

Clackamas County News

L. D. MEADE, Editor and Publisher

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THE TOBACCO ROAD OF THE NORTH

Thirty miles from the roar of the world's greatest city lives a dull-minded, moral-less and lawless tribe of mountain folk who make the characters of Tobacco road seem cultured and effete by comparison. A novelist in search of earthy material would find more perhaps, than he bargained for among this degenerate lot who have succeeded in staving off the overtures of civilization while skyscrapers have mushroomed almost within sight of their mountain clearings. They are the Jackson Whites, who sully the blue Ramapo Mountains today with the same jerry-built squalid communities that have been their haven since the Revolution.

Little has been written about them. Among the many legends of their origin some are conjecture, others contain fact. That their family tree is romantically wild and conglomerate one glance at a family plainly shows. Negro blood is apparent in the complexions of most Jackson Whites, and Indian too in many cases. But when you see a white, fair haired one, and you comment upon it you are invariably reminded of the English Women. "Prostitutes" people tell you. "It was a mean business." You are referred to Mr. John C. Storms of nearby Park Ridge, N. J., who is an authority on the Jackson Whites as anyone. It was left to him to unearth their sad secrets and to trace them back to their dark beginnings in five countries and three continents. And yet their history because of the very nature of it, still lurks behind a curtain of mystery, a surly and devilish sort of mystery if there ever was one. Not all of it probably can ever be told.

If you were to leave Suffern, New York on some afternoon in spring before the foliage on the trees becomes too dense bear into the foothills of the Ramapos, desert your car and walk for miles then perhaps you may

see the Jackson Whites as they are today and as they live in the incredible primitiveness of their own homes. You can do it no other way. You take the mountain road as far as it goes, until it seems to give up with a sigh of relief in a thick tangle of mountain laurel and scrub oak; then you branch out on your own initiative, following a way thru the underbrush that looks as though it has been trod by a good many feet. And suddenly in a shaft of afternoon sunlight perhaps, you'll see the homes of the Jackson Whites growing obliquely out of the mountainsides like unwholesome fungi.

Closer inspection shows them to be shacks, shanties, lean-tos what you will, consisting of two rooms at the most, but usually one, and made up of every conceivable bit of material the builders were able to steal. Sheets of corrugated tin serve for roofing while the three sides (the mountain makes an adequate fourth) are apt to be patched up with old washboards, barn doors or bed slats. When the shacks approach the final stage of decrepitude they are propped up by long poles driven into the ground and wedged against the side walls to keep them from falling down. In the dooryards you will certainly find a weath of broken whiskey bottles, a curiously flattened old shoe, the ribs of an old umbrella and a number of very ancient chicken heads decaying in the sun.

A white slattern with faded blue eyes may be sitting on one of the crazy steps holding a sepia-tinted baby in her lap. And around the corner may appear a gaunt, dark man with a shotgun who hates a white valley snooper with bitter violence. You have to approach him warily and with some deference. This is the hereditary land of the Jackson Whites and here he is indisputable king just as he was a century and a half ago. Time often stands still in the Ramapos.

These people do not observe the least of the human decencies. The miserable shanties you will see about house ten or twelve of them with as many shades of skin, all sleeping in a room seldom larger than ten by fifteen feet. Marriage laws are no more obeyed by them than any other laws. When anyone wants to marry he or she simply moves in with the other family as long as the notion lasts and in the course of natural events another handful of sickly little Jackson Whites comes into the world.

The wild Ramapos seem tainted and spoiled somehow. Even the mountain air is polluted with too many odors. There is too much rottenness and filth lying about in the sun. And there are too many dark-skinned renegades with surly faces stamping thru the mountain laurel. Your heart will indeed be a stout one if it does not jump about a little before the leers of ten or twenty of these gentlemen who had undoubtedly been watching you every step up the mountain. Is this logical you ask, yourself, that here so close to Times Square several thousand people like these live and have their being? No, it isn't logical at all, it's 100 years and across the world.

The Jackson White probably possesses the most potent ego west of Broadway. He is satisfied with himself and is well contented in his way of life. He scraps with his brothers usually over the purloining of his women or the theft of his frightful corn liquor and deals out justice after a fashion. It is significant that most of these people carry knife scars somewhere about their dark persons and occasionally though not so often as one might think, a man vanishes completely after some flagrant offense. You don't ask questions of any Jackson White, ever about such a disappearance. He may not like it at all.

