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THE TENNESSEAN MAGAZINE

A Pioneer in Family Rehabilitation

Granny White, With Ox Cart, One Slave And Two Orphan Grandsons, Wrested Her Living From Tennessee Hillsides Friend Staked Her to on Easy Terms

By EMILY TOWE

IT was about the year 1800 that a little old white-headed woman with two orphan grandchildren left her home in North Carolina to face unknown dangers in the "wilds" of Tennessee.

She had a determined expression as she sat in the front of her one-ox cart—that 66-year-old woman who had seen so much misfortune back in Surrey County. The government authorities had even tried to take her grandchildren because home said she was too poor to keep them off the parish.

"No indeed," said Mrs. Lucinda (Granny) White, "the Justices Court won't bind out these children as long as I'm alive." And to back up her statement she had bundled her scanty household goods, the two grandsons, and Zachary, an old negro slave, in a cart and set her face toward the west.

History relates a stirring climax to the life of Granny White—a true story of the grandmother who, at a time when most women were ready to settle down with handwork by the family fireplace, started on an inn-keeping career that before her death brought wealth and recognition to her grandchildren.

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A DIRECT descendant of this plucky little woman who was born in the famous old Granny White Inn is living today at Hillsboro, Tenn. His name is Thomas Milton Lankford and he is the grandson of one of those little orphan boys who made the trip over the mountains into Tennessee.

Seated on the front porch of his modest little home in Hillsboro, he can talk by the hour of Granny's inn which he remembers as it was during his boyhood before the structure was torn down.

From his mother, the late Mrs. Pamelia White Lankford, the old gentleman, who looks much younger than his 76 years, learned much of Granny White's eventful life from the long trip to her death some 16 years later. This lady received her information from her father, Willis White, one of the grandsons rescued from an orphan's fate by the energy and courage of his aged grandmother.

It was several years after the long trip into this state before Granny finally reached the spot where she settled on what is now Granny White Road. In the first place, the journey was of necessity a slow, tedious one because the poor travelers could come only a few miles each day. A large part of the time was taken up with the single ox feeding on the grass along the way, for of course there was no money for food.

It was an interesting group that made its way over the hills—the two little grandsons, interested in everything they saw, expecting Indians and robbers at every turn of the road, and showing that they were thoroughly conscious of the novel experience in their young lives; Uncle Zachary, that faithful old servant who was leaving everything familiar and who showed that he was almost scared to death; the long-horned ox, known at that time as a Tuckaleonee, a solid yellow animal which was distinctly southern bred; and Granny herself, feeling responsible for the group, realizing fully the dangers, and yet determined with all her will that this was the only course left if her family was to be kept together.

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AND so they came, arriving by the end of the summer at what has since been known as the "Meridith" Place on the road between Kingston and Knoxville. Since this road was traveled considerably for the time, Granny became established there and set up a gingerbread stand. Soon her trade was flourishing and the tourists could not seem to get enough of her delicious baked bread.

After a time she sold her stand and good will to other parties who built a tavern at the place, which for many years was kept by "Liget" Meridith and was a popular hostelry in its day. She then moved westward again and located on the "Walton" Road where it crossed Piney Creek. Again she set up a gingercake stand which proved to be just as popular as the one before.

With a watchful eye for business, she hit upon the idea of another money making scheme. Large trains of movers were going west. Their wagons required tar to lubricate the axles, for the peculiar construction of the wheels discouraged the use of oil or grease. Granny saw that all through the woods on the mountains there was an abundance of pine knots. So with the aid of her ox and cart she gathered them to make tar for sale to the travelers. She selected the site for a kiln on a hillside, scraped the top soil away, making the bottom concave and lower on one side, beat the bottom with a wooden maul to prevent the substance from sinking into the ground, and burned her rich pine.

She barreled it and found ready sale for the product. It is said that traces of her old kiln can still be seen on the bank of the old road. She must have enjoyed a good trade, for purchasers soon began trying to buy her out and finally she sold to David Haley, an ancestor of the well-known Haley family of Roane County.

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GRANNY LUCINDA WHITE seems to have had a natural eye for money making, manifested by her selection of two locations of the best patronized stands in Roane County where tavern keepers later became rich. Haley's tavern was afterwards one of the most noted stage stands on the line of the old stage road from Knoxville to Nashville.

Her next journey westward brought her to the site near Nashville, seven miles out on the road that has since been named for her. It was particularly favorable for establishment of a tavern in view of the fact that it was in the gap of a ridge through which the road passed from Nashville to Franklin. Near her place was a large hollow tree which gave the name to the gap, and this point was said to be about as drear a looking place as one could very well find.

The widow met a friend in this section of the state who made it possible for her to prosper. He was Thomas McCrory, who gave to Mrs. White forty acres of land—Thomas H. Benton, long a senator from Tennessee, said in one of his congressional speeches that McCrory sold it to her at a nominal price on unlimited credit.

The farm was located on the two faces of a pair of confronting hills. Her slaves brought lumber three miles on their heads to build her house. It was a tedious job, but with Granny's supervision, a rambling structure was erected on the land which was so steep that it was necessary to prop pumpkins and support them with stakes to prevent their ponderous weight from breaking the vines and rolling on down the hill.

"I remember when I was a boy the old place was big and showed signs of having been a comfortable inn. Granny White added rooms whenever her trade made it practical, and of course there was really no plan to the house," Mr. Lankford said.

