

WILBUR AS ICON*

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A little while ago my old friend Wilbur Zelinsky was about to present a paper at the Pennsylvania State Geography Department's weekly coffee hour. Our young colleague Lorraine Dowler, who introduced him, began by telling the overflowing audience that they were about to hear from one of geography's greatest "icons." I was struck by Lorraine's use of the word, because Wilbur Zelinsky had been an icon to me long before I ever met him—and that was back in the early 1960s. In fact, Wilbur Zelinsky was one of the few icons that I knew about in geography, although I did not think to call him that. One of the first articles by a geographer that really hit me where I lived was a short piece published in a relatively obscure journal called *Social Forces*. The essay was titled simply, "Where the South Begins" (Zelinsky 1951). Wilbur started by asking the most obvious of questions in American regional geography: We all know that the South is one of America's most portentous regions, but just where is it? Where are its boundaries? When a traveler approaches the South, where does it begin?

He started out by using his eyes, looking at the differences in human landscape along the borderland of the South. Using one's eyes was a Zelinsky trademark that I particularly admired. Then he went to the library and pored over all kinds of statistics—another Zelinsky trademark! But most of what he found did not make much sense when you went out into the field and actually looked at the human landscape. You could see where the South began, somewhere in the middle of Virginia. Southern Virginia was in the South; northern Virginia was not; and the line across the middle was fairly clear. But short of 2,000 miles of fieldwork, what other measure could be found that would define the boundary elsewhere? Wilbur kept plowing through the census and whatever other numbers he could find, and guess what? The South began where the ratio between mules and horses tipped on the side of mules. In the 1940s northern farmers relied on horsepower, whereas farmers in the South relied on mules.

To me, at the time a puling graduate student at the University of Michigan, but a student who had crossed that North-South boundary a good many times on family trips and tried to figure out what I was looking at, Zelinsky's insight seemed a vision from on high. Geographers at the time were incessantly writing about regions like the South, but nobody had bothered to go out and look, and then check what they saw against one of the most basic of measures. I was awestruck that somebody would have the naive good sense to see and do what Zelinsky did. Here was a

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