FEuds DIE OUT But FEUD TALES PERSIST

Among Southern Mountain Folk
Many of the Old Rancers
Live Only in Memory

By JEAN THOMAS

RECENT tragedy in North Carolina, the slaying from ambush of a wealthy North Carolina mountain man by a mountaineer, has served to revive the perennial tales that represent our Southern mountain folk as a land of feuds and feuds, of blood-hated and vengeance. The truth is that mountain feuds are dying out faster than the tales about them.

Certainly, the slaying of Thomas Price was not a typical answer of mountain people to such behav- ior as he had bestowed upon his humble hill-folk neighbors. He had provided them with medical care at

his estate, maintained a circulating library among them, contributed to their schools and churches. It was more in keeping with their nature that, as the dispatches said, "re- sentment ran high among them" against the slayer. It has been my experience among the mountaineers that they never forget a kindness. I do not claim acquaintance with all the people of the Southern highlands who have been unfortunate enough to have trouble with their neighbors. Yet my years of court reporting and ballad hunting in the hills of Eastern Kentucky have afforded me an opportunity to know mountain life. Across the years, I know of no parallel to the Price case among the people with whom I have been associated. I call no betrayal of a benefactor, and I have never known a mountaineer, man, woman or child who would accept a favor without revers- ing the debt.

It is hard, and is a long time, for a region to live down a bad name. Once in New York I looked for employment as a stenog- rapher. "Where were you last employed?" the employer asked me. "In Rowan County, Kentucky," I answered. He fairly pounced upon me. "Rowan County, dark Rowan, where the Martin-Tolliver feud was fought. Of course you want armed? They tell me those hill-billies are still killing each other. If they don't they say a stranger isn't safe." I didn't get that job, for then and there I asked on my heel and walked out.

I knew how Ben Martin, son of the first Martin to die in the troubles with the Tollivers, felt when he had left home to get away from strife and worked as a farm hand out of state. Ben Martin is a true mountain man, as when he mingled with his fellow- harviners on the prairies he had little to say. Of old all he ever speak of the circumstances that had caused him to leave home, mother, brothers and sisters, he spoke of the circumstances that had caused him to leave home, mother, brother and sisters to suffer home- sickness out in the "level land." And a day in the wheat fields at the noon hour Ben Martin himself told me this story as he and his wife and I sat on the porch of his cottage a harvester spoke of Rowan County, "where the Martin-Tolliver feud is still raging." The feud had been ended for years, but the speaker went on: "They say the feudists slapped handcuffs on John Martin and then riddled him with bullets. Dear, live by the sword— I guess he got what was coming to him."

Ben Martin, quiet, home- sick man, was at hand his hands about his knees, and kept silent—Ben, who as a lit- tle boy had knelt beside his dying father whose hands were bound while the guns of assassins poured lead into his defenseless body. "And it was not Tollivers who fired the shots," Ben longed to say. But be- ing a mountain man he kept silent. He quit the farm that day and went his lonely way, seeking peace from babbling tongues.

Today, returned to his beloved Kentucky hills, Ben Martin lives in quiet. "It was outsiders," he told me, "that started the troubles and kept them alive. The man who killed more graves than any other man in Rowan County never him. Ancient scores was all feeling between us and the Tolli- vers, and there is none now." To prove his statement, Ben added in a gentle voice, "My own blood cousin married a Tolliver—and look yonder." A baby of school children went hurrying down the road past his cot- tage with its hollyhocks and pe- turnias and gay sunflowers. "Look at the least ones yonder. The blood of Tollivers and Martin runs in their veins. I see you, all with them with their arms around each other. Do you look like you're carrying malice in their hearts?"

Ben Martin has given more than a quarter of a century to the ser- vice of his country. He saw battle in what he calls "the Spanish- American skirmish" and in the World War. He was a great sharp- shooter, though he will not tell you so—to learn of his war record you will have to ask his wife. Now for peace and contentment he has come back to his Kentucky hills. "There is no other place like them in the world," he says. "Here I aim to spend the rest of my days with en- mity in my heart against no man." It is easy to understand how

A Family of Mountaineers Around the Hearth.

