A newspaper of the period depicted the scene of the battle outside Craig Tolliver's residence.

The feud that produced a college

In the years following the Rowan County War, education proved to be a "civilizing" influence in Kentucky's mountain regions

by Fannie and Alvin Madden-Grider

"I composed this as a warning, Beware, young men, my friends; Your pistol will cause you trouble, On this you may depend. In the bottom of the whiskey glass The lurking devil dwells; It burns the breath of those who drink it, And sends their souls to hell." From the folk song, "Rowan County Trouble"

In his final stanza, the Kentucky songwriter, John "Blind Bill" Day listed the major causes emphasized in the history of the bloody "Rowan County War" of nearly a century ago. Violence, whiskey and immorality were seen by many as the ingredients for a mountain feud immortalized in song and in the establishment of a small church school, which evolved into Morehead State University.

Between August 1884 and June 1887, two warring factions were responsible for 20 violent killings and the wounding of 16 people. The feud began with a hotly contested sheriff's election and ended with the killing of Craig Tolliver, one of the leading feudists, and his followers.

The Courier-Journal editorialized in 1886: "Something like a half-dozen funerals in Rowan County would materially improve its moral atmosphere, and if the principals were prepared for them at a rope's end, the effect upon the survivors would be more lingering and valuable."

A special judge, brought to Morehead to oversee feud prosecutions, promised to line the county roads with men tied to balls and chains, a pledge never fulfilled because jurors were "in the warmest sympathy with crime and
Morehead Normal School, circa 1920, nestled against the hills of Eastern Kentucky.

criminals."
The General Assembly revoked Morehead’s charter. Corruption reigned in the courthouse, and officials were ousted at various times. A military investigation disclosed that the deputy sheriff was “almost daily drunk,” and another report said the county judge “can just write his name.”

The state militia was sent to Morehead twice to quell violence. A state legislative investigating commission recommended splitting Rowan County up and giving portions of it back to surrounding counties from which it had been formed three decades earlier.

Governor J. Proctor Knott, asked by one Morehead citizen for weapons to arm a “Law and Order League” to end the feud, did not give government aid to the vigilante venture. He did, according to the Lexington Daily Press, condone violence to end the feud, however, “Go and take them dead or alive, and I furthermore authorize you to spill every drop of whiskey in Morehead and smash every bottle,” Knott reportedly told Morehead attorney Boone Logan.

Logan and his Law and Order League planned and executed the June 22, 1887 near-extirmination of the Tolliver brothers, who were credited with much of the violence. The next day, a front-page New York Times news story called the League’s action “the best piece of work that has been done for Kentucky within a half century.”

That same day, the Times editorial writers wrote that Kentuckians “must be aware that a community in which a band of assassins can control the politics and the society of a whole county...is no more entitled to be called civilized than if it were composed of South Sea cannibals or Chiricahua Apaches.”

While the smoke was clearing from the League’s shoot-out with the Tollivers, plans were being made to “civilize” Rowan County. For many of those who read news reports during the same period of Appalachia’s widespread ignorance and few churches, the root of the region’s feuding evils was the lack of religion and education. These two forces would be provided in the Morehead Normal School, established in September 1887, by the Disciples of Christ and the Christian Church as a cure for the “Rowan County Trouble.”

In an August, 1887 article in the Disciples’ Apostolic Guide, B. F. Clay, an evangelist, suggested that the Kentucky Christian Missionary Society, an affiliate of the Disciples, send a missionary to Morehead.

Clay deplored the state’s continuing expenditures on militia to control the Rowan lawlessness. “Which is the most profitable, noble and honorable, for us to send the gospel or the military to the mountains?” he wrote. “One or the other we must do.”

At a Christian Church convention that same month in Maysville, Clay gave a speech implying that the state militia could not heal the feud’s cause, which, he said, was sin. During the convention, the establishment of a mission school at Morehead was decided to be the best way to fight this feuding sin.

