RUFUS REED'S ACCOUNTS OF SOME MARTIN COUNTY PLACE NAMES

In my research visits throughout Kentucky I have found that each county has at least one person who is so well associated with it that the county and person are considered inseparable. One can't think of Martin County, for instance, without thinking of the late Rufus M. Reed, the man who knew more about that county's people and their history than anyone else, and was ever willing to share his knowledge with anyone who asked.

Rufus, as his neighbors and friends called him, was born on Caney Creek, in the Wolf Creek valley, on May 5, 1895. He lived most of his life in the vicinity of Lovely on the Tug River at the mouth of Wolf. Though trained as a surveyor and employed for years as a consulting civil engineer, he is best remembered for his syndicated nature columns in a number of eastern Kentucky weeklies and for his several volumes of poetry. As a historian and reconteur he was first rate. His book Conqueror of the Dark Hills (1979) tells the story of Martin County's transformation from an isolated subsistence economy to one of coal-derived prosperity. He died in Huntington, West Virginia's V.A. Hospital on April 4, 1984.

On several Sundays in the summer of 1971, Rufus shared with me on tape his memories of streams and communities, schools, churches, and cemeteries throughout the county and, with few exceptions, was able to give me detailed histories and even name derivations. As a surveyor and naturalist he had personally visited and had become intimately acquainted with every square foot of the county.

What follows are a sample of Rufus' verbatim accounts. Ellipses are used to save space in this article, while explanatory and supplementary data are presented in parenthetical statements.
The Elk Creeks: "On down Tug River are the two Elk Creeks. One is called Big Elk (eight miles below Warfield) and one is Little Elk (four miles below Warfield)....They got their names from the elk that roamed through here back in pioneer times. (Dr. Thomas) Walker's diary mentioned the great number of elks in this region....Little Elk has a church and a store and used to have a school. It now has a post office called Hode... at its mouth. (The office closed in September 1989). It was named after Hodeviah Hensley (sic). An old (Baptist) minister lived there by the name of W(m) H(enry) Hensley. He had a boy named Hodiviah (pronounce hoh/dj/veye)." (On another occasion Rufus had informed me that Hodeviah's sister Bertha Hensley had established the post office on June 3, 1921 and that the boy had been killed in a car wreck.)

(Two of the branches of Big Elk are Booth Fork and Clay fork.)

"The Booth family lived in there. That's one of the old families of that region....Lots of them living there yet. And there's Clay Fork ....I heard that was named after (sic) Clay Williamson, an old surveyor who probably surveyed that land in there." (Williamson was Rufus' mentor.)

"Buck Creek which empties into the Tug River at Warfield was named for a buck deer....you go up Buck Creek about a mile and a half and you come to a forks (at Beauty) and the main left fork is where the Highway Number 40 goes up toward Inez (though it's given as Buck Creek rather than Left Fork on the government maps)....Phoebe Trace...runs into Buck Creek (about 1½ miles above Beauty)....I don't know who Phoebe was. I think some old lady was probably called Phoebe back there. There's a lot of Phoebes lived in there."
"Warfield is one of the oldest communities in Martin County. It was first laid off as a town by a surveyor named Case....And one good thing that he did--he made the streets...sixty feet wide....There's some disagreement about the origin of the name. Some claim it was due to the battle there (between) the Shawnees and some whites way back before the Civil War....And there was a skirmish there during the Civil War. But other historians claim that John Warfield and some more old-timers came to Warfield and settled there on account of the saltworks. Now, just above Warfield, at the mouth of Collins Creek (which joins the Tug River just opposite Kermit, West Virginia) there's a tract of land, used to be, called The Salt Works, about six acres where they used to get salt, get the water and distill it and make salt. They'd ship salt from there (by) steamboat down the river to different towns ....People would come there to get the salt and I think that's probably what brought Warfield there, from, I believe, Virginia. He's supposed to be closely related to Wallis Warfield Simpson who married the Duke of Windsor...."

"Beauty is on Buck Creek, about a mile and a half up from the mouth. The town used to be called Himlerville, named after Martin Himler, a Hungarian coal operator and businessman who came there, established the town and built a large mansion up on the hill. He established there the Himler Coal Company and built homes for his employees and opened a bank called the Himler State Bank. It all operated till the Depression ....They had to close down. They had to close down and I think they went into receivership. And after that they changed the town from Himlerville to Beauty."