voiced by open ballot, calling out the name of their choice and giv- ing their own names and votes, differ- ences continued and sometimes became quarrels. The Martin- Tolliver trouble, by the way, grew out of a county election. So long as mountain folk dwell in isolation, setting misunderstandings and grievances in their own fash- ion, it was not easy for them to fall into a new way of doing things. A judge, what of him? Why call a jury to settle how Neighbor Jones's sheep-killing dog should be dealt with? Neighbor Jones didn't need those fellows down at the county seat to tell him that Jones's dog should be settled with at once. He reached for the old flintlock gun over the fireplace and finished the sheep-killing dog with out ado. It made Jones angry as a hornet, of course. But hadn't he made Brown's blood boil to see his helpless mutton piled, especially after he had spent Jones to tie up the dog? Why journey thirty miles over the creek bed road to the court house and go through a lot of "gyrations" to get Jones warned off?

An incident so simple caused bitter- nesses among neighbors. In the uneventful life of the mountaineer there is no trespass or the loss of property be- cause of prompt action in matters of independence. The mountaineer muffled it over in his mind. He talked it over with his family in his cabin. The children were there and heard. There was no other room for them. Kinfolks joined in and loyally sided with kin- folks. Just as the clans of Scotland gained in numbers and ill ill. grew the mountain factions, des- cendants often of those same Scottish

I n some ways, after a dis- pute over the ownership of a house, rose the Hatfield-McCoy trouble at Tug River. I have lived at Tug River, my nearest neigh- bors the Hatfields. There were no locks on doors or windows in the little shack I occupied in my midst. One day when I was still a stranger there I set out to visit a stream that was on the other side of the railroad tracks. At the tunnel entrance stood a giant fellow with miner's cap on his head and pick on his shoulder, his face dark with coal dust. I was once in the Hatfields.

"You needn't be a mile40 to walk through the tunnel," he
FEUDS DIE OUT BUT TALES OF FEUDS PERSIST
Among the Southern Mountains, Used to the Rugged Life and Jealous of Their Rights, Many Old Rancers Live Only in Memory

(Continued from Page 11)

As she went out, a soft, musical voice, "Yon-der comes the woman (his wife)." She's going to see sick folks throw'er side."

He bowed to me as grav-ely as a knight to a queen. "The woman, basket on arm, gave me a friendly smile and said, "I'm proud to make your acquaintance." Her ma inquired solicitiously, "Did you fetch a play-pretty for the sick child?"

"The woman answered, "I did, for a fact—a poppet," tak-ing, as she spoke, a cornshuck doll from her basket, and I fetched a jar of honey, too."

The stalwart son of the Hatfield, "own blood kin of Devil Anse," fumbled in the bosom of his shirt and drew forth a paper bag. "I love you most, and a lit-tle "un does crave sweetening, so I stopped at the commissary and bought a bottle of candy." He dropped it in the basket.

"They are the people whom roman-ticized. They are as human, as simple, as the rest of us. They like to sit and have a feed as bitterly as any of us. Too well they know what it means to keep their kids from the word from their lips. If speak they must, they say, "the trouble," and "the war." And the enemy is always, in their words, "over there.""

I recall a "war" in the mountains on a divv-iding line. The lit-tagnes were the neighbors. War was back in the beginning of the trouble; there had been loss of life, but the blood feud was not the cause. Shooting days and disposed of with pacific amilなsh. "There was no shooting in the fourth room. There was something exciting neverthe-less. The star stiop Produces an-original land grant from a king."

The gratitude of mountain peo-ple is so much more character-istic of them than their rances. There was Jamie, a helpingsize cripple, until his fourteenth year, when the doctor unlocked his twisted joint with bloodless surgery and restored him. One day when he was still in his early *pit", he was down but able to use his hands a little, came upon him working with a spade and hearth and a punch "I'm making the doctor a gift pocket," he told me, added: sardonicly, "Jethro's Eph, focht me this hide to make hit of, and this here punch."

Then he leaned close to me and flesks dancing in his dark eyes, "By Eph a-fottin', there's noisin' in this town, "a fellow in peace betwixt old Jethro's people and mine."

The pill pocket was all Jamie had to give in return for the doctor's services—for the like of which an Appalachian mountain would pay a king's ransom to Lorenza. And Jamie's grandfather—what of her grandma—she stood by whole life. For days Granny, though stumped with age came out and kept him "seng diggin" until she had a "great passel" of roits. "The doc-tor can away 'em for cash money," she said.

