The Rowan County Trouble

Anatomy of a Mountain Feud

by Stuart Sprague

One of the most deeply resented Appalachian stereotypes is that of the mountaineer as feudist. "Why is it," an Appalachian editor queried, "When the Allens shot up the Hillsville court, three million people were condemned for the act; but when the gunmen of New York City killed Herman Rosenthal, only those intimately connected with the crime were censured?" Metropolitan editors delighted in headlining articles "Feud Reopened" or "Mountain Feud." Yet feuds occurred in only a few mountain counties, and their violent stage usually lasted five years or less. To the outsider the feud is synonymous with Hatfield-McCoy, and generalizations about feuds are usually drawn from that vendetta, though it was but one of several.

For generations commentators have attempted to explain the feud. At a time when Appalachians were referred to as "our southern highlanders," the conventional wisdom was that they were merely carrying out the traditions of the Highland Scots. Another popular theory ascribes feuds to bushwacking during the Civil War. "The antagomism that sprang up then," states one authority, "lived on long after their causes had been forgotten." A third theory blames isolation. According to Virgil Carrington Jones' The Hatfields and The McCoys (1948), "the feud country constituted a region unto itself, a wilderness shut off from the progress of the world." The "factor that contributed most to the prolonged trouble," Jones says, "was the terrain." Thomas D. Clark, the dean of Kentucky historians, claims that feuds were "compounds of ignorance, isolation, old world clannishness, poor economic conditions, and the failure of the Kentucky political system to assume its social responsibilities."

All of these theories have their holes. The War Between the States cannot explain feuds that happened before that conflict, the Scotch and Scotch-Irish were not nearly as dominant in the Appalachian population mix as is usually suggested, and some feuds came after the forces of isolation were largely broken down.

Perhaps another question would prove more relevant: Why did feuding reach its peak in the half century following the War Between the States?

There are probably two major reasons. By 1865, increased population and strong kinship ties had provided families with "instant armies," and the Civil War provided them with weaponry. Certainly some mountainmen brought home their government-issued war rifles, and the lawlessness of reconstruction, along with the rise of the revenue officer, encouraged the purchase of hand guns.

But perhaps the causes and the nature of the feuds can best be understood by looking at a particular feud in detail.

Rowan was a quiet, rural Eastern Kentucky county between its creation in 1856 and the coming of the railroad in 1881. In those twenty-five years, only six murders occurred. But between August 1884 and late June 1887, violent deaths were recorded at the rate of six per year. This was the time of the Rowan County War, one of America's severest feuds.

If the feuds were caused by the isolation of Appalachia, then the Rowan County Trouble is an exception to the rule. For along with the coming of the railroad came a logging boom. Men from Ohio and from Rowan's neighboring counties converged upon the burgeoning towns of Morehead and Farmers. Before this disrupting force of immigration, it had been said of Rowan that the county could be depended upon to give the Democratic Party a small majority, but the influx of newcomers created a new political instability. This was the backdrop for a
hody contested Sheriff’s race between Democrat Gooden and Republican Cook Humphrey.

Passions reached their climax on election day in August, 1884. Fiery talk and fiery alcohol, one suspects, led to the death of Solomon Bradley, the father of seven. To this day no consensus exists as to exactly what happened. As an outsider expressed it, “I have heard hundreds of things in Rowan that may not be true. It is easy to hear anything in Rowan County.”

But the depositions do make it clear that rocks were thrown, punches were exchanged, three participants were decked, pistols were drawn, and shots were fired. One version of the incident still current in Morehead is that the feud’s first victim, Solomon Bradley, was running forward to catch a falling man when he was shot. In that superheated atmosphere it is easy to believe that his action may have been interpreted as a hostile move, perhaps that he was going for the gun of the fallen man.

