

Now in Mississippi: Four S's, Four I's, And a Dollop of P.R.

There's an old joke about Mississippi — actually, there's a mean one that says "joke" and "Mississippi" are redundant — but the one we're talking about, it's big among expatriates, and it goes like this:

Q: What are the three biggest cities in Mississippi?

A: Memphis, Mobile and New Orleans.

Hahaha! None of them are in the Magnolia State, which is the punch line.

The idea is that if you're a Mississippian and you're in the departure lounge at LaGuardia, and you're trying to tell a stranger what's near where you're from, you have to go outside the state to give them a clue. Sometimes it seems the rest of the country doesn't know anything about the poorest state in America except that they never want to go there. Just ask the honorable gentleman from New York, Rep. Charles B. Rangel (D), who wondered aloud to the New York Times a few weeks ago: "Who the hell wants to live in Mississippi?"

This sort of national guffaw, which is neither new nor exclusive to Congress (people in other poor states, like Arkansas and Alabama, are forever saying, "Thank God for Mississippi!"), has given new life to a buzz-generating advertising campaign from a public relations firm in Jackson (about three hours south of Memphis), that uses equal parts pride and fury to tell the rest of 'murica where to get off.

The "Mississippi, Believe It!" series of posters started last year and were mainly sent to schools and universities in Mississippi as a sort of in-state pep rally. But after Rangel's remark, organizers have been peppering national media outlets about a new batch of ads, trying to get some notice for the campaign. Here's one of the earlier ads. In big, bold type:

"Yes, we can read. A few of us can even write." (Photos of the Mississippi pantheon: Faulkner, Welty, Grisham, etc.)

Another:

"Yes, we wear shoes. Some of us even wear cleats." (Pictures of Big Muddy's all-world football giants: Walter Payton, Jerry Rice, Brett Favre.) As a Holmes County native, I can tell you the best part of the ads is that they leave out the full wording. This is good writing. You say one thing and people know you mean something else.

In Mississippi-speak, you say:

"Yes, We Wear Shoes."

What you actually mean:

"Would You Like to Feel My Foot Kicking Your [expletive]?" Some people like these ads and some people don't (you can see them all at Mississippi believeit.com). But it's fair to say this is the first time since white Mississippians

bought themselves the world's worst reputation during the civil rights era that the state has so publicly punched back at its pop culture image.

You know. Barefoot, tobacco-chewing, cousin-affectionate rednecks who park their pickups right out front of the double-wide. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.) "I hear negative things about the state's image all the time," says Mississippi State head football coach Sylvester Croom, the only black head coach in the history of the Southeastern Conference, who often tries to recruit players outside the region. "Mainly you hear about it out west and up north. From African Americans in those areas, it's about lynching and all that stuff." So it turns out white people in Mississippi get tired of hearing about their poverty and civil rights sins, the way black people in Detroit get tired of hearing about their poverty and the 1967 riots, and the way that everybody in Gary,



A campaign begun at the initiative of a Jackson advertising agency seeks to dispel longtime unfavorable perceptions about Mississippi.

Yes, we wear shoes. A few of us even wear cleats.



From left, Jerry Rice, Brett Favre, Steve McNair and Walter Payton, Mississippians all, star in one of the campaign's 14 posters

Ind., is tired of taking the blame for Michael Jackson. Some stuff you just have to let go.

"I prefer to think of the campaign as aggressive rather than defensive," says Rick Looser, president of the Cirlo Agency, who came up with the campaign idea and has overseen it since. He says his and other companies have donated about \$315,000 to the cause. "We're not whistling by the graveyard of our past, but it's sort of like other people think of us in a time warp . . . we're trying to present a different side of Mississippi."

Looser says his most gratifying response was a tearful thank-you from "a little old lady at the Friday hot dog and hamburger buffet at the Winona Rotary Club." He paused. "I think you have to be from Mississippi to appreciate that." (Winona being about two hours

south of Memphis.)

Other states have stereotypes, Looser notes. "But saying 'Hey, surfer dude,' to a Californian doesn't imply that they're a fat, dumb, lazy, illiterate racist." Other states have issues, too, and play with them in different ways. There's the swagger of "Don't Mess With Texas." The brand-new day of "Wild. Wonderful. West Virginia." Mississippi, though, is something of a different case, as so much of its imagery is caught up in "the national psyche as murderous racism," says legendary Jackson Clarion-Ledger reporter Jerry Mitchell. Mitchell's reporting for Mississippi's largest newspaper over the past decade has helped solve four of the civil rights era's most notorious murders, and the Rob Reiner film "Ghosts of Mississippi" is based on the uproar his stories wrought.

Today, Mississippi isn't what it was

40 years ago — nobody even seriously makes the case — but it's also complicated. Rice, who rose to college stardom at Mississippi Valley State University (in Itta Bena!), lives in California but loves going home to visit his mom.

"It's just so much peace of mind that it does wonders for me," he says in a telephone interview. "I can always go back to Mississippi, there's no red carpet or anything, but I miss the winter there, the brisk air, the color of the trees, just being home."

And it really is true, as boosters never tire of pointing out, that Mississippi has the most black elected officials of any state in America.

Then again, it's also true that it is the most predominantly black state (at about 36 percent) yet hasn't elected a black politician to statewide office since Reconstruction. And it's also true, as Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D) points out, that black Mississippians had to file lawsuit after lawsuit to gain voting rights in order to elect even local officials.

"All of us defend our state and people took offense at what Rangel said, but when you look at his voting record in Congress, he's actually been a friend to the people of Mississippi," Thompson says, via a cellphone call from a restaurant in Cleveland, Miss. "I'll take that any day over somebody talking about state pride."

Somewhere out there, that big, beating heart of Mississippi is just waiting for a little national love. Somehow, you just know it's not coming quite yet.