(Why was it called Beauty?) "I think from the beautiful scenery around there. It's a very beautiful place. That's what the oldtimers say." (According to others, the name was derived from 'Kentucky Beauty
Coal,' the name of the brand marketed by J.H. Mandt's Hysteam Coal Corporation which later took over production.)

One of the Tug River's major Martin County tributaries is Wolf Creek. "I've been informed that a large timber wolf was killed at the mouth of Wolf Creek and the creek has borne this name ever since.... A man came in here, a Rev. James Madison...and made a number of surveys. He started near the creek's mouth, going up one side of the creek several miles and crossing over and back down the other side, taking in all the bottom land. I think during that survey he probably killed this wolf and named it Wolf Creek. This was about the year 1796. One of the oldest surveys in this country was the old Madison Survey. He was the leader of some religious sect...and was going to establish homes in there for (his members)." (Substantially the same account appeared in the introduction to Reed's Conquerors of the Dark Hills.)

Wolf Creek joins the Tug River just above the town of Lovely. This used to be known as the Smoky Bottom Neighborhood. "At the time it was first settled it was a pretty rugged neighborhood. They'd meet here--a lot of outlaws would--and drink and shoot their pistols and make the air right smoky...so they called it Smoky Bottom for a long time from the pistol smoke (is) how it got its name. But we who live here now resent the name because we have a better, a more civilized community than that....But a lot of people still call it that. (Later Rufus pointed out that, when the town was laid off in 1924 and ten years later, before the post office was established, the community was also called South Kermit for it's being a mile south of the town of Kermit, across the Tug in West Virginia. The post office was named for S.L. Lovely, the town's first storekeeper who helped get the post office established.)
Buck Branch of Wolf Creek is a mile up that stream, on the west side. "I suppose the way it got its name was that it heads right up against Buck Creek." (mentioned above)

"There are two Petercaves (streams) on Wolf. The first is called Little Petercave" (Branch), a couple of miles up, on the west side (of Wolf). It's called that because it's smaller than Big Petercave (Fork) up Pigeonroost Fork. (see below)

Pipe Mud Branch is a well known branch of Wolf Creek. It's up nearly three miles from the mouth, on the east side of the creek, and it always seemed to be hard to get to--no road from the creek leading over to it. But people do go in there quite a bit. Used to be a famous place to hunt....I don't know how its name originated unless they got some mud out of there when they were building the old cabins back there....I know the Hales lived around there."

The first major east side tributary of Wolf Creek is given on modern government maps as Emily Creek. "It's a large stream, heading close to the Pike County line with many tributaries. I think it got its name from some of the old pioneer ladies that used to live there. It's a very old name; you find it on some of the older maps and deeds of this region. But it's spelled Emley and that's what it's still called."

"A mile up Emily Creek is White Oak Fork....I suppose it got its name from some big...white oak tree growing there...near its mouth.... Most of the land (is) owned by large corporations. The Pocahontas Land Company owns most of the minerals in there, at the head of the creek (and that section is thus now uninhabited). On the White Oak Fork there are...the Upper and Lower Twin Branches that come in right almost in the same mouth, nearly close together, but they widen as you go up in 'em, about a mile long...."
"There are two Goodman Branches on White Oak Creek (given as Goodwin on government maps). One is Upper Goodman and one is Lower Goodwin and they come in right near together into the creek...."

Roost Branch of Emily Creek "was named for the passenger pigeons that came through here in great numbers about a hundred years ago. It was a famous roosting place all through here. They covered the whole region....There was a school here named Roost Branch that's (since) been taken over and used for a church called the Little Home Church--painted and fixed up, a nice church. (Rufus didn't know why "Pigeon" was omitted from the branch's name.)

"On the east side of Emily we come to Caney Creek and then Rock Holler for a big rock there. Then on up is one called The Dog Holler. Maybe some found a dog in there--shot or killed or something, maybe a hunting dog. Anyway, it was probably named for a dog."

"On the west side is Meade Branch. It must have been named for one of the first settlers of Emily. And this branch finally got into the hands of the Burgetts who owned at least a part of it for a long time.

"Another important stream on Emily is Copperas Mind (Branch)--a three mile long stream on the east side. They say the copperas would run right out of the rocks or cliffs there. (They're stripping in there now.)