Bradley had supported Cook Humphrey, who won the election by a mere twelve votes. Bradley’s election day death, one of three in the state that year, was further politicized by disagreement over who was responsible for the killing. Some claimed it was John Day, while others declared Floyd Tolliver guilty. Bad blood grew, and rumors were common. “As soon as the leaves put out good,” John Martin allegedly remarked, “I aim to get Floyd.” Floyd Tolliver reputedly declared, “I’ll hide my time till the brush gets green; then I am to have a reckoning. That Logan outfit, well-wishers of the Martins, are getting too uppity.” From the prominence of these families the Rowan County Trouble has often been called the Tolliver-Martin or the Logan feud.

With the ill-will that existed, a chance meeting between John Martin and Floyd Tolliver was predictably unfriendly. Angry words flowed and John Martin drew his gun and fired. Floyd Tolliver’s last words were “John you have killed me!”

The Martin version of the incident differed. According to it, John Martin walked away from Tolliver after their quarrel, but Tolliver followed him into the barroom. Martin saw Tolliver, and resigning himself to a clash, said: “Well, if you must fight, I am ready.” Both men drew. And in this version of the story, Floyd Tolliver makes a somewhat longer dying declaration: “Boys, remember what you swore to do; you said you would kill him, and you must keep your word.”

John Martin was arrested for the killing and transported some fifty miles away, so when a group of Tolliver partisans arrived with orders to transfer him back to Morehead, John Martin suspected foul play. He was then manacled, carried off to the depot, and forced aboard the train. The engine traveled east, passed over the Licking River and ground to a halt at the town of Farmers, where masked men boarded the train and gunned down the handcuffed prisoner. Though seven slugs entered John Martin’s body, he managed to make a dying declaration accusing the Town Sheriff of Farmers and others of carrying out the cold-blooded crime. County Attorney Z. T. Young declared the order transferring the prisoner a forgery and Rowan was in an uproar.

The following March County Attorney Young and Deputy Sheriff Baumgartner rode together to Elliottville, and Young journeyed back alone through a blinding snowstorm. Three miles from Morehead he was ambushed. A .44 caliber slug slammed into his right shoulder and exited through his chest. A second shot went wild. Young could barely make out two shadowy forms in the distance. He urged his horse forward and managed to reach the comparative safety of the seat town.

Ten days later Deputy Baumgartner was waylaid on the same road. Later, an Elliott County mail carrier ran across his lifeless figure, which had by that time been badly torn up by animals. One bullet had caught the deputy squarely in the neck and another had entered his chest. Baumgartner’s death set off a mass exodus. Among county officials, only the Clerk, Major Carey, dared remain. And he did so despite threats that sent the rest of his family packing for the peace and quiet of Kansas.

Shortly thereafter, on April Fool’s Day Ed Pierce and Cook Humphrey, the new sheriff, invaded George W. Nickell’s pool hall. Ed Pierce drew a bead on Jeff Bowling, ex-Sheriff Day had Humphrey in his sights, and Bowling had Humphrey covered. A hasty truce was improvised, which lasted only until the participants reached their respective hotels. Rifles cracked and the firing subsided only after the foursome had exhausted their supplies.

Stuart Sprague is an assistant professor of history at Morehead State University.
of ammunition. Despite the rain of bullets, no injuries were reported.

The conflict escalated further when the Tolliver faction attacked the Martin homestead. John Martin's widow lived in a substantial two story frame building about thirty feet from the closest railroad track. The Tollivers learned that Sheriff Cook Humphrey and Benjamin Raybourn were staying there, and determined to get them both. Craig Tolliver led the attackers towards the Martin homestead. He crawled up to the house, slithered inside, and began crawling up the stairway. Cook Humphrey spotted Tolliver, grabbed a shotgun and fired. Tolliver's friends rescued him and surrounded the dwelling. Fearing that the building would be torched, Raybourn and Humphrey decided to make a run for it. Going out the east door, they leaped the yard fence, dashed through a cornfield, and sought the safety of the woods. When the pursuers reached the yard fence, they used it to steady their rifles and fired. Raybourn fell. According to Humphrey, who was lying on his Winchester in the underbrush, the attackers fired shots into the corpse, robbed Raybourn of his money and divided the spoils. Angered at Humphrey's escape, the attackers took out their frustrations on the Martin building, burning it to the ground.

