchers who once chased a crocodile until his hide came off and who "carried twenty eyes in her work bag, at one time, that she had picked out of the heads of certain gals of her acquaintance. She always made them into a string of beads, when she went to church, and wore 'em round her neck."[32] Unfortunately, she died when she stood for two days in the Mississippi up to her chin hailing steamboats that passed by. And finally, when Colonel Coon courts a girl named Judy (who sucked forty rattlesnake's eggs on her wedding night to give her a sweet breath), he presents before her half a dozen eyes claiming that "he'd place any man's eyes by the side of them that dared to say a word agin Judy."[33] In a tale named "A Love Fight – by Ben Harding" Ben Harding once witnesses a fight between two girls who have a love interest in him with a following result: "The long one had lost her cloze and one nipple, and the short one lost an i and haff her nose."[34] He eventually marries the eyeless one because she had suffered so much in his cause.

Eye-gouging did not die out from popular culture with the decline of Crockett Almanacs and survived well into the 21st century. Gouging scenes continue shocking audiences in such blockbuster movies as Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 2* (2004) or Sam Mendes' *Spectre* (2015), the latest installment of James Bond franchise. Quentin Tarantino even pays a tribute to rough and tumble fighting in *Django Unchained* (2012), set in the antebellum South, where a brutal fight between two slaves culminates with the loser's eyes being gouged out. And, shockingly, gouging has appeared in real-life situations as well. In October 2005, Dale Purinton, an enforcer for the New York Rangers was suspended 10 games for eye-gouging when he dug his thumb into the eye of Colton Orr of the Boston Bruins during an on-ice fight in a pre-season game.[35]

Gouging was a unique Appalachian phenomenon, recorded in the written accounts of a number of travelers to the region in the late eighteenth century. It was a legacy of the extremely violent warrior culture introduced to the Appalachian milieu by Scotch-Irish immigrants from

29 "Fight with Negroes," *Davy Crockett's Almanac, 1847* (Boston: James Fischer, 1847), 34.

30 See Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 451.

31 "Crockett's Aunt," *Crockett's Almanac, 1848* (Boston: James Fischer, 1848), 5.

32 "The Flower of Gum Swamp," in *Davy Crockett's Riproarious Shemales and Sentimental Sisters. Women's Tall Tales from the Crockett Almanacs (1835–1856),* ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001), 113.

33 "Ben Coon's Courtship," in *Davy Crockett's Almanack, of Wild Sports in the West, and Life in the Backwoods, 1836* (Nashville: Published for the author), 34.

34 "A Love Fight – by Ben Harding," in *Davy Crockett's Riproarious Shemales and Sentimental Sisters. Women's Tall Tales from the Crockett Almanacs (1835–1856),* ed. Michael A. Lofaro (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2001), 178–179.

35 Chris Rauch, "Enforcer Dale Purinton doesn't pull punches about the havoc concussions wreaked on his brain," espn.com, November 28, 2016, accessed January 5, 2017, http://www.espn.com/nhl/story/_/id/18113373/nhl-former-new-york-rangers-enforcer-dale-purinton-pull-punches-havoc-multiple-concussions-wreaked-brain.

Britain. In terms of fictional representation, rough and tumble fights were colorfully recreated in the tall tales of a number of authors of Southwestern humor. However, it was the *Crockett Almanacs*, humorous pamphlets published in the three decades preceding the Civil War that gave gouging the literary treatment that uplifted the frontiersmen's reputation for ferocity and savagery. The tales of the Almanacs offered grotesque depictions of rough backcountry life and presented gouging as a trademark skill of Davy Crockett and other screamers of the frontier.

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Jozef Pecina teaches American history at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, Slovakia. His main fields of interest are antebellum history and popular culture. He is the author of *The Representation of War in Nineteenth Century American Novels* and he has published numerous articles on James Fenimore Cooper, antebellum sensational novels and 1950s comic books.