

YANKEES ARE HUMAN

BY DAVID L. GRAHAM

THE national illusion that every Yankee is a puritan and a sourpuss is as unyielding as New England's stern and rockbound coast. My wife and I settled in Maine simply because we craved an old house and a farm by the sea, and despite the fact that our neighbors, by common repute, were a tight-fisted, puritanical crew who would sell us down the river, if we let them, to a passel of sanctimonious, psalm-singing bluenoses.

What astonished and delighted us, therefore, was not so much the friendly welcome (cordiality being two-thirds curiosity) but something far more precious — tolerance! This in spite of the fact that we have made no secret of our liberalism, winebibbing, and free verse — in the state that produced Prohibition and regards the Republican Party as the bulwark of civilization. We are considered a little queer; but in an individualistic community like ours that goes for nearly everybody — except the summer people, who are considered mad.

After sweltering in the puritanical atmosphere of the South and West, we have found a new life in the serenity of Yankee tolerance. Of course, there are retreats like Sante Fe and Greenwich Village where some moral *laissez-faire* survives, but such communities cater to “artistic” groups. For ordinary all-around native tolerance, without frills and self-consciousness, there is only New England. We've found plenty of conservatism, but no puritanism in the derogatory popular sense.

The Yankee we know is a small farmer, fisherman, or craftsman of some sort. He has a constant quiet twinkle in his eye, and although he talks easily enough if he thinks you're worth it, he never loses the air of knowing more than he chooses to tell. He somehow makes you feel that his ancestors had the opportunity of sailing on the *Mayflower* but passed it up because of the vulgar notoriety it would bring their descendants. As much as anybody, the Yankee is a product of his environment. It is profitless to re-

proach him, as outsiders with a metropolitan point of view have done, for being independent, self-sufficient, stubborn, cautious, and thrifty — qualities without which he never would have been able to survive his environment. These amount, however, to a defensive individualism, not an offensive puritanism.

Puritanism nowadays has degenerated into prudishness, with a passion for euphemisms and a horror of passion. But the puritans of old, however straitlaced, were not averse to rum and bundling. Certainly the Yankees we know are not prudes, for the briny winds of a long and tempestuous seacoast have seasoned these people of Maine. They are careful to take all protestations of virtue with a grain of salt, and there is plenty of salt. To them righteousness is more palatable if it has been blended with experience and aged in the keg, so to speak. Prudishness, on the other hand, is a product of the freshwater universities and tramontane morality. As for Prohibition, it was the sop the alcoholics of Maine tossed their Carrie Nations. The prohibitionists got the law on the statute books and the drinkers kept the hard cider in their cellars — a sensible arrangement, and a tribute to their tolerance and realism.

Yankees are considered prudes because they don't go around boasting about their excesses in an epoch when you get credit only for the vices you advertise. But boasting about last night's binge is against Yankee tradition; they'd as soon divulge how much money they have in the bank. Although there is far more desire and devilry under the elms than under any other kind of a tree, the Yankee gloats over his sharp practices only. It seems to be a matter of principle with him to put his worst foot forward, a sort of social bravado. But of his courage, his generosity, his patience, his use of the bottle, and his rugged lubricity he makes no mention. Thus the rich full life of the average Yankee flows on quietly beneath the frozen surface of his traditional reticence — unvaunted, unhonored, and unsung.

II

In insisting on the humanity of Yankees, the ample soul behind the tight lips, we don't mean to imply a readiness to accept new ideas. The Yankee and his thinking derive from a culture that was tenacious rather than luxuriant. He is a man of strong principles — one of which is tolerance, another independence. His hatred of being

interfered with doubtless begat his horror of interfering with others. Where we live, this passion for leaving people alone amounts to a mania. Perhaps that explains why a relatively large number of Maine's mental defectives remain at large. We know a man who has been committed to the asylum more than thirty times, but because the community's disapproval of coercion is so strong, he is released again as soon as he shows improvement. In the same spirit the Yankee hordes that commodity which people elsewhere are so generous with — advice. Not until you ask for it, and then only with the greatest reluctance, will a Yankee trespass on your individuality by telling you how to do something. A true democrat, he senses the paternalism of advice and shuns it.

It is no accident that in Maine and Vermont, the only states where Yankee philosophy is still unquestionably in the ascendant, the crime rate is low and lynching unheard of. This is the more remarkable because language, religious, and racial differences between the old Anglo-Saxon stock and the recently arrived French-Canadians offer ample cause for trouble. The French-Canadians, with their lower standard of living and their strong ethnic solidarity, now make up

more than half the population of many mill towns. But there has been no violence preached or perpetrated against them, for violence is the quintessence of intolerance, that fundamental Yankee taboo.

The cardinal virtue of colonial New England was thrift. Like any virtue when turned into a fetish, thrift has a tendency to fester. But in appreciating the value of money, the Yankee shows a trait common to civilized races the world over — the Scotch, the French, the Chinese. Money is not easily won from the granite ledges and icy waters of New England; and not being a leisure class group, but chiefly farmers, fishermen, and artisans with a first-hand knowledge of how wealth is created, Yankees are the last to be lured into extravagance. Such habits of mind, held over from colonial times, have ceased to be considered virtuous when mass-production must flow like a mill-race or stagnate. The thrifty Yankee who was the hero of pioneer economics is a heretic to modern business. His frugality, both of goods and ideas, is denounced as stinginess, contrariness, reaction. Well, the traveling salesman will have to realize that, where savings banks are still the pillars of society, spending will not be recognized as a social obligation.