"These rooms were added on at the most convenient places, and there were no hallways. Guests entered rooms through other rooms and these through others until it came to the place where they had to know where they were going to get settled for the night."

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HE related the story of one guest who lost his way in the maze of rooms and later the next day when hallooing and pistol shots were heard. Granny found that she had missed the count. "This is probably not true, but it just shows how the place was built," Mr. Lankford commented.

Another story that he believes may have happened follower: "One of Granny's guests was in the mood for a joke so he put the tabby cat in a jar of buttermilk which the old lady kept in one of the many off-rooms. At supper the guests were all hungry and cheerful and, after drinking coffee, asked for some of the inn's famous buttermilk. They all drank and drank. It seemed as if they couldn't get enough. Finally it was all gone and Granny told them they couldn't have any more.

"The gentleman told her to look in the jar in the room where he had been sitting and she would find plenty of good fresh buttermilk; But he certainly got a surprise when she told them that she had just served them the last of that very can."

On another occasion a Nashville merchant admired Granny's gourds that she raised out on the hillside. He asked her is she wouldn't like to exchange some for wooden bowls. When they were fully mature, Granny polished them and went to Nashville only to find that the merchant was out of town.

Granny was not one to be outdone, however, so she told the clerk about the bargain. But that young man knew nothing of the agreement for of how many bowls the innkeeper should receive in exchange. She was equal to any emergency and had him bring in the gourds and count them; then she went to the shelf and filled her apron with wooden bowls, taking a number corresponding to the gourds. When the merchant came back he had to make the best of the joke and did not make any attempt to rectify the mistake.

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THE fame of Granny White's inn spread far and wide for the food was good, drinks were better, and everything was in apple-pie order. She kept the sideboard filled with apple and peach brandy and whisky, all manufactured on the farm. She also kept loaf and clarified sugar and honey to sweeten these with, as preferred.

Travelers from Nashville to Franklin usually made it a point to stop at the inn. Her house was visited by many judges and lawyers going to or returning from Franklin Court. If she had kept a register, without doubt the following names would have been on the guest list: Sam Houston, Andrew Jackson, John Bell, James K. Polk, Edmund Dillahunty, E. H. Foster, R. L. Caruthers and many, many others.

At Hollow Tree Gap Granny White prospered far beyond her wildest dreams. In the beginning she tied pumpkins to her hills but before her death in 1818 she tied horses and cattle and other live stock that she herself had bought through her own efforts.

Mr. Lankford said that she planted an orchard on her farm and when one of her neighbors asked what was the use of that she replied: "To have apples to eat and make the cider." And she lived to eat fruit from the trees that she had planted with her own hands.

"Granny's old spinning wheel was one of the few household belongings that had been brought in the ox-cart from North Carolina. When her tavern duties lightened, she was always found with her flax. Often when she fell asleep, one of her grandsons would slip the wheel away, but in a few minutes she would partly wake, and thinking her wheel was still there, go to spinning her 'tool.'"

PHOTOGRAPH by OTIS McBRIDE

Thomas M. Lankford of Hillsboro, Tenn., great grandson of Granny White, recalls her inn building as it was in the years before its destruction.

THOMAS BENTON described Granny White's success in a senatorial debate as an illustration of the advantages in giving land to those who would settle and cultivate it. Senator Benton was not familiar with some of the details, historians have pointed out, but in general the facts are in accordance with those handed down as authoritative.

The part of his speech dealing with the Tennessee innkeeper follows: "At the age of 60 Mrs. White had been left a widow in one of the counties in the Tidewater region of North Carolina. Her poverty was so extreme that when she went to the county court to get a couple of little orphan grandchildren bound to her, the Justices refused to let her have them because she could not give security to keep them off the parish. This compelled her to emigrate, and she set off with the two little boys upon a journey of eight or nine hundred miles to what was then called "The Cumberland Settlement." Arrived in the neighborhood of Nashville, a generous-hearted Irishman, Thomas McCrory, let her have a corner of his land on her own terms—a nominal price and indefinite credit. It was fifty acres in extent and comprised the two faces of a pair of confronting hills, whose precipitous declivities lacked a few degrees, and but a few, of mathematical perpendicularity.

"There was just room at the base for a road to run between, and not room for a house to find a level place for its foundation for which purpose a part of the hill had to be dug away. Yet from this hopeless beginning, with the advantage of a little piece of ground that was her own, this aged widow,

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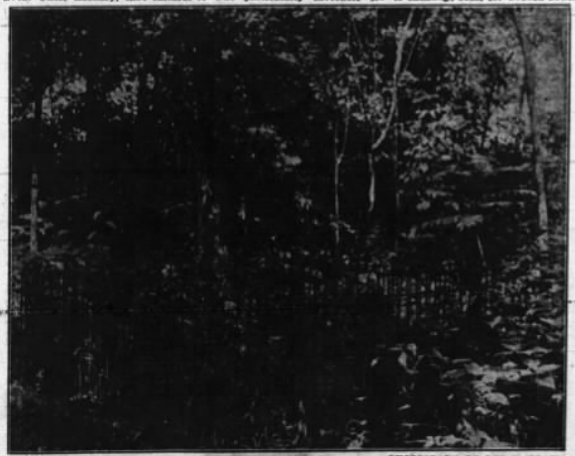

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB WALLACE

In the deep shade of trees, with weeds flourishing in its iron-fenced enclosure, lies the grave of Granny White, pioneer Tennessee innkeeper, on land adjoining the road which was named for her.

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