

THE PALIMPSEST

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The Hairy Nation

Along the north and south forks of Wyacondah Creek in the southeastern part of Davis County there is a strip of country five or six miles wide, somewhat rolling in contour, and originally covered with timber and brush. Native oak, elm, hickory, and walnut trees once topped the low hills, while sumac, gooseberry bushes, grape vines, and hazel brush filled the shallow ravines and invaded the open spaces in the wooded areas. Swarms of bees stored up their honey in the hollow trunks of old sycamores, squirrels hoarded nuts for the winter, foxes dug commodious burrows for large families, and all nature was undisturbed by settlers on the forks of the Wyacondah until late in the thirties.

As early as 1837, however, a few white persons from Missouri, Kentucky, and Tennessee came into the Wyacondah Valley and built their shacks in the timber. Especially crude in manners and unkempt

in appearance, the squatters in that particular locality came to be generally known as the "Hairy Nation". They were a rough lot — independent, liberty-loving, whisky-drinking, poverty-stricken, and belligerent. They staked out their claims without much regard to what government had jurisdiction over that region. The northern boundary of Missouri was not marked, so it is not surprising that the settlers thought little about the location of the line and cared less. Even the establishment of the Territory of Iowa in 1838 was probably a matter of slight importance to these backwoodsmen who, as a matter of fact, had squatted upon land that still legally belonged to the Indians. Not until May, 1843, was Davis County officially opened for white settlement.

Originally the name "Hairy Nation" applied only to the settlers on the forks of the Wyacondah Creek, but it was gradually extended to include all of the residents along the border in Davis County. In the course of time, as the reputation of the community spread, people who lived at a distance regarded any one who hailed from Davis County as a member of the Hairy Nation. On some occasions Senators and Representatives were recognized by their colleagues at the State capital as the "gentlemen from the Hairy Nation".

The origin of the epithet has been explained in various ways. According to one story there was once a settlement of trappers and hunters in the

mountainous region of Kentucky or Tennessee known as the Hairy Nation, because of their long hair and shaggy, unkempt appearance. Some Tennessee immigrants transferred the name to the Iowa settlement because of the similar appearance of the men who lived a wild, rude life, and were very fond of such sports as drinking, horse racing, and fighting.

Another account is to the effect that a settler from Indiana, who went to a house raising in the neighborhood, was so impressed by the long hair and shaggy appearance of the men that he remarked, "You are the hairiest set of men I ever saw." His comment seemed so appropriate that the name was adopted.

There are still other versions. It is quite impossible to determine just who first applied the appellation of Hairy Nation to these people, but there can be no doubt that the reason was the rough, unkempt appearance and rude manners of the men. They had apparently declared their independence of razors and other tonsorial accessories.

As a rule the men wore blue or brown-colored jeans while the women were generally clad in calico. Shirts and petticoats were almost exclusively homespun linsey-woolsey: it would have required peculiar tact and firmness of character to wear a starched shirt in those days, even on Sunday. Although the men usually wore store boots, the neighborhood cobbler plied his trade during intervals of labor on his

claim. Occasionally some of the more primitive members of the Hairy Nation might have been seen in buckskin garb, coonskin cap, and moccasins after the fashion of Daniel Boone as befitted their character.

The cabins of the Hairy Nation were typical backwoods habitations. Half concealed in the brush, they were hastily constructed, one-room, log structures. Thatch roofs were not uncommon and a puncheon floor was a mark of distinction, for some families made the earth do for a season or two. Most of the buildings had a ramshackle appearance and an atmosphere of shiftlessness pervaded the whole community. The clearings were so small that the surrounding timber and brush seemed always on the point of closing in completely.

Shortly after the Territory of Iowa was established, a dispute arose as to the exact location of the southern boundary. Was it the old Sullivan line, which was ultimately agreed upon; or a line running due east from the old northwest corner of Missouri about four miles south of the Sullivan line at the eastern end, as Iowa contended; or the Brown line running due west from a rapids in the Des Moines River about nine miles north of the Sullivan line, as Missouri insisted? If the Brown line should prove to be the true boundary the settlement on the forks of the Wyacondah was in Missouri, but if the Iowa claims were upheld it was wholly in Iowa, while the acceptance of the Sullivan line would di-

vide the Hairy Nation. Most of the squatters on the "Dispute", as the strip of territory between the lines was called, preferred to be residents of Iowa because the taxes were lower, but were entirely willing to allow the anomalous condition to continue.