About a mile further up Emily is the Sang Branch. "This is a shortened form of ginseng which is one of our valuable Kentucky plants. Oldtimers would dig this plant and sell its roots. It's very scarce now. It's so scarce, in fact, that one pound of dried ginseng is now (in 1971) worth $43 on the market. But there's none to be found hardly."

Dreyhouse is another branch of Emily Creek. "It's a couple of miles from the mouth, in the old Munsey settlement, and it was once called Dryhouse Branch. I think some people still call it that, but it seems to me that someway they misspelled it; some of the early citizens"
of the region must have misspelled it, or some of the historians or mapmakers did because on maps it's Dreyhouse Branch when it should be Dryhouse...."

"Lackey Branch is another old branch of Wolf Creek, a mile above the mouth of Emily, on the west side. Several houses up in there. Some Munseys live up there and Runyons used to. Lackey was named for some of the old settlers there. It's a very old name....Many gas wells were drilled in there....I think the name may have originated among the Stepps (a Martin County family). Probably some of the Stepps were named Lackey. But there's no Lackeys in Martin County at the present time."

Six miles up Wolf Creek is Pigeonroost Fork, a large creek with many tributaries, some named for old settlers. "When I was a child I heard (folks) talk about these passenger pigeons. They had several roosts in Pigeonfork....It was a wild woods and full of oaks, and these pigeons liked acorns, and they'd come in there to get the acorns and they'd roost there in such great numbers that they said they'd darken the sky when they flew over. They'd break the timber down when they'd latch--so many of them--by sheer weight of numbers. They was millions and millions of them. But now they're all extinct ....They'd alight on trees till they'd break them down. In the late 1880s were the last great flights of these birds through here. They became extinct when man got to shooting them down."

The first major branch of Pigeonroost is Petercave Fork. It's about a mile and a half up, on the west side. It's a thickly settled place. One time there was caves in there where deer came to lick the saltpeter that run out of the rocks. It looked white on the rocks and tasted--had a bitter salty taste. Deer would come there and lick that. So they called the creek Petercave...."
The Laurel Fork of Petercave is located on the west side of that stream, about two miles up. "It's a large fork and was named for the mountain laurel that used to grow thickly in there and was once the home of some prominent people--the Blackburns. And it run into Petercave right where the David Jude School is located. Of course, the school is not being used anymore; I think the house is there yet but all the rural schools have been cut out and the students are transported to the central school at Warfield and will be till they complete the one at Blacklog...."

Some three miles up Petercave is a place called The Three Forks of Petercave. "That's where the three forks come together at one place. Used to have a school there and a post office called Three Forks. (The office was) established in 1938 (and closed in the late 1990s. John Jude and his wife maintained the office.) "The school was of cinder blocks, a very nice school with two or maybe three rooms. It (too) has been abandoned. Don't know what it's being used for now, probably for a dwelling...."

I asked about the Dave Jude School, as I'd heard it called. "Dave is an old man and is (still) living there (by) the school....He gave the land for the school. I don't know whether that old building is standing there yet. My daughter taught there at one time."

At the head of Petercave, some six miles up, is the Runyon Fork "named for an old family of settlers, some of whom still live there."

About four miles up Pigeonroost, on the east side, is what's been called Schoolhouse Branch since the 1880s. "My mother attended school there (in the early 1890s) and the branch took its name from this old schoolhouse. The school (though) isn't called by any name." (Rufus shared with me a list of teachers, including some members of his family. It was abandoned long ago.)
A mile or so up Pigeonroost, on its west side, is the Rockhouse Fork. Half a mile above it, on the east side, is Lick Branch. "A very old settlement there used to be the home of the Taylor family and the Field family." Another half mile up Pigeonroost is Caney Fork. "This was once thickly settled by well educated people. One of the families had seven schoolteachers. My grandmother always told me it got its name from the Biblical Canaan; Caney was a shortened form of Canaan. She said it was a kind of wild land flowing of milk and honey, of all kinds of animals, birds, and trees...." Some 2½ miles up Caney is The Flat Hollow. At its mouth was the Head of Caney Fork School which has since been torn down. There used to be eight or ten houses on Caney (including Rufus' boyhood home) and all but one are gone."

Half a mile above Caney Fork, coming into Pigeonroost from the southwest, is Wildcat Branch. "They used to call the mountain bobcats in there wildcats." Between Wildcat and Caney was The Sartin Branch named for the family that lived on that branch at one time."

