

# Whippoorwill E-Comment

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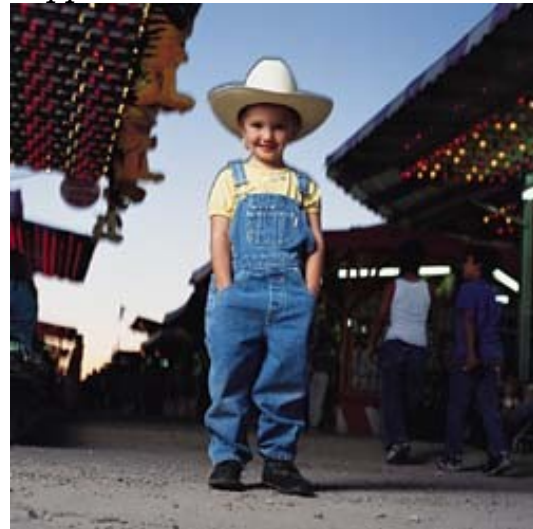
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## ON DENIM

I grew up in a rural central Kentucky county where nearly everyone I knew made their living as tobacco farmers. My father was one of the few who was not a farmer; he worked for an electric power company. Virtually all of my elementary and high school classmates were children of farmers, or people who worked in farm related occupations. I later learned that the region was economically depressed, and that much farming was conducted on a subsistence level. The farmers tended to have large families, and ten children were not uncommon. Many were tenant farmers. People were poor, but they got by. There were no extravagances. Farmers and their families usually ate better than most because they grew large vegetable gardens, and had their own milk cows, and chickens, pigs, and cattle, for meat.

When I entered the small rural school, I became aware that most of the boys wore the same uniforms – bib overalls made of extremely heavy denim which wore like iron. When school began in September, I noticed that most classmates

sported new overalls and new ankle-high brogans, very heavy, hard wearing shoes, which we knew affectionately as *clod-hoppers*.



The new denim was so thick and stiff that I suspected that they could stand alone. Overalls and heavy flannel shirts were worn every day, and as they were cleaned, they gradually became more flexible and doubtless more comfortable. They became lighter in color as the blue dye was bleached out after repeated washings. When the school year ended in the spring, they continued to be worn while working in the fields, setting and cultivating large tobacco crops. A pair of new overalls and heavy

shoes lasted all year before becoming excessively threadbare and worn.

I don't remember kids wearing what are today called blue jeans. Although my family was not better off financially than most of the farmers, I never wore overalls. I learned to associate bib overalls with relative poverty.



Fast-forward fifty years, and blue jeans became extremely popular, especially among students. Some students wore expensive designer jeans, but most preferred deliberately bleached, extremely worn and stressed jeans, with holes in the knees and often crotches. Many sported gaudy multicolored patches. I eventually bought a couple of pair of jeans to wear at home while doing gardening and yard work and enjoyed their surprising comfort and hard

wearing qualities. I preferred not wear them to teach my classes, though did when I took classes on biological and geological field trips. After a few short years, many younger colleagues began wearing them while teaching, and soon it was hard to find faculty wearing suits and neckties. Most faculty dressed as casually and sloppily as students. The only college employees who wore formal suits and ties were in administrative positions, the president, the dean, and the business manager, and a few of the older faculty, including me, who preferred to dress as we considered, *professionally*.

After retirement, jeans have become my preferred dress. I learned I should choose the *relaxed fit* style, which better fit my aging physiognomy — I have become more gorilla-shaped in my advancing years. If I were a gorilla, I would now be classified as a *silverback*. Today, nearly everyone wears jeans exclusively, and the few who wear other clothing stand out from the crowd. Recently, we had dinner at a local O'Charley's restaurant and had to sit in a waiting area about 30 minutes before being seated. I began studying the waiting crowd, and those seated, and those leaving the premises, and of the hundred or so I observed, only four women and two men wore clothing other than well worn jeans. Evolution? *Devolution?*