The Hairy Nation enjoyed many peculiar privileges on account of their location in the disputed area. Not only did they possess all of the customary rights and advantages of United States citizens, but in addition they were allowed to vote at all elections in both Missouri and Iowa. Ballots and whisky were abundantly supplied. Furthermore these people were not in the habit of paying taxes and showed very little inclination of becoming accustomed to it. Although the region occupied by the Hairy Nation had been under the jurisdiction of the Indians and at the same time subject to the jurisdiction of a State or Territorial government or both, it must be acknowledged that these particular settlers did more governing and were less governed than any people in the country. Under such circumstances it is not surprising that they "bristled" up and began to look "wolfish" when the State of Missouri and the Territory of Iowa both began to tax them. The appearance of the tax collector to search their cabins never failed to produce trouble.

The residents of the "Dispute" were organized into clubs for the protection of each other in the possession of their "claims". This was well enough in itself, but constituted only a portion of the protective

activities which some of the citizens assumed. They very successfully resisted officers of the law in the collection of taxes and in serving legal processes as well. A second attempt of a Missouri official to collect taxes in the Hairy Nation thoroughly convinced him that the opposition to the law was entirely too formidable, whereupon he retired in disgust, swearing that the people were unreasonable and that he would just as soon undertake to do business with a menagerie of wild animals.

And so conditions went from bad to worse until Governor Boggs of Missouri ordered out the militia to uphold the dignity of the State. Governor Lucas of the Territory of Iowa thereupon promptly called for the Iowa militia to repel what appeared to be an invasion by Missouri. The rival forces assembled on the border, but the crisis was averted and the war ended without bloodshed. The trouble arising from the conflict of jurisdiction continued for more than a decade, however, until the Supreme Court of the United States finally fixed the Sullivan line as the correct boundary.

The settlers were encouraged in their resistance to authority by the official attitude of both Missouri and Iowa — each protesting against the extortionate exactions of the tax collections of the other. Under such circumstances trouble inevitably developed between the officials of Iowa and Missouri who were attempting to collect the taxes. Samuel Riggs and Jonathan Riggs lived in the Hairy Nation. They

were cousins. Samuel was sheriff of Davis County, Iowa, and Jonathan was sheriff of Schuyler County, Missouri.

One day Jonathan was arrested by Sheriff Samuel Riggs for trying to perform the duties of an office to which he was ineligible because he lived in Iowa. He refused to give bail and was thereupon kept in jail for twenty days until he tired of confinement and produced the required bail. He had learned a lesson however. At the first opportunity Sheriff Jonathan Riggs of Schuyler County arrested his cousin Samuel for exercising illegal authority in Missouri. Governor Clarke of Iowa obtained permission of the legislature to employ counsel to defend the sheriff of Davis County at the expense of the Territory. But the case never came to trial, postponements being made from time to time until the boundary question was settled.

Other amusing incidents arose from the confusion of the settlers not knowing whether they lived in Iowa or Missouri, though they did not hesitate to express their preference. Two old women were gossiping one day about the disposal of the disputed strip. One said, shaking her head slowly, "I dew hope it won't fall tew Missouri, fer Missouri's so sickly."

"Wall, I dunno," replied the other, puffing at her pipe, "they alluz raise wheat in Missouri."

In the Hairy Nation the pugilistic code of honor was universally recognized. Every man, large or

small, considered himself the best man physically that ever lived. Consequently it was necessary for him to be ready at all times to resent the direct assertion of any superior claims. But if a man were restrained by a circumspect modesty from asserting his prowess, his more powerful and more ambitious friends avoided any pointed statements in his presence which would compel him to fight. Any man who aspired to be a champion could demonstrate his ability as frequently as he pleased by mentioning his ambition in public.