It is also true, of course, that the Yankee greets the annual influx of tourists with somewhat the same enthusiasm as a run of salmon. But in what part of the world are tourists not regarded as fair game? Chaucer records that inn-keepers were battenning off them six hundred years ago. The accommodation of travelers is just another business, whether in Hopewell or Hong Kong.

III

Though the Yankee may be loath to part with hard-earned cash, he is generous with his time and labor, for his tradition lays down the solemn duty to help those in distress. In consequence, the Yankee has a morbid dread of passing for a poor neighbor. The community spirit of many New England settlements is equalitarian: they all own farms of about the same size, none has any great political or economic advantage over the other, and any sort of an emergency is met by the combined energies of the group. Repeatedly, for instance, our neighbors have volunteered a full day of haying, gardening, cutting ice or wood for one of us who was disabled or in trouble. Dicker- ing is the Yankee's delight and he is not unwilling to profit by another's

foolishness, but not by his misfortune. All human intercourse he regards as a battle of wits, but once a truce has been called he pitches in and helps.

That fear of being known as a poor neighbor is the only anxiety of a Yankee's soul. No kind of snobbery with its attendant terrors and triumphs corrodes him. He scorns to enter the daily grind of keeping up with the Joneses, that nightmare of most Americans. In the petty rivalries of display and expenditure he does not figure because he lacks this competitive sense, priding himself more on what he does without.

This independence, characteristic of a cultural stillwater, may impede the rush of assembly-line progress, but it also bestows a sort of dignity upon these few who have not been drawn into the whirlpools of Babbitry. People who, on account of business and social pressure, live in dread of being thought old-fashioned, shabby, or hard-up, condemn the Yankee for not kneeling to materialism. But the Yankee is wise enough to be himself and let it go at that. He wears no mask to embarrass him by falling down; he erects no false front to humiliate him by crumbling to pieces. Most Yankees, therefore, clam-diggers or whatever they may be, have the calm self-posses-

sion of kings, while in these troublous times captains of industry, bankers, and politicians are never more than half-triumphant over a bad case of the jitters. The Yankee, whose philosophy embraces catastrophe and whose assets are character and time, remains tranquil. He has learned much from his quarry, the clam.

We like living among the Yankees if only because of their sense of humor. It is a sophisticated, sardonic humor, not sophisticated because of a leisure-class bias nor hopped to the ears with sex, but sophisticated in the sense of being realistic, disillusioned. One of our neighbors, for instance, insisted that her husband must be more than seventy years old; nobody, she said, could get as dirty as he is in seventy years. Yankee humor is creative as well as critical; it chiefly consists in making one's own sharp, pithy comments on men and affairs instead of parroting other peoples' funny stories. Thus the New England town-meeting, the last survival in America of pure democracy, which elsewhere would be a dreary babble of statisticians and right-thinking men, is as entertaining as a performance by Will Rogers — a continuous stream of pungent wisecracks and common sense, in which even fiscal facts

spring from the ledger and crackle like live wires.

To persons used to the twilight-sleep of radio punning, Yankee humor may be as disconcerting as a snowball behind the ear. The Yankee likes to whip over his wisecracks with all the speed he can pack. Yet there's nothing mean or underhanded about this. Next to dickerer, it's the regional sport. And the receiver is expected to think up an annihilating comeback in the twinkling of a blue eye. This spirited give and take is the joy of New England; it keeps a man on his toes and discourages vain brooding about the weather, the soil, and the sea — ungenerous all.

It must be admitted that the Yankee is no longer in the forefront of American progress. Detroit is nearer the hub of our universe than Boston. Industrialism is in the saddle and we are far gone toward collectivism, although it is not yet clear whether we are galloping back to a militaristic feudal society or forward to a new freedom. In any case, the nineteenth century with its Yankee ideals of democracy, self-reliance, reason, and tolerance is being put to the question. Whatever changes are coming, the Yankee, I am convinced, will be the salt of whatever civilization he's a part.

► *A leading authority on crime demonstrates that in America homicide begins at home.*

DIVORCE BY MURDER

BY COURTNEY RYLEY COOPER

A FARMER in Iowa staggered to the home of neighbors and half fell in the door.

"Quick!" he begged. "Call the sheriff! Burglars! They beat me with an iron rod. God only knows what they did to my wife and daughter!"

About the same time, a bereaved wife sat talking to a district attorney in Illinois. It was difficult for her to speak without sobbing: "I don't know how my husband could think of such a terrible thing. All of a sudden, he grabbed up a shotgun and braced the butt against the floor. Then he put his head to the muzzle, bent over and pulled the trigger. It was horrible."

And in Oklahoma, an injured woman crawled from beneath a wrecked automobile. She was bleeding from terrific injuries; dying, she cried: "Find my husband! Find out what happened to my husband!"

What ultimately happened to the husband was that he was convicted of murder; it seems that he had battered in his wife's head with

a hammer and then, believing her dead, had driven the car into a ditch in an effort to create the illusion that she had been killed in the wreck. As for the other cases, up-to-date law enforcement men followed what is becoming more and more a routine type of investigation. Convinced by experience that murder begins at home, they looked close to the domestic hearth for clues before pursuing will-of-the-wisp stories about murderous burglars or spectacular suicides.

They were quite correct. The spouse was guilty in each case. The farmer had beaten his wife to death and hit himself a few weak blows to support his story of invaders, and the grieving wife had made a slight error in her story to the district attorney, inasmuch as it had been she who had put the shotgun to her husband's head and pulled the trigger. These murders, plus hundreds of others each year, were committed to save the "scandal" of a divorce, so a preferred member of the eternal triangle could be loved without interference.