

Feuds

In 1882, one hundred and twenty six years ago, perhaps the most famous of the inter-family feuds that cast a long shadow across this nation of ours began when the Hatfields and McCoys took up arms against each other.

Our immediate neighborhood unfortunately almost followed suit in the first half of the twentieth century when East and West Hartland developed differences caused by the flooding of Hartland Hollow, effectively cutting the township in two with no means of land communication between them except for Conn. Route 20, that made an end-around on the north side of Barkhamsted Reservoir. For years the two segments of the township struggled and fought over expenditure of public funds, the location of town meetings and countless other minor irritations that combined to make for strained relations. I won't attempt to say much about the events leading up to the feud that broke out between East and West, as I am sure that someone in Barkhamsted or Hartland is in a better position to do so than I. I do remember that school transportation was suspended for a time in 1947 to the Gilbert School because of indiscriminate small arms fire. The State Police lost one of their cruisers that had survived the WWII years when it was caught in the crossfire. By the following year, police and other emergency organizations were able to finally replace the pre-war models, but in '47 the loss of a cruiser must have been sorely felt.

On more than one occasion the voters of both sides of town petitioned the Legislature to allow them to split into two separate townships, but this was denied as neither was considered to have enough population to meet the criteria for a township. What finally set the stage for more stable times was the surge of new house construction that took place after WWII with the return of the veterans. As Hartland grew with the influx of "outsiders", the tensions of former times relaxed, and with it the danger of establishing the makings of a real feud faded as well.

Now to return to the Hatfields and McCoys and the one feud that the majority of people have heard of, but probably don't know a great deal about.

In Pike County, Kentucky, the easternmost county in that state that juts to the point of contact between Virginia and West Virginia, a dispute over a \$1.75 fiddle, a stray hog and the well-remembered violence of the Civil War lit the fuse that touched off a killing spree that hot day in August 1882. In the midst of Pike County election-day festivities, Ellison Hatfield opened the most famous feud in American history by stirring from a drunken slumber, first to insult Tolbert McCoy and then to attack him. Tolbert and his brother drew knives and started stabbing Ellison; a third McCoy brother shot him.

Ellison, fearfully wounded, was borne away. When word reached Anse Hatfield, head of the West Virginia clan and described by one contemporary as "six feet of devil and 180 pounds of hell," he and his kin rounded up the three McCoys and held them prisoner. Two days later Ellison died; the Hatfields brought the three boys to within sight of one of the McCoy's cabins, tied them to papaw bushes, and pumped fifty rifle bullets into them.

The State of Kentucky posted big rewards for the capture of the murderers, but the Hatfields stood together and sent packing the hopeful detectives down from Chicago. The McCoys were persistent. The violence continued.

On New Year's Day of 1888, nine Hatfields crossed the West Virginia line into Kentucky and laid siege to Randolph McCoy's cabin. After an hour's battle, the building caught fire. Alifair McCoy stepped outside to douse the flames, confident the Hatfields wouldn't harm a woman. They shot her in the stomach. As she lay screaming on the ground, her mother, Sarah, tried to get to her. "For the love of the Lord," she screamed, "let me go to my girl." A Hatfield pistol-whipped her until she lost consciousness.

Within days bands of McCoys fifty strong began forays across the border, and on January 19 a full-fledged battle raged for two hours and left heavy casualties in its wake. The governors of both Kentucky and West Virginia called out the National Guard.

At last, in 1889, several Hatfields captured in the McCoys raids were tried in Kentucky; all were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment, except for Alifair's murderer, who was hanged. The feud began to peter out. "Devil Anse" found God; one of his nephews, Henry Drury Hatfield, became governor of West Virginia.

At the turn of the century a curious sightseer made his way to Anse's abandoned cabin. He found hanging above the fireplace a lithograph bearing the legend "There is no place like our home." In the margin another visitor had written, "Leastwise, not this side of hell."

Let us be thankful that we don't have a similar history to live with.

Historic Bytes

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