

Scotch-Irish Pronunciation

Revision of an essay originally published in *Journal of East Tennessee History*, vol. 67, 1-33 (1995).

By Prof. Michael Montgomery (copyright of the author)

Linguists often divide language into three broad components—pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The Scotch-Irish influence on East Tennessee speech is clear in each of these, but most prominent in grammar, to which we will give the closest attention.

Pronunciation

As far as pronunciation is concerned, one of the most prevalent tendencies in East Tennessee speech today is the identical sounding of pairs of words like *pen/pin*, *ten/tin*, and *hem/him*, that is, what are popularly known as the "short i" and "short e" vowels before the consonants "n" and "m". Most people in East Tennessee, regardless of their education or social class, neither hear nor produce the vowels differently in such words, but they do distinguish word pairs like *bit/bet* and *lid/led*, in which the vowels come before other consonants. Indeed, growing up in Knoxville in the 1950s/60s I distinguished *pen* and *pin* only by the words that were put in front of them, such as *ink*, *straight*, or *safety*, and my mother, a first-grade teacher, had more trouble teaching the phonics lesson for words like *pen* than any others. There is a perfectly reasonable historical explanation: this speech rule or habit was brought by emigrant ancestors, just as many others were. Letters written back to Ulster by emigrants are full of spellings like *gineral* and *sind*. Samuel Brown, living in Philadelphia but recently emigrated from Belfast, exhibited the same tendency in writing home to his brother in 1793, "Dear Brother, I take this opertunity of Wrighting you Afew Lines to Lett you know that I am in good health at preasent thanks be to god and hoping these Lines will find you and My sister And the Children *Injoying* the seam ..." (see the appendix).[33](#)

A pattern of pronunciation that can possibly be traced to the Scotch-Irish is what is known as the "Southern drawl." This involves the stretching of short vowels in words like *bad* and *bed*, the result being that a vowel is added (a kind of "uh" sound) that produces another syllable: "I felt so ba-ud that I just fell in the be-ud"). This type of pronunciation is, of course, common throughout the South, and where it occurs in the Lower South it most likely is due in part to an African-American influence. We can be less certain of the history of this pronunciation feature than the one discussed in the previous paragraph, because no evidence of it ever shows up in writing (no matter how poorly educated writers were and therefore tended to spell by sound, their spelling never reflected such a pattern). The drawl that speakers in Ulster today have is unlike the American one, but there are certain clues in their speech suggesting a connection between the two.

We could also cite any number of individual words (like *whip* sounded as *whup*, still the usual pronunciation in Scotland), but suffice it to say that some of the most widespread and distinctive features of East Tennessee pronunciation are quite possibly inherited from the Scotch-Irish.