

A bid to buff Mississippi's image

A **NATIVE SON** aims to counter barbs and jokes about his state.

By **PATRIK JONSSON**

STAFF WRITER

Atlanta – Definition No. 6 in the “Urban Dictionary,” an online tome written with usual irreverence of Web-roaming readers, is the one that most gets under Rick Looser’s skin. The entry reads: “Mississippi: the most racist state in the nation.”

Fed up with the chuckles at his state’s expense, Mr. Looser, an ad executive in Jackson, is using the tools of his trade to defend Mississippi from the barbs of comedians, cultural critics, and non-Southerners who suspect that the civil rights movement never really came to the Magnolia State. With all the tongue-in-cheek spin of Madison Avenue, he created a poster featuring Mississippi writers ranging from Richard Ford to Richard Wright, with these words: “Yes, we can read. Some of us can even write.” Then he sent a copy to every school in the state.

Until now, heritage groups and state marketing committees have been the primary defenders of Southern states’ reputations. Now, Looser’s campaign aims to counteract what he sees as a bad rap and to lift the self-esteem of young Mississippians.

But is it possible for Americans to let

Mississippi live down its dark legacies of resistance to civil rights?

“There’s no doubt that we made our own bed and that Mississippi has been its own worst enemy, but [my] goal is to show the rest of the story,” Looser says in a phone interview. So far he’s spent about \$275,000 of his own money on the PR campaign, which intensifies this month with new posters and a broader distribution.

A conversation two years ago with a 12-year-old Connecticut boy, during a plane trip to Atlanta, spurred Looser to try to remake Mississippi’s image. The boy, Looser says, asked him if he hated blacks and how often the Ku Klux Klan marched in his hometown.

With the state’s blessing, but no financial assistance, he launched his campaign, “Mississippi, Believe It!” He sent his posters to every private and public school in the state to instill self-confidence in young Mississippians and help them become “ambassadors” for Mississippi. A poster featuring Delta blues singers reads: “No black. No White. Just the blues.”

It’s a stark contrast to Mississippi’s public



IMAGE REPAIR: Ad exec Rick Looser hopes to polish Mississippi’s reputation.

profile, which, many concede, could hardly be worse. Rankings of poverty, educations, and racist attitudes consistently put the state at the top of the “bad” lists and the bottom of the “good”

lists. Critics note Sen. Trent Lott’s unguarded confessions in 2002 of support for the late Sen. Strom Thurmond’s segregationist run for the presidency in 1948.

Recently, Rep. Charles Rangel (D) of New York spoke his mind about the state while discussing its receipt of federal largess with *The New York Times*: “Who the [heck] wants to live in Mississippi anyway?”

The animus toward Mississippi, Looser says, for the most part does not jibe with the state many residents know and love: a multi-cultural melting pot that appears to be poor and segregated, but that in fact has a rich history of literature, entertainment, and sports. It is also becoming a hub for industry as steel and auto plants set up shop amid the cotton fields and hog farms.

“It is frustrating that the United States as a whole lumps us all as a bunch of

Mississippi: Gimme an “M” says ad man

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ignorant racists who are uneducated and don’t have shoes and go around having stereotypes about everybody else,” says Bess Averett, director of the Southern Cultural Heritage Foundation in Vicksburg, Miss. “Hey, we have cars and trains like everyone else, so we could leave if we wanted.”

Ms. Averett, who went to integrated schools in Mississippi as she was growing up, says it can be easy for outsiders to judge harshly the continued segregation in Mississippi, forgetting that reform and redemption are a daily part of life in the state.

“We celebrate what has happened in our past and how we’ve grown from it,” she says. “We acknowledge all parts of it. It made us the state that we are today and the people in that state, and there’s no reason to act like things didn’t happen that brought us all to where we are today.”

Of course, the South isn’t the only place to fight an image of being backward. Maine resi-

dent Phil Bailey, who visited Mississippi to help out after hurricane Katrina, knows that all too well. “I could say people look at Maine and say it’s backwards, rural, a bunch of dumb fishermen, and we’re really only here to serve Massachusetts and New York as a summer vacation spot – but the reality is different,” he says.

Based on his own observations, however, he says racial reform in Mississippi seems slow. “I don’t think that we fix problems with a campaign that implies that problems don’t exist,” says Mr. Bailey.

The state’s detractors say the fact that Mississippi had no reported hate crimes last year and that New Jersey had about 1,500 doesn’t reveal any truth about how attitudes have changed in the Magnolia State. Rather, they say, it’s a sign that people are still reluctant to report such crimes in Mississippi.

“Mississippi is a victim of its own history,”

says Heidi Beirich, spokeswoman for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala. “Deep South states are very, very reluctant to deal with hate crimes.”

Looser says his intent is not to white-wash such realities. But he contends that segregationist attitudes are a marginal part of Southern society.

During Looser’s year-old campaign, his ad agency has received positive e-mails from all over the world. But it’s on the hot dog and hamburger circuit where Looser draws the most emotional reactions. “I had a little old lady come up to me with a tear rolling down her cheek” at one Rotary Club event, Looser says. “She said, ‘I tried to read these ads and I only got halfway through them and I started crying. You have said, in these words, what I have wanted to say my whole life, but didn’t know how to articulate.’”