

In the FOOTSTEPS of a FEUD

The events between the Hatfields and McCoys live on at numerous historic sites.

By J. Eric Eckard

In the 1880s, worldwide fame reached the Tug River Valley that separates West Virginia and Kentucky. Newspaper accounts across the globe sensationalized the mountain folk involved in history's most famous feud: the conflict between the Hatfields and McCoys.

The stories portrayed people in this area negatively. So, for a dozen

decades, the people of southwestern West Virginia and southeastern Kentucky shied away from their heritage.

"A lot of locals are (still) reluctant to talk about it," Everett Johnson, curator of the Big Sandy Heritage Museum in Pikeville, Ky., said. "It did bring a stigma on Appalachia."

Although the feud ended years ago, the world remains fascinated with

the Hatfields and McCoys. As each generation passed from the original feudists – men as rugged as the land and full of family pride – the area along the Tug River evolved.

"History is history," Willow Chafin, a Hatfield descendant who was born in Matewan, W.Va., said. "You're not going to get rid of history. I think it's great we have this tradition."



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Tourist Hotspots

A resurgence of interest in the feud in recent years has sparked tourism officials, business owners, history buffs and even descendants of the two families' patriarchs – Devil Anse Hatfield and Ran'l McCoy – to use the 19th-century events as a selling point to rejuvenate the area in the 21st century.

West Virginia created the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System, 500 miles of off-road trails for ATVs, dirt bikes and utility vehicles. Theater West Virginia produces an outdoor drama in the summer, chronicling the bloody events from 125 years ago.

A marathon and half-marathon named for the feuding families weaves its way from Kentucky to West Virginia every summer, attracting runners from around the world. Along the way, racers will pass several of the feud sites, and each runner is designated as a Hatfield or McCoy to instill a little friendly nod to the feud.

"The runners come for the marathon, but then they find the history of the area interesting," said Margie Annette, a McCoy descendant who now lives in San Diego.

The story of the feud also is retold on CD through actors, part of a self-guided driving tour that takes motorists along a dozen or so historical stops in both states, including the Blackberry Post Office, site of the infamous hog trial; the pawpaw patch where three McCoy boys were murdered; and the historic Dils cemetery where many of the feudists were laid to rest.

"You not only get to walk the ground where Devil Anse walked but also see the bushes down over the bank where the McCoy boys were shot," Chafin said. "We get them from all over. People want to come and see the hollers they've read about."

The major event each year is the Hatfields and McCoy Reunion Festival



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held during the second week in June. The festival started in 1999 when descendants of the two families gathered at sites along the Tug River to celebrate their storied past. The first one was called the Reunion of the Millennium, and in 2003, a peace treaty marked the ceremonial end of the feud.

Over the past decade, the family reunion has blossomed into a series of festivities in the Tug River Valley that attracts thousands of people, some from as far away as England. During the festival, bus tours also take visitors to some of the same feud sites featured on the driving tour.

"There are events on both sides of the Tug," Johnson said. "Pikeville has a banquet, and we offer tours that give you a sense of what took place."

Each year, Annette returns to the mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia for the festival. She and her kin gather at the old McCoy house to reminisce and greet festival visitors. And some of those visitors show up with an affection for history and a story of their own link to the feud.

"Everybody that comes in has some relationship to the Hatfields and McCoy's, it seems," Paula Blankenship, curator of the Matewan Depot Replica and Museum, said. "When we first started this, the local people wanted nothing to do with. But once it started, it took."

The Bitter Battle

The history of the feud has spawned dozens of stories of its origins. Some said it started during the Civil War when the Hatfields sympathized with the South, and the McCoy's sided with the North. Others said it began over the alleged theft of a pig. Still others claim an Election Day spat incited the feud.

Annette, who was born in McVey, Ky., said she thinks it was a combination of all those events and more that



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started the bitter battle between the Hatfields and McCoys. Annette's grandmother, who was born at the height of the feud, handed down stories of the "bad times" where the men would become "angrier and angrier" over each dispute.

The first death attributed by some "feudologists" occurred in 1865 when Harmon McCoy was killed by a band of Hatfields after he returned home from the Civil War. More ill will came when Ran'l McCoy accused a Hatfield of stealing one of his pigs. The case went to court, and the Hatfield was acquitted.

Johnse Hatfield and Roseanna McCoy also played a role in the feud thanks to their short-lived Romeo and Juliet type romance. The McCoy clan felt betrayed when Roseanna McCoy saved her lover's life by alerting Devil Anse Hatfield that a group of McCoys intended to kill Johnse Hatfield.

By the time the feud ended in 1891, the death toll of Hatfields and McCoys stood at 13.

"People talk a lot about the pig, but it was so much more than that," said Tony Tackett, director of the Pikeville-Pike County Tourism agency. "Life was hard back then, and we are known to be territorial. But the story is so much more than just a pig."

Chafin agreed that the feud started over a combination of events – when the three McCoys were shot, the romance between Johnse Hatfield and Roseanna McCoy and a land dispute between Devil Anse Hatfield and Frank Phillips.

Betty Howard, who has ties to both sides of the feud, helped organize the festival for several years, setting up venues and recruiting actors to portray the feuding families. Today, Howard continues to trace her family's roots, contemplate the feud's origins and consider what gives this feud its longevity.

"I wish I knew because there were other feuds in Kentucky," Howard said.

For whatever reason, the story of

the Hatfields and McCoys has become a symbol of a longstanding feud in American culture. It's been memorialized in movies, cartoons, plays, songs and books. Restaurants, auto shows and car dealerships bear the name of the famous feudists – all in the name of bringing visitors to the site where it all started.

"A lot of people see the Hatfields and McCoys as a tragedy, and at one point, it was about the feud," Tackett said. "But now it's about two families celebrating. And now we have people who aren't descendants come in to celebrate." ■



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