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Their Old Kentucky Home Is Here

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Crandon, Wis.--Stretch a string on a map from the Michigan border south to the point where the mighty Wolf River sweeps into the Menominee Reservation. Now, if you travel this area, listen carefully as you talk to the natives 20 or 30 miles on either side. It's not unlikely that you'll encounter a Kentucky twang. The heritage remains. It was into this forested corridor that a proud breed of "briar hoppers" began filtering from the hill of Daniel Boone country at about the turn of the century. Some were fugitives from hillbilly justice and feuds, but more sought a living less harsh than the drudgery they found in coal mines. The fact that no historical marker commemorates their arrival--although they certainly merit one for the spark of romance they contributed--might be laid to the misconception that their most celebrated exploit was the distilling of moonshine. It appears that they did plenty of that. And word is that a patient man might find a nip to wet his tongue today, although it has been a handful of years since the "last" still was raided. This largely Scots-Irish stock also brought their broad-bladed axes into the economy of the north woods and today predominantly do logging.

And they brought a full measure of southern hospitality, their favorite five stringed banjos and songs they "hyerd" their mother's sing (some of them later recorded by the Library of Congress). They came to the Langlade and Forest County sawmill communities of the past--Elton, Bryant, Nashville--with concentrations at Crandon and White Lake. They mixed with Poles and Swedes and Canucks in logging camps that were virtually little Leagues of Nations.

Different Names

The Kentucks were variously labeled Southerners, KY's, or briar hoppers. It is said of them: "They took Crandon without firing a shot, but there was plenty of that afterwards."

This reputation for gunplay in more rambunctious decades has let some gentry to avoid talk of their Kentuck ancestry even though it includes family names of considerable substance. "We're a strange breed," explains Joe Jones, who left Antigo for Milwaukee and got elected to the legislature. "We tell stories and everyone thinks we're lying." Later Jones lost his legislative seat and returned to Antigo. He is the Assembly sergeant-at-arms now. Those stories are of old-time moonshiners being killed in "commotions" with revenue agents. Or of the Whisky Northern railroad bringing in oaken barrels by the carload to fill with booze. Of hijackings of liquor stored in barns or basements while waiting shipment to Milwaukee or Chicago (and reputedly the Al Capone empire). Of men having their pictures taken with their arms around their stills rather than their wives.

Lived to 103

Jones father, the late C.E. Jones, was going from Kentucky to West Virginia to work in a coal mine when Uncle Eph told him what a fine place Wisconsin was. Uncle Eph had

wandered to Bryant by mule in 37 days over unmarked roads. C.E. cold neither read nor write but learned enough to become a farmer, logger, hotel-saloon keeper, Antigo bank president, chairman of the Langlade County Board, sheriff twice, a top Democrat, an honorary Kentucky colonel and 103 years old. At his 100th birthday observation, he recited the "Round County War," a saga of a feud among Kentuckians he knew. A son, Willis Jones, also became sheriff, and turned out to be the scourge of moonshiners. His legend, including some gunplay, is being revived this year with frequent items in the "Peeps at the Past" columns (of 50 years ago) in the Antigo Journal.

A Teetotaler

Joe and his brother, Merle, who also lives in Antigo, recall that Willis did not drink and thought people elected him to clean up. In one raid he seized 3,000 barrels of moonshine. But, according to Merle, after his two year term "no Jones could ever get elected to a law enforcement job here again," although other Kentucks have been sheriff since then at both Antigo and Crandon.

Friendly Cup of Coffee

Another Kentuck, Arlie Messer, lives at Grudgeville, a Kentuck settlement west of White Lake. Recently, Messer offered a visitor a friendly cup of coffee, a banjo tune and some memories at his trailer home. His father was a coal miner in Round County, Ky., until it got to disagreeing with his health and he came north to cut logs in winter and farm in summer. Grandpa Boyd, he rambles on, was "a minister and a moonshiner" in Kentucky where "they figured it was less load to carry the grain out by the gallon than by the bushel." Grudgeville Rd. got it name because every family had some kind of trouble and a grudge against someone else. That might have been the makings of feuds in Kentucky, Messer recalls. "It seems like when people came up here they felt they had gone far enough with that," he adds. "But I had to take a gun away from my dad to keep him from shooting people. I didn't want to treat my dad like that but I didn't want him to get into worse trouble."

Tales of Poaching

There are stories of poaching in this dark "dark and bloody ground." The stories imply that poaching is a Kentuck trait, but more likely is is not solely theirs. Yet, according to Boone Spencer, 73, of Lily, "Some aren't too familiar with the hunting laws. I had a relative got caught three times. It cost him $500." Ed Hill, a conservation warden who is an in-law to Kentucks, observes, "They don't feel they're violating when they break a conservation law. They feel six or seven deer is part of their way of life. Basically you can't find finer people. If you catch them "fahr and squahr," as they say, they'll pay the fine and invite you in for a cup of coffee afterwards." "They are religious," Hill reports. "They think they can handle a rattlesnake on Sunday."

Strict Philosophy

And they have a philosophy. Sally Wineburner, deputy White Lake village clerk, recounts her father's view of Kentuck resourcefulness and long life: "God put you on earth to work. If you can't work and do your job, you don't stick around." Alton Ison, 75, a retired logger living alone in a neat Lake Metonga cabin, keeps busy appraising land

and trapping beaver. Offering a plate of apples he dried himself the old family way, he notes that Kentucks feel insulted if a person does not stop to eat with them. According to Ison, most continue in modest means even into the third generation because "Kentucky people never had capital."

Another Kentuck is Grace Haney, 72, of Crandon, a late comer (in 1934). She wears high shoes, "long drawers" and a cloth hillbilly cap, still drinks well water with a gourd, subscribes to the weekly Beattyville (Ky.) County Enterprise and sprinkles her chatter with yonder and kinya (can you) and fur (for or far) as she proclaims with Hubert Humphreyish enthusiasm, "I'm just proud to be a Kentuckian." Her Homemakers Club holds Kentucky Days.

Moonshine Capital

Though Crandon once was known as the "moonshine capital of the north," it must be remembered that during the nation's wars, these Kentucks were called upon to make government munitions. They had a little trouble stopping. Some prefer moonshine (from corn or rye and 110 to 130 proof), reports Ison, but oome other Kentucks liked to chew ginseng and swallow the juice. As medicine, younger folks say, ginseng tea was so awful people got well just so they would not have to take it.

Olive Glasgow, Crandon freelance writer-photographer, asssesses her Kentuck kin as "poor but proud," and if their homes were humble and their means small they "always appreciated a little elbow room and quality of life over material things." And they always will be represented in the Library of Congress archives with songs collected from Pearl Jacobs Borusky of Bryant. Such as:

I ran up the street and I ran down
In search of my bonnie little girl.

I whooped and a hollered and I played on my fiddle
but my bonnie little girl was gone.

And:
I asked that girl to marry me. She said, "Oh, no, I'd rather be free."
I asked that girl to be my wife. She cut me with an old case knife.
I asked that girl to be my bride. She sat right down and cried and cried.
And the worse she cried the worse I felt, till I thought my sad heart would melt.

Pearl Jacobs was born in Jacobs, Kentucky in 1899 and migrated to Langlade Co., Wisconsin with her parents Matt and Ollie Jacobs about 1906. Pearl is a great aunt of mine.