Several church leaders agreed to finance the mission school. William Temple Withers of Lexington, a former Confederate general and philanthropic Disciple, agreed to give $500 a year to support teaching and preaching at Morehead. Others contributed $20 to $25 each in annual pledges, as Clay exhorted the delegates for contributions.

The call went out for someone to lead a Morehead mission school, someone who could teach as well as spread the Gospel to the “uncivilized” mountainers. That call was answered within a month by a young Christian preacher, Frank C. Button, and his widowed
mother, Phoebe. Button, a 23-year-old Illinois native, had been recently graduated from Lexington's College of the Bible, which was part of Kentucky University, now known as Transylvania College.

Button is probably the most influential individual in the institution's history. He served as the normal school's principal for 22 of its 35 years and as the first president of Morehead State Normal School and Teachers College for six years.

Although the village the Buttons came to in September 1887, is generally described as "a town with no churches," religion had been in the region for a number of years. A Primitive Baptist denomination in the county dated back to the Civil War, and three Morehead church congregations shared a union church building for their services. During the Rowan County War, church services were "intermittent and irregular" due to the fighting. Before the mission school opened, Button became minister of the local Christian Church.

On October 3, 1887, the Buttons opened their school in two "poorly ventilated" rooms in a Morehead house. Only one pupil, Annie Page, an orphan, attended the first day's classes.

In its early days, the mission school was opposed by some local citizens. Button mentioned this in a letter to General Withers, who replied that opposition could be beneficial by "bringing your school before the public — and that is what you want."

By early 1888, the school's attendance had outgrown the Buttons' home. More than 50 pupils had enrolled, and 10 others had applied for admission. The cry went out for more Christian dollars to expand the school.

In 1890, the grounds and money for the first school building were donated by Thomas Hargis, a Morehead native and Louisville judge. Other classrooms and dormitory buildings were soon added, and more teachers were hired. The four acres donated by Hargis, and 50 acres purchased in 1898, are part of MSU's present campus.

One school history says Hargis had come from a poor Morehead family and could not afford an education as a child. Instead, he "had borrowed law books and going to a wide, spreading beech on the banks of Triplett Creek, had studied Blackstone."

In May 1899, Morehead Normal School was chartered by the state and given the power to confer high school diplomas. The next year, the school was deeded to the International Chris-
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forbidden. The wearing of jewelry was taboo. “Gaming with cards or keeping a deck of cards” was not tolerated. Students were advised in 1894 “to avoid that distraction from study which arises from frequent attendance at parties, shows, courts, elections, etc.”

Even after the state purchased and began operating the school as a teachers college in 1923, the spiritual tradition of Morehead Normal continued. A 1934 advertisement for the state school listed “deep spiritual tone sounded through convocation and religious organization” as one reason to attend Morehead State.

Did Morehead Normal School help end the bloody feud era in Rowan County’s history? Or had the feud already run its course and ended with the deaths of the Tollivers?

No one can say for sure, although the school is generally credited with solving many of the region’s social problems. School brochures and catalogues listed the feud’s ending as a major accomplishment. Many people believed that the two-pronged combination of Christianity and teaching did much to end the mountain feuds.

Perhaps the most important legacy the school left to Eastern Kentucky was the teachers it trained. Although fewer than 100 students graduated from the school, more than 300 teachers had received training there by 1900. These teachers returned to their home mountain counties to spread education throughout Appalachia.

Although all the old normal school buildings were destroyed long ago, a few reminders of the school can still be found on MSU’s campus. Old photographs and normal school mementos are exhibited in the student center, which stands on the exact spot where the Button home stood and where the first students crowded together to read the Bible. Near the student center is a time-worn cornerstone commemorating Judge Hargis, “Giver of the First House, also the Grounds.” And across the street is Button Auditorium, named after a young Christian preacher who arrived in a bullet-riddled mountain town nearly a century ago.

The authors are 1983 Morehead State University graduates.