The men hunt and fish all year round and the women do a lackadaisical sort of gardening. During the winter months they weave splint baskets, really quite beautiful baskets part of the splints are dyed with the juices of bark and mountain berries and are woven into the natural wood to make symmetrical designs. They carve bowls, ladles, spoons, forks and an assortment of other household utensils with considerable skill. When the blueberries are ripe on the moun-

tainsides they exert themselves more strenuously than they do at any other time during the year and all the men, women and children turn out to strip the bushes bare.

Immediately they descend upon the valley towns before the berries spoil. The men walk first like good Indians empty-handed, and the women and vari-colored children trail along behind at a discreet distance, loaded to the eyes with their baskets and their blueberries to sell. One excursion generally nets enough cash for a whole year's living back in the hills now and then a little group have moved off the mountains. There is a Jackson White settlement at Hillburn, one at Sloatsburg, Ramapo, Torn and Ladentown as well as in Suffern itself. Occasionally the men get work in factories but the first week's pay looks like such a fortune to them that they go on drunken bays lasting for days. As far as the families are concerned relief is a much more effective means of support. Almost every Jackson White who has heard of that institution is now on relief.

On the outskirts of one little North Jersey town there is a colony founded some years ago by two DeVries brothers. The colonists live in shacks made of packing boxes in a wooded hollow known appropriately as "Skunk's Misery." and the taxpayers of the town support them. Their children are subject to rickets and tuberculosis. They go to the public school but seldom get beyond the fourth grade. They consort with negroes and whites alike and as they are completely unmoral by nature their squalid little hollow is a lewd threat to humanity.

So there you have the Jackson Whites as they are today. But their tragic, savage history, the devilishness and the desperation and the degeneracy which went into their blood years ago is well worth examining. It may help to explain them.

The official records of the state of North Carolina show that in 1711 a tribe of Woodthirsty Tuscarawas were exiled from Southern soil after massacring an entire settlement of white people and were driven northward by a regiment of British soldiers into the mountains near the great Hudson river. One can only speculate at the purpose behind the strange treaty which resulted in transplanting the Indians from one group of mountains to another six hundred miles away. At any rate they lived up to their agreement and set up their teepees in the Ramapos where they lived peaceably with the native Hagingashakies.

Some sixty years later in England a gentleman by the name of Jackson hit upon a lucrative scheme. He presented his idea to George the Third and it met with approval. Jackson by the terms of a contract was engaged to collect, transport and deliver 3500 women to the port of New York for the gratification of the British soldiers quartered there. New York was largely a Tory city and one slip on the part of a British soldier might have a disastrous effect on local opinion. So Jackson's plan to protect New York womanhood was welcomed ironically enough and he was promised a generous sum for each woman he could deliver.

But Jackson now met with difficulties. Women of the proper sort approached in the proper places naturally mistrusted his proposition. The perils of the ocean voyage and the colonial wildness were not much inducement. There were some who would go. But all this took time and Jackson had to work fast for his fortune. And so if one can believe the tradition that persists today among the people of New York and northern New Jersey, began perhaps the worst wholesale kidnapping in the annals of European crime. The eyes of Jackson and his men fell on isolated cottages on lonely moors and downs, on highways where darkness found belated travelers still abroad. Women were seized right and left, and Jackson rushed them to the vessels that lay at Plymouth waiting to transport them. He had no intention of returning to England and ran little risk once his sorry fleet had set sail for the colonies.

During the long voyage the wretched women had barely enough food and water to keep them alive. Many died of pneumonia, dysentery, terror and broken hearts. And Jackson, seeing body after body pitched into the sea, perhaps began to believe that God was not with him in his enterprise. When one of his vessels sprang a leak and sank in the ocean losing all on board he must have certain of it. Still he was a man of resource and remembering this his contract contained no stipulation as to the color of the women he was to present to the army he sent an emptied vessel to the West Indies. It returned with a load of great gleaming negroes.

(Continued on next page)

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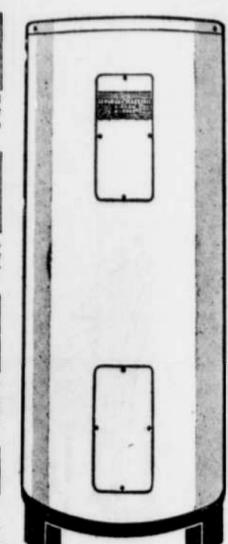
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