Nearly one and a half miles above Caney, on the east side of Pigeonroost, is Hobbs Fork. It's a relatively unsettled, timbered area. Its branches include John Hollow named for an old settler; Charley Staton Hollow named for an old hunter who had a cabin at its mouth; Stonecoal Creek named for a seam of very hard coal called stone coal; and the Crooked Gourd Neck Branch that makes a curve like the neck of a crooked gourd."

"Hobbs Fork is about four or five miles long, a wild region that's never been settled. It's now just a timbered area....Johns Hollow was named for an old settler (and that's all he knew of him). Charley Staton had a cabin at the mouth of his hollow, about a mile up Hobbs Fork (from Johns). Stonecoal was another mile and a half. That hard coal is something like anthracite."
For awhile after the Second World War the Laura post office was at the mouth of Hobbs Fork. It was established in 1909 some 2½ miles up Pigeonroost by Everett Jude and was named for his sixteen year old daughter Laurie. Laurie later married M.C. Pinson (called "Mac") on Blacklog Creek. After her death he married again and (by the early 1970s when I interviewed he... Rufus was still living). Over time the office was moved up the fork to the mouth of Caney (where it closed in 1987, some years after the interview). Martin Countians have long wondered about this Everett Jude especially when they learned from old postal records that the first postmaster was Gabriel Frederic(k). According to the late Henry P. ("Buck") Scalf, Gabriel's grandfather John Frederic had assumed the family name Jude to escape family problems. Rufus later stated that the office had been established by Gabriel Jude (not Everett) and after the Judes died out it was moved to the Kelsie Stanley home. Rufus was raised near its original site. They do a lot of timbering in that area now. "Many an old log would lie in the creek and blacken; couldn't easily get 'em out."

"Coming back down the mouth of Hobbs and then going up Pigeon Roost (sic) you come to a large stream called The Maynard Fork, named for some old settlers in there. (To) this fork run several big streams. One on the right is the Johnson Rockhouse Fork for an old settler lived in a rock house near its mouth. The stream heads back against the Peter Cave Fork of Pigeonroost."

"Now then, you go on up and there's another fork on the left called The Jude Fork. An old man lived at its mouth (presumably a Jude) but I don't know his first name."

I once asked Rufus about some of the other Wolf Creek branches. "... Going up Wolf Creek from Pigeonroost, about half a mile, is Little Rockhouse Creek...through which they recently (in the 1960s) built a hardtop road...."
You go up on that hardtop road through a low gap and you go down Nigger Fork. It's the only stream. It's the only stream in this whole country called after colored people. And it's shown as this on maps and deeds. But a feller'd be in trouble using that name now." I pointed out that that name is not on contemporary government maps. "They're afraid to but it used to be. That's all they ever called it locally. The reason they called it that was for a family of colored people who lived up that fork....This road...comes out on (Highway) 40. And they got this road to transport pupils to the new school at the mouth of Blackleg. They'd go up that way and down Blackleg Road to the school ....There's two Blacklogs--one is called Big Blacklog and the other is Little Blacklog. Little Blacklog flows into Big Blacklog near its mouth, near...the new high school." (More on this area later....)

"There's two Crooked Creeks on Wolf Creek. One is Big Crooked and the other is Little Crooked, both on the west side of the creek, going up. The first, Little Crooked, is about half a mile long and it's not settled; it's owned by companies. There's a big oil field in there--oil tanks set up in there. And then you go on up just a short distance to Big Crooked Creek. It's a very large stream with two big forks and is one of the old settlements of Martin County. Stepps first settled at its mouth and they own some land there yet. They too got oil and gas wells on this property. Very good land in there. The Pocahontas Land Company owns most all of the land in the head of it, I think (Remember this interview was in 1971). I asked why the streams are called Crooked. "Yeah, for the shape. They wind around...."

"(The) Poplar Thicket (Branch) of Wolf Creek is all wooded land, three miles long. It's owned by big companies, mostly Pocahontas of Bluefield, West Virginia. It's a great oil field in there and was once a great place for timber. But all the big timber was cut out years ago. Wild country there now, but a very beautiful place; fine
place to study nature. I used to go up there to study the trees and flowers. But there's no road up in there, only a trail."

"Ashlog Branch is a large stream, about seven or eight miles up (Wolf Creek), on the west side. For many years the Moore family lived at the mouth of this branch....Hobart Moore still lives on his farm there, an old man. I imagine Ashlog got its name from some of the early hunters who'd build a campfire in there, leave a log partly burned up and called it an ashlog."

