

**Terry G. Jordan and Matti Kaups. *The American Backwoods Frontier: An Ethnic and Ecological Interpretation.*(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) xiii, 340 pp., \$36.00.**

Terry Jordan and Matti Kaups have produced a new study which is revealing, thorough, and extremely well documented with ample illustrations, charts, and maps. Their thesis is fascinating: Finnish immigrants played a highly significant role in the shaping of the American backwoods frontier. The authors trace the origin of the Finns from Finland's interior where winters were (are) severe and where chinked log cabins and double-pen cabins became an art along with hunting, gathering, and marginal crop growing. Such a life style prepared them for immigration from Savo-Karelian Finland to the lower Delaware Valley settlements in New Jersey and Pennsylvania (during the 1740s) and from there westward through the Appalachians to the prairies, Rockies, and Pacific Northwest.

While this reader at first felt that the thesis was oversimplified, he became convinced by an overwhelming amount of evidence which confirms the fact that the Savo-Karelian Finns did have a strong impact on Scotch-Irish, Swedish, and other frontiersmen. How? Jordan and Kaups explain that while the Spanish shunned forests, the Dutch clung to the Hudson River Valley, the English settled in New England, the Russians came too late (to have settled the frontier), and the great exploring French none-the-less colonized only Quebec, it was the Finns (along with Scotch-Irish and others) who settled in New Jersey in the early 18th century and spread westward intermarrying with Native Americans (not decimating them at all) along with the Scotch-Irish, Welsh, and Swedes.

How is it that the Savo-Karelian Finns, of all people, had the most influence? Jordan and Kaups explain that their particular style of log cabins (chinked logs, V-notches, double-pens) are evident throughout interior woodland Scandinavia as well as woodland America and westward. Yes, of course, other cultures influenced certain aspects of the backwoods log cabin (earthen floors from Native Americans, stone hearths and chimneys from the Scotch-Irish and Welsh), but the basic construction stems back to interior Finland and borderland Sweden (where the Finns migrated as early as the 1600s). Such a thesis runs counter to that of such folklorists as Henry Glassie and others.

Cultural traits are also in evidence. The Savo-Karelian Finns were unruly (hence were expelled from borderland areas within Scandinavia), shamanistic (hence were accepted as brothers by such Indian tribes as the Delawares), inventive, adaptive, and racially tolerant. They learned much from the Indians including hunting techniques, burial customs, and uses of plants for medicines and foods. This study is exhaustive in its presentation of pertinent detail as convincing evidence.

There are just a few places where this study could be even further

strengthened. While numerous 18th and 19th-century socio-historical views of backwoods culture are given (including those of Frederick Jackson Turner), no mention is made of Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur who has some significant commentary on the backwoods in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Jordan and Kaups make no references to the changing climate of North America since the early 18th century, and how such a change in weather patterns may have affected the use and distribution of double-pen log houses which are now found only in the heavy snowfall regions of the mountain West.

This reader strongly recommends *The American Backwoods Frontier* for all scholars of American culture and civilization.

—Richard F. Fleck  
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**Pleasant “Cousin Joe” Joseph and Harriet J. Ottenheimer. *Cousin Joe: Blues from New Orleans*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 227 pp., \$19.95.**

Unlike more traditional biographies, oral histories require that readers suspend their basic cultural assumptions about narrative. These assumptions, according to James Clifford, form a “myth of personal coherence” in which readers expect a narrator’s life story to represent a coherent and continuous self. The discrepancy between what a reader expects and what a reader receives forces the editor of an oral life-story to choose among several editorial options. In *Cousin Joe*, a work which took over twenty years to collect, to transcribe, and to edit, Harriet Ottenheimer informs us that she chose from three editing possibilities. She decided not to present a wholly unedited text complete with coughs and pauses, nor did she want to provide a work which included editorial commentary which might confuse the editor’s voice with the teller’s voice. Instead, she chose a style which strived for “some measure of coherence. . . intended for a general reading public” because Cousin Joe wanted his story to be a “best seller.” This compromising editorial tack proves to have a more positive than negative effect on the narrative, but Ottenheimer’s tendency toward an unedited text is plain. Although the book does exhibit standard spelling and grammar, much of the narrative is made up of unedited, rambling digressions.

Ottenheimer’s unobtrusive editing style allows Cousin Joe’s voice to reflect the reality of being black in a racist culture. Born to a poor, violent family on a Louisiana plantation in 1907, Cousin Joe relates the profound effect that this early social and familial abuse had on his life. Anger and frustration permeate his narrative, and Cousin Joe admits to too often finding solace from the world’s injustice through alcohol. But Cousin