Nor was all that the grandmothers could do for their "jep." A poke of walnuts, mind you, hulled and washed clean as a hound's tooth at the top of the game. They insured them, "because the doctor can't bide a gand. He told Jamie a long time to finish the pill pocket while he was regaining the use of the joints of the hands. "My people is a proud race of peo-ple," he told his benefactor, "and me and Granny, we ain't alimnt to take without we can give."

I MET a neighbor of Jamie's, old Uncle Eli, 70 and blind. He was the ace of hillbillies to me while I typed them, and I pre-sented him with a bound sheet of manuscript. He read it without eyeglass and not apt at any task, I took to them ballads and, as it were, myself in my deen. I tried to assure him that he was un-derstand him, to take lit to me and ob-served him for a deen. He knewed him for have kept the old songs alive and fresh in mountain argument. But his death was lost on Uncle Eli. He pondered, then made his slow way into the house and fumbled in a hide-covered trunk in the chimney corner.

"They say you are everly sarchin' for hillbillies' songs with a song-sing, with a frayed volume in his hand. I tell that's the Good Book my granddair got focht across the brine deep. When you're satisfied to own, take hit and I'll be proud to have them ballads you write off for me." He placed in my box a rare old copy of the Bible. There was a bullet hole in the thick leather cover. "Hit saved my life once," Uncle Eli said dreamily. "I was hit, hit was my water bag. I was hit in the leg, and blood flowed like a river out of me. I got the Good Book and spread hit out wide over my chest under me. The blood got stucked chucked at the memory. "The bullet hole was where hit cut me. My life was spared." He paused a moment. "I everly thought a bullet hole was a blemish, but hit was solid good by me. But you take hit now, for them troubles is all past and forgotten long ago."

MANY people have met in the Kentucky mountains.
To the world they may be "leavin' in the blue ridge", but not to just people. There was Emmeline, who had last her sight when a child and regained it in later life. Emmeline "craved to learn to write a love letter," but not until I had allowed her to put pen to paper in pleasant knitting would she consent to begin her "harrin."

Months afterward she confided to me, "Woman, do you appreciate, I'm aimin' to marry one of those city side! We've a heap of letters to each other. Time were when Pap would ha' set his hilt on hit, but now he owns no more dooughty man as Pap. I owns me a ring or lifted axe to tree than to Jason."

"There was something else. "Woman, I'm wanting to see my waunter with his sister Elvire."

I protested that I had never been a bridesmaid. Couldn't she have Elvire alone? But Emmeline persisted. "Don't you appreciate that Elvire, his sister, being my waunter, is our sign of peace? I'm aintin' to see my sister bear witness to our peace through alive and Jason's wedlock, with Elvire by my side."

And there is Aunt Rinnithke, whom I visited in her one-room cabin in a quiet hollow below a hilltop bury-ing ground where lay 'Pap's meen folks of the Hatfield's Red Queen'. Headstone still showed the names of three soldiers of the Hatfield. One put down below, close beside her garden, was another burial plot with a cross- covered grave. "My four boys," she said, "They died for their rights, same as 'Pap's folks did."

Her wrinkles were chased; her trembling lips soared the soundless words, "God forgive us."

* * *

I walked the moonlight on the cabin step told me briefly of "the troubles between the Hatfield and the Russell 'other side', troubles that had taken away what she loved best on earth. "But it's all over now," she said reverently, "We've all get peace here."

Presently she was singing an old Scottish ballad, the nearest to a lullaby that I have ever heard from a mountain woman. "That were my baby boy's favor-ite song ball; she sang as she worked. She had a second child, a girl.

"He were just turned 12 the day he and my three others were shot. I couldn't put my boys way off on der hill. I wanted to keep them."

"I meant the beaten one, 'he'd wantin' to hear him daddy singin'. Ballads, I tell you."

"Though mine was a good one, I had it for a ballad he loved so good."

"She was the one mountain woman, who has been fantastically described as "the fiery-eyed mother of four des-pairing children."

Braze, silent Ben Martin and the Hatfield who was mindful of the "sick baby child"; Jamie, filled with his granddair to be granddair for the clan; Uncle Eli, pasting with his treasure Good Book; Emmeline with his "sister Elvire" for her "waunter"; and Aunt Rinnithke, sing-ing in the moonlight with a look of sadness in her eyes. All the above—by all, as I see them, are living signs of peace in the Southern mountains. And signs that feuds are vanishing.