The whole event had shown such a flagrant disregard for law and order that the governor sent troops to Morehead, causing the Tollivers to accuse the troops of "standing squarely on the Martin side."

Seventy-six men were rounded up in connection with Raybourn's murder, but at the examining trial no consensus could be reached and the defendants were released. The commander of the troops was furious.

Before making a tour of the feud counties of Breathitt, Larue, and Rowan, he said, he "was willing to say that the reports had been exaggerated," but as respects Rowan, "I can only say in the language of the Queen of Sheba, 'the half has never been told.'"

The vendetta then took a surprising turn when Ed Pierce, who had invaded Nickell's pool hall with Cook Humphrey and who was on trial for robbery, announced he was going to tell all. He implicated Cook Humphrey, Morehead merchant Howard Logan, and eight or ten others of feud related crimes. He alleged that he and Raybourn were to receive $50 for gunning down Democratic leader Z. T. Young and $25 per assassination for eight others.

The prosecution at Pierce’s trial was none other than Z. T. Young, whom Pierce had attempted to assassinate, and the defense counsel was one of the men Pierce had accused. It is not surprising that the defendant was found guilty.

In time, conditions calmed, the troops debarked, and the situation remained tranquil until the following July. Some attributed the subdued atmosphere to a peace contract state officials induced the leaders of both factions to sign. "Peace has spread its wings over that unfortunate district" is the way one paper put it. But a paper peace is a fragile bird, and this one was severely tested when Deputy County Clerk Matt Carey, a Martin supporter, ran into Craig Tolliver. The two quarrelled over who was to blame for the commencement of hostilities. Merchant Howard Logan joined in. Although there was no violence, the tension was renewed. Both parties called for reinforcements and paraded in force, threatening war.

"The Courier-Journal reported: "Again the outlook is gloomy for Rowan... Business is wholly suspended." The metropolitan daily editorialized that "a half-dozen funerals in Rowan County would materially improve its moral atmosphere, and if the principals were prepared for this at a rope’s end, the effect upon the survivors would be more lingering and valuable."
The ink was scarcely dry before guns blazed again. The Courier-Journal sent a correspondent to Morehead to ascertain the facts. "Henry Ramey," he wired back, "went into the store of Howard Logan. The latter asked him if he had any warrants for his arrest. Ramey replied in the negative. Logan then told him to get out of the store. Ramey refused. Here accounts begin to vary. The Martin men say that Ramey drew his pistol and began to shoot. The Tolliver men say that William Logan... was the first to shoot. Cook Humphrey was also present. Old man Ramey was called to his son's relief, and the cracking of pistols was quite lively for a few minutes. When the fusillade ended it was discovered that Will Logan had been shot in the hips, and his son received a ball in the thigh. Nobody seems to know who fired the balls that hit the men. All but the wounded men skipped out of town to gather their friends and prepare for war."

After the Logan store incident the governor sent Judge Cole to Morehead to determine whether or not a special court session was needed. The Judge returned, arguing that without troops, a special session would degenerate into a farce. Reluctantly the governor assented.

On court day, Judge Cole minced no words in addressing the jury: "We must have law in this place. The pendulum has been swinging too long one way. It is coming back now. I will adjourn all the courts in my district, and sit here for a twelfth-month, or have the law enforced."

Cole's words, coupled with the successful challenge to a former jury foreman who had consistently refused to indict Tolliver partisans, unnerved feudists on both sides. Shortly thereafter Thomas Gooden was arrested for murder. Cook Humphrey and Craig Tolliver were both located and brought to book in town.