At the mouth of Ashlog was the McClure post office. "In the old days when there was lots of virgin timber in the Wolf Creek area Thomas McClure started a timbering operation there and established the McClure post office in 1904 on the creek between its Poplar Thicket and Crooked Branches and a commissary to keep his men in trade. He also built a large splash dam near the McGee Branch. Since there were no roads or railroads in there then they hauled their timber to the dam by ox teams\textsuperscript{1}. In the spring they'd turn the dam loose and poke the logs out to the north of Wolf Creek where they would raft them together, fifty logs each, and float 'em down to Catlettsburg to the timber markets. So McClure was a very important man in building the early lumber industry of the region." (He operated his area lumber business from about 1900 to about 1908 or '10. After his business closed the post office was moved three fourths of a mile up the creek to the mouth of Ashlog where it closed in 1959. Though the area is now on a rural route the McClure name still identifies the place.)

"As I understand it, McClure came originally from Lawrence County and married a local girl, the daughter of Samuel Moore. (Moore was his first name choice for the post office.) Elsie, Samuel's girl, lived for several more years on Wolf Creek after McClure died. They had some children but I don't remember their names."
The Carcass Branch of Wolf Creek is about one mile below the mouth of Meathouse Fork, on the east side of Wolf. "I've been told that some time back someone found the carcass of some big animal but couldn't tell what it was; it may have been a dead horse or a dead ox or something, for it was big."

Meathouse is a four mile long stream that joins Wolf Creek from the south, about thirteen miles from its mouth. "Old settlers claim there's a hollow sycamore near the mouth of this creek where they stored their meat and maybe even lived in part of the time." (Several other area sycamores had the same derivation; they were used to store meat and for a short time served as homes.) "They grew big, sometimes twelve to fifteen feet in diameter and they'd be hollow."

Mc Gee Branch of Wolf is a couple of miles from Meathouse. It's a long branch. "A strange thing happened there at one time. McGee was a pretty wealthy Scotsman and he wanted to develop coal and timber back in the eighties. I understand he spelled his name McGee but some of the later maps have it as Magee. Anyway, he came in there and took up this land established a large timbering operation, and built a big dam and brought in a Col. Waterson, a very brilliant Civil War veteran and Harvard graduate, to be his superintendent. He was the father of all these Wattersons which now live in this county--all very brilliant people. He had a wife who stayed in Inez while he stayed up here at this timber operation. He supposedly took up with a local woman (I omit his specifics here...). He was living with her while he was working for McGee, and one morning he was found dead with a bullet hole in his head. And they arrested a young man named Harvey Hardin, a school teacher in that community and he too was enamored of this lady and they claim he got jealous of this Watterson. Slipped in there and killed him one night. And they tried him for it but he had an alibi--claimed and proved he was in Louisa at that time.
He came clear at his first trial. But (the Watterson faction) kept fighting this and got a new indictment against that man. But Hardin had skipped out of here and gone to Colorado and was working in a silvermine. They brought him back here to try him again. And do you know what they did? It had been about twenty years since the old man was killed. They went down and dug up his skull. And a strange thing happened... He was buried below Inez, upon that hill. They dug his skull up and brought it into court to show that bullet hole was from a small gun, a 22, and tried this man again but he came clear again, the second time. And they took the skull back and reburied it. About three years later (Hardin) himself was killed under mysterious circumstances but like old man Watterson had been. Killed out there in Colorado. Ain't that strange. No connection (with the Watterson case) though. It seemed like nature had paid him back, you know. His parents had all kinds of money and they got him out...." When did this happen, I asked. "I'd say it's been at least sixty years....The trial was in Inez. So many people went to that trial, it like to broke the court house--the old brick one, not the one we have now. And this floor commenced poppin' and cracken' one day they had to haul them out of there; they had to clear the room...."

(I really hated, at this point, to get Rufus back to discussing the Wolf Creek branches). "Well, sixteen to eighteen miles up Wolf, near its head, is Panther Fork. It's a very wild region in there and old settlers remember seeing panthers (cougars or mountain lions, they're called) in there, and hearing them scream. I've heard that at least one was killed in there."

"Now, above Panther is Cow Fork. I don't know how it got its name except maybe some old settler had a cow he liked."

On another visit I asked Rufus about the McCoys but that will wait for another article.