

The Fighting Hatfields and McCoys

THE STORY OF A FAMOUS FEUD
IN THE WEST VIRGINIA-KENTUCKY HILLS*

by
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WITH his Winchester slung across his saddle, a pistol or two in his belt and "jest a swig of pap's whisky" under it, Jonse Hatfield ambled his horse across the West Virginia hills one fine day in the spring of 1880. Just turned 18, he was ebullient with the knowledge that he could hold his likker with the best of the bearded mountaineers of the frontier.

He was singing lusty, ribald tunes as his mount strolled along and little did he realize that he would that day be instrumental in precipitating a revival of a vendetta which would draw hundreds into its bloody web, bring the States of West Virginia and Kentucky to the brink of civil war, and continue, from first killing to last, for some forty years until industrialization of the then remote territory diverted family hatreds into economic war over unionization.

IT WAS SOME YEARS before Jonse set out that day with the polling place at Blackberry Creek as his objective that animosity between the clans of Anderson (Devil Anse) Hatfield and "Ol' Ran'l" McCoy had its inception. During the Civil War both veterans of the hills had commanded companies of raiders under the Confederate flag and on occasion the two units would clash but without serious results until in 1863 a certain Harmon McCoy was killed by Devil Anse. Randall, says John L. Spivak in his story of the feud, never forgot it and intermittently the two families—the Hatfields, on the West Virginia side of the Tug river, and the McCoys, across in Kentucky—flared up at each other.

ACTUALLY, it was a razor-back hog which caused the most recent and most severe clash prior to Jonse Hatfield's trip to Blackberry Creek. In the fall of 1878 Floyd Hatfield, relative of Devil Anse, went into the hills with his sons for the annual "hawg" round-up. When Randall McCoy claimed one of the animals as his own, trouble started and fuel was added to the fire when a jury of six Hatfields and six McCoys rendered a 7-to-5 verdict in favor of Floyd. Selkirk McCoy, the juror who held the deciding vote and who ruled against his clan, moved across the Tug and was adopted by the Hatfields.

"Two uneventful years passed," says Mr. Spivak in discussing the era after the dispute over the hog. "The ill feeling between the clans again seemed well on the way to being buried. Randall had stopped threatening; Hatfields and McCoys crossed and recrossed into each other's territory, attended dances together in Stringtown, Pikeville, the old dilapidated schoolhouse, or drank together at election meetings." And then Jonse Hatfield eloped with Rosanna McCoy, eldest daughter of "Ol' Ran'l."

IT WAS at Blackberry Creek that day in 1880 that Rosanna and Jonse met for the first time. That night Jonse swung the girl on the saddle behind him and took her back across the Tug as his bride without benefit of clergy.

Jonse Hatfield never was born to be a one-woman man—and perhaps therein lies the cause of the disturbance which followed his unceremonious elopement.

For about a year matters remained at an impasse and then Jonse began to chafe under the responsibilities of his semi-marital existence. When it was learned that Jonse had asked Mary Stafford, a girl courted by Rosanna's brother, to marry him, the McCoy ire rose again at this flouting of one of their own blood.

IN ONE FINAL EFFORT to maintain peace the head of the clan of McCoy sent a peremptory summons to his straying daughter to return to the fold. Forty-eight hours after she had refused the McCoys were mobilizing on the banks of the Tug for an armed invasion of the Hatfield territory to take the girl by force.

*THE DEVIL'S BRIGADE:
The Story of the Hatfield-McCoy Feud
By John L. Spivak. 325 pages. 1930
Brewer and Warren, New York

The impending conflict did not materialize, as Rosanna, frightened at the prospect, took her leave of the Hatfields.

The peace thus restored was to last less than two weeks before a hot-blooded young McCoy took a pot-shot at a Hatfield. The bullet went wild, but it prefaced bloodshed on a scale which soon relegated Jonse and Rosanna's part in the feud to the background. Rosanna gave birth to Jonse's child, was exiled for warning the Hatfields of a raid, and died while the feud which she, more or less,

charged with lead and himself fully clogged with moonshine, he opened fire on a disgruntled detective who had found the hunting of Hatfields a distasteful occupation. In addition to the leaden barrage, Phillips berated the hiring scornfully for his lack of success in his quest for the rival clans. When the ground under the detective's feet had cooled, the man turned caustically on his tormentor. "Anybody kin make a man dance when he's dropping bullets at his feet with friends all around him. You're so quick on the trigger and he's so much contempt for them as can't ketch Hatfields—why don't ye try to ketch 'em yo'rsel and do a little shootin' at them as'll shoot back?"

PHILLIPS ACCEPTED the challenge, was sworn in as a deputy and within twenty-four hours had started on a career of Hatfield hunting



"DEVIL ANSE" HATFIELD

innocently, had helped to revive rage on about her. Jonse, apparently fatally attracted by McCoys, married Nancy McCoy, one of Randall's relatives, and half-heartedly took part in the many reprisals of the vendetta. Tiring of it later, he went West, expecting his wife to follow him, but she deserted back to the McCoys, taking a good deal of Jonse's material wealth with her.

Jonse returned to Logan, fought through the feud and the labor outbreaks which wiped out the last vestiges of the Hatfield-McCoy feud in a blaze of industrial war. In 1920 Jonse fell from his horse and died. Heart disease from too much liquor was given as the cause.

LONG BEFORE Jonse's death, however, the feud had undergone the metamorphosis from the personal to the economic, from a conflict between the McCoys and the Hatfields to a clash between mine owners and mine workers. And, strangely enough, it was neither a Hatfield nor a McCoy which led the last final flare-up of the clans.

