

Okeisms – Southernisms

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Sunday, July 17, 2022

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I was more or less raised on the east coast. But I also spent a lot of summers in Oklahoma. Both my parents had rural, agrarian upbringings, one in Kentucky, land of beautiful horses and fast women, and the other in Oklahoma. One of my siblings has described Oklahoma as southern and western, but definitely not southwestern. Under their cowboy hats, Okies definitely operate with a southern sensibility. For many years I was married to a highly educated woman who grew up in the boondocks of Arkansas. She was buried so deep in the pine forests and mountains of rural Arkansas that the first black person she encountered was when she went away to college. She and her *mishpocha* had a very southern, rural way of speaking. When we would go back to visit her parents, the closer to their home we were, the more country her speech became. The same phenomenon happened the further afield we ranged. Once we were on vacation in New England, and I had to frequently translate for her. The Yankees up there were baffled by her accent, and she, not infrequently, by theirs.

So why I am I bringing this up? I have a fairly southern way of speaking myself. With my mish-mash of accents, here in St. Louis, I frequently get, “you’re not from around here, are you?” We were once out with a group of folks, and I told a fellow I was fixin’ to... whatever. At the “fixin’ to” he about fell off his bar stool, he was laughing so hard. I have lived in 13 different states and my particular accent can best be described as confused with major southern overtones. One of the characteristics of the southern dialect is the use of metaphors, colloquialism... various types of idiomatic expressions. One of the most famous being, “why bless your little pea pickin’ heart”, which is not a compliment, just in case you did not know. These sort of expressions just pop out of my mouth without any more thought than you would give to putting an ‘a’ or ‘the’ before a word. I am going to call them, Southernisms or Okieisms.

When I worked in Tulsa, the last two years there I was heavily involved in merging the computer systems of CSW with those of the company buying them out, AEP. As such, I had to spend a lot of time on the phone with a gentleman in Columbus, Ohio. He would react so uproariously when an Okieism popped out that I just started making up new ones just to satisfy his need to hear how the hicks were talking down in Indian Territory.

However, these Okieisms not infrequently cause communication difficulties within the boundaries of my

matrimonial bliss. *Señora* has lived all of her life, except four years at the University of Missouri, in the St. Louis metropolitan area. When I first heard her speak I would have described her accent as a Jewish, Chicago accent. She had a hard time understanding mine. In fact, we almost did not go out as she could barely comprehend the first voice message I left her after corresponding via emails for a while. Fortunately, her friend convinced her “to give David a chance.” Thanks Viki. Our ongoing difficulty is that one of these Okieisms will pop out and she has no idea what I am trying to express. I look at her, perplexed, because as far as I was concerned, I was as clear as new glass. I do wonder occasionally if she is taking them literally, rather than parsing out the metaphor. I will admit to feeling like I have been rode hard and put up wet after jumping through hoops to explain to her in highfalutin, standard, galactic English what I just said in clear Southernese.

We were just in Oklahoma for a quick visit with my mother in the nursing home, and then on to the [Woodyfest](#) in [Okemah, OK](#). *Señora* had an epiphany (no, not that kind silly). Folks were using a lot of Okieisms that I routinely use. The first time was the hotel desk clerk. I do not remember exactly what she said, as for me, it was unremarkable, maybe something along the lines of “*might as well, can’t dance, too wet to plow*.” *Señora*’s jaw dropped, and she about did a cartwheel pointing out to me that the young lady had used one of my common Southernisms. The last time it happened was at the Woody Guthrie Museum when the young lady there, after going through her new visitor spiel, ended by saying, “and that’s my story and I am sticking to it.” That is something that I frequently say... whether it is applicable or not.

I sure *Señora* stills sees me as weird, but, perhaps, just a tad less so. I know I still see her as cute as a speckled pup under a red wagon.

And so it goes.

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