

A Kentucky Legacy

by Georgia Green Stamper

Their voiceless spirits crowd into my bed at night, elbowing for my attention. They thrust the fragments of their lives under my pillow like so many milk teeth, silently nagging me to resurrect them, to give them breath one more time. I'm not a storyteller, I protest—I'm not a writer—but they give me no peace until I decide to try.

I refuse, even so, to tell the end of their stories, because, if you think about it, the conclusion of a story is usually the least important part. Eventually, everybody's ends up at the same place and that's at the cemetery. Beginnings can differ some—rich or poor, pretty or not—but it has always seemed to me that the tale lies in the middle, in those moments caught out of time, and held in motion like a perpetual newsreel at the old Saturday movies.

The stories that echoed through the long years of my childhood were like that—only middles, with players, raised from the dead, to repeat an old joke, or teach a needed lesson, or worry an old sore. In my memory, the stories were told in near darkness—outside on a summer porch at twilight, or inside in a dim winter room, though surely the ghosts were sometimes spoken of in broad daylight. Surely, we sometimes sat at a noontime table spread heavy for the work hands, or maybe after church for Sunday company, and repeated their wit, laughed at their foibles. Surely, we sometimes whiled away the miles of a long car trip with the comfortable familiarity of their triumphs and tragedies. But in my memory, it is always near dark, and the smoke from my grandfather's pipe tickles my nose and comforts me.

The stories teach me who I am. I know that even as I hear them for the first time. Perhaps more importantly, the stories teach me where I am, and where I am makes me who I am.

At the beginning of time—so the stories went—my people decided to leave the far away land of Virginia, and made a great pilgrimage across the mountains and through the Gap, seeking our Promised Land. Having started a little later than some, we found the best land was already taken up by the quick and the privileged. Discouraged but not defeated, seeking a spring that would quench our thirst and protect us from disease, we simply took off vaguely to the left, vaguely northward towards the Ohio River, until we happened upon the broad, rich bottoms of Eagle Creek.

It was the singular most extraordinary event in our history, and we never, ever got over our amazement at having done it. We had faced Indians, bears, hunger and cholera to claim our Eden. Having once done the magnificent, there was never again a need to do more. We stayed put, and reigned, here on Eagle Creek, just about forever.

To be born on the creek, into the Hudson family, as I and most everyone else along Eagle had been, was to know from the cradle that one was purebred of pioneer stock—though refined and improved, of course, by the Methodist Church and a good sense of humor. No English lord could have felt greater entitlement to his land than we Hudsons felt on Eagle Creek. No Middle Eastern royal family could have rivaled our regard for Hudson kinship, which was carefully calculated and recorded into at least the eighth generation. Our people became legends, our stories myths, our place hallowed.

Despite the external poverty of our lives, despite the outhouses, despite the coal burning stoves and sooty ashes, despite the linoleum on the floors of our drafty houses, despite our underserved schools and unpaved roads—I was a near grown woman and long gone from the county before I understood that the Hudsons were unknown off the creek. That the Hudsons were not, after all, Roosevelts or Kennedys or even counted among Kentucky's elite. We were common folk in the eyes of the world. Poor people of little consequence.

At first, this realization stunned me into a profound insecurity. Later, it made me laugh out loud at our wonderful, naïve, through-to-the-bone pride. Much, much later I came to appreciate the sublime rarity of my childhood—the unique privilege of growing up immersed in a family's culture, a family's history, a family's place on earth.

Now I am the only one left who remembers the stories of how it was—the triumphant, proud, wise, laughing, merry, tragic, vengeful, weeping, regretful middle of all their stories. And so I feel obliged to become a storyteller myself. I decide to try and speak their peace, over and over, this way and that, loudly and softly, to my children, to passing strangers, in the dark, until I sleep.