Smooth-faced, dark-complexioned Frank Phillips, living in Pike county with the McCoys but not one of them, was the storm center of this particular outbreak. Although he took no personal interest in the family feud, he was, apparently, a born seeker after trouble. Not infrequently it was his pleasant practice to try out his six-shooter on the ground beneath the dancing feet of terrified detectives or other interlopers in the town of Pikeville. Among other things, he scorned the sobriquet of "two-gun" man and instead packed four pistols.

One day early in 1887, his pistols well

that brought him glory among the McCoys and spread despair through the Hatfield ranks.

Of course, the legal machinery in each county was well under the control of the respective clans, with Hatfields able to secure warrants for the arrest of McCoys wanted in Logan county, West Virginia, and the McCoys equally capable of harassing Hatfields found in Pike county, Kentucky, with legal red tape. The imaginary State boundary line, however, formed a barrier which stripped of legal aspect any invasion by posers from one county into the other.

THIS BOUNDARY, however, failed to awe the redoubtable Frank Phillips, who adopted a policy of invasion which soon made him the chief tactician of the McCoy high command. By forced marches he and his aides would cross the Tug, swoop down on an unsuspecting Hatfield and carry him away. By the time the Hatfields could invoke the law, the victims of these forays would have been borne into Kentucky, where their detention was given the cloak of justice.

Governor Wilson, goaded by the importunities of the politically powerful Hatfields, became frantic, but Governor Buckner turned a deaf ear to his pleas, pointing out that official Kentucky requisitions for Devil Anse, Cap and a score of others were growing musty in the files of West Virginia. Governor Wilson appealed to the Federal Government and a United States Marshal took Phillips into custody on a charge of kidnapping. Subsequently a Federal court ruled that it did not have jurisdiction and the McCoy generalissimo was freed to continue his raids, which so far had netted a score of Hatfields, including

"Cotton-top" Mounts, who later was hanged with great celebration in Pikeville, and Jonse, who was sentenced to life imprisonment by a Pike county jury.

Jonse's sentence was welcomed doubly by Phillips, as it paved the way for an alliance with Nancy McCoy, with whom Phillips had been living since Jonse's erstwhile wife had failed to join her husband on the West Coast. Incidentally, Jonse later was pardoned.

The interchange of gubernatorial notes throughout this phase of the feud became so heated that suddenly both executives realized that the two States were rapidly approaching a breach which might easily end in open warfare. Both immediately took what steps they could to prevent such a crisis. Devil Anse was persuaded to quit the border; McCoys moved farther away from the Tug, and a new era was begun as an encroaching civilization altered property values and changed the economic structure of the region from frontier standards to industrial.

One major flare-up, however, occurred before the metamorphosis was complete. Cap Hatfield, Devil Anse's second son and the fiercest of the tribe, shot and killed John Rutherford, an ally of the McCoys; Rutherford's brother and an innocent bystander. The Hatfield, in this case, was not the aggressor, for Rutherford had fired the first shot, but, nevertheless, Cap was forced to take refuge in the mountains. Arrested later, he was sentenced to one year in jail.

BUT HE NEVER served even that nominal term of imprisonment. Shortly after his incarceration he escaped and the hunt was on again, gaining momentum until approximately 2,000 men were combing the West Virginia and Kentucky hills in quest of the fugitive. Into the man hunt came old Ran'l McCoy, lured from retirement by the prospect of settling a grudge against the worst killer of the feud. For days the hunt continued and finally closed in about an isolated peak—Devil's Backbone—where Cap stood his ground, fought off the posers and withstood two charges of dynamite which blew up half the mountain side. When the smoke from the second blast cleared away Cap, still safe on the shattered ridge, waved his hands derisively at the posse and vanished. In due time he returned to settle near his father. The indictments against him molded.

With the arrival of this era the disintegration of the clan lines was complete and, as unionization and its accompanying labor disturbances crept into the region, the split of family associations became more pronounced.

At first, it was the Hatfield and McCoy mine owners who coalesced, their wide property holdings and the necessity for protecting them forming a common ground on which they might meet.

The transformation was so complete that two of Devil Anse's sons joined that same detective agency which, a decade before, had been hunting their father. Sheriff Don Chafin at Logan, one of the Hatfield blood, was the arm of the operators and the scourge of the mine-workers' organizers, while Chief of Police Sid Hatfield, at Matewan, was a loyal friend to the miners and became the central figure around which was fought a bloody street battle which cost the lives of seven detectives employed by the operators and a number of others.

IN 1919, a year prior to the shooting of the seven detectives by Sid, the disturbances in the mine fields took on national importance when 3,000 miners mobilized to march on Logan and demand the right to organize unions in that town. An apathetic Governor was galvanized into action and finally succeeded in causing a cessation of hostilities, which lasted but a few months.

It was twenty days after Baldwin-Felts detectives retaliated and shot down the unarmed Sid Hatfield in the streets of Welch on August 1, 1921, that the final outbreak occurred which swept away every vestige of the McCoy-Hatfield feud in the smoke of an industrial conflict.

Following Sid Hatfield's assassination the miners again mobilized and marched on Logan, and the mountains in which Hatfield had ambushed McCoy and vice versa took on the aspect of a real battle front. Only after half a hundred or more had been killed, scores wounded and Federal troops rushed to the scene from Camp Knox, following a proclamation by President Harding, was conflict in the Kentucky-West Virginia hills settled and a comparatively peaceful reign established.