But Asher Caruth, the highly touted prosecutor, discovered to his dismay that the problem of evidence was greater than the problem of finding twelve impartial jurors. "There is no very nice regard for truth," he said, "when one side talks about the other."

Caruth, fearing that he would be unable to obtain a guilty verdict, consulted with Cook Humphrey's and Craig Tolliver's lawyers and agreed to suspend their cases on condition that Humphrey and Tolliver would go into exile.

The principals signed the agreement August 9, 1886. But Craig Tolliver was reported in town the day court adjourned. In March, he was reported in Cincinnati buying hardware. Dr. Henry Logan and Morgan McClure, accused of conspiracy in killing George Cole, were sent to Lexington for safe keeping.

Three quiet months followed, but then came June. The Mount Sterling, Sentinel-Democrat headlined its account: BLOODY ROWAN: TWO MORE KILLINGS ADDED TO HER CRIMINAL CALENDAR. The victims were two Logan boys. Ever since the incident at the Logans' store, killing Will Logan and Sheriff Ramey and wounding his son, there had been much ill feeling between Tollivers and Logans. The Logan boys were to be served a warrant for ku-kluxing, perhaps as a means of keeping them from testifying at the trial of Dr. Logan. Not unexpectedly, when Marshal Manning attempted to serve the warrants, he was met with buckshot. Later, the elder of the Logan boys agreed that they would surrender under a guarantee of safety. That guarantee and the lives of the two Logans expired within a few hundred yards of the house in which they had holed up. A few days later Craig Tolliver was waylaid and was considered fortunate to have escaped with just a shoulder wound. On June 14, Sheriff Ramey and his son were ambushed, but escaped unscathed. A nearby paper proclaimed with little exaggeration, "The citizens are terrorized since anarchy and crime reign supreme."

But at that very moment steps were being taken towards a denouement. Boone Logan—incensed at the murder of the two Logan boys and realizing that justice could not triumph as long as the Tollivers controlled the county government—determined to crush them in a large scale military-like action. He set out for Cincinnati where he "expended as much money in Winchester rifles as would have bought a Rowan county farm." The guns
Once the gunfire faded, the bodies were laid out in the hotel. The law-and-order faction wasted little time. That same day, they held a public meeting at the courthouse to plan for a citizens protective association. The Big Shoot Out led to two unsubstantiated stories. According to one of them, Boone Logan wired the Governor once the battle was over the cryptic message: "I have done it," implying that the Governor had approved of the action beforehand. Logan denied the story under oath.

The second belief is that the bloody affray brought about an immediate peace. This was wishful thinking, for many in Rowan County were unwilling to abide by the results of the late blood bath, which amounted to an unlawful rear-extirpation of the Tollivers. Rifles were imported afresh and a new showdown appeared imminent. For the third time state troops were sent into the county, followed by orders and a public meeting at the Barnes to hold a revival at Morehead. And more significantly, the notoriety that Rowan received attracted the attention of William Temple Withers, who believed that Christian education was the answer. Such a belief was commonplace among those who attributed the feuds to ignorance and lack of religion. Such an evaluation of the ills of Appalachia gave rise to an "uplift movement," creating a number of "academies" in feud-ridden counties. Withers, an ex-Confederate General, donated $500 to the State Board of the Christian Church to found a school in Rowan County. In later years, that school would be known as Morehead State University.

Author's note: This account is based on newspaper accounts and the report of the committee investigating the feud. The following papers were useful: Louisville Courier-Journal August 5, December 3, 11, 12, 1884; March 8, 1885; July 3, 6, 11-13, 24, 27, 30, August 10, 1886. Hazel Green Herald March 18, April 8, July 8, 22, August 26, 1885; March 2, 9, 23 June 15, August 26, 1887. Louisa Big Sandy News June 16, 30, 1887; Paducah News September 9, 1885 June 23, 1887; Frenchburg Advertiser July 4, 1887; Carlisle Mercury June 23, 1887.