These fights were not conducted according to the rules of the prize ring but according to the code of the Hairy Nation. Usually the fight occurred in the presence of spectators who formed a circle about the contestants. Sometimes a circle was marked off on the ground. No weapons were used except the bare fists. The rival pugilists might have seconds, but there was no bottle-holding, towel-fanning, or sponging of the battered contestants between rounds. The fight was uninterrupted from start to finish.

In a combat like this it was very important to determine accurately the precise moment when one of the men was thoroughly whipped. In order that this decision might be made with the utmost nicety, the victim himself had the first right to declare it. This he did by uttering the word "enough". In extreme cases "nough" was permissible. Promptness in uttering the magic word occasionally saved a man's eyeballs, for any torture that could be inflicted with

the hands was fair until one of the fighters had said "enough". After that no blows were to be struck.

Old Joe Carter was king of the Hairy Nation. He kept a large pack of hounds and was the leading wolf-chaser and champion fighter. Several men became bold enough to dispute his title to the championship, but always with disastrous results. He was a man of only medium size, but compactly built, strong, and wiry. A hard hitter, he had the courage and tenacity of a bulldog, with no tender scruples about using any legitimate means of disabling his antagonist. His favorite method was gouging the eyes of his opponent.

The Hairy Nation was very fond of strong drink. One of the main occupations was the distillation of whisky and the chief diversion was the consumption of it. It is said that in the very early days of the settlement good water was rather scarce, but whisky was cheap and plentiful. In order to save the time of going to fill their jugs, and also to better enjoy each other's society, the barrel of whisky was hauled from house to house. In busier seasons the barrel was left in the brush at a convenient spot where a man could come with his bottle, jug, coffee pot, or whatever he could find and take as much as he wanted. Each customer kept his own account and reported the amount consumed to the owner at the proper time. Furthermore, he was not required to specify and itemize the quantities used for medicinal, mechanical, culinary, or sacramental purposes.

Occasionally a contest was held to determine who could consume the greatest quantity of whisky. When Judge Samuel McAtee first visited the Hairy Nation he was on horseback and was looking for the blacksmith shop of Jeff Sailing to get his horse shod. As he rode along through the dense brush he heard a most unearthly thumping and stamping and whooping. Dismounting from his horse, the Judge pushed the bushes aside and peered in the direction of the noise. Through the open door of a little cabin he caught sight of a tall man, bare-headed with a shock of shaggy, straggling hair. His clothing consisted of primitive breeches and a shirt open at the bosom. The veins in his red, turkey-like neck were distended like whipcords. He was swinging his hairy, naked arms high in the air, and dancing with triumphant joy back and forth across the puncheon floor. When he discovered the Judge peering at him through the bushes he yelled out, "Hullo, thar, come in! You shan't be hurt. Won't you wait? I'm old Dan Sailing. The boys in the Nation have been bantering me to come up and take a spree. They said they would drink me blind. But come in, stranger. Look thar."

As he said this he raised a puncheon in the floor. "Look in thar, stranger. There they are, all three of 'em. I've drunk 'em dead drunk, throwed 'em in the tater hole, and I'm dancin' over their graves."

The Judge failed to get his horse shod, for the blacksmith was sound asleep in the "tater hole".

When Judge McAtee again visited the Hairy Nation he was seeking the residence of Aaron Cochran, one of the first justices of the peace in Davis County. As he approached a cabin to inquire the way, seven dogs came to meet him and disputed his further progress. Several of the animals were of the hound order, so the inmates of the cabin had due notice of the stranger's approach.

Finally the door moved on its wooden hinges and the roughest looking man the Judge had ever seen stood in the doorway. He ordered Towser and the whole bunch of noisy whelps to be still. When order had been restored the Judge asked the squatter if he could direct him to the home of Squire Cochran — never dreaming that he was then in the august presence of the dignitary he sought.

“I am the man”, answered the Squire, still standing in the door of his cabin. His hair was long and matted about his head. He was dressed in buckskin breeches about nine inches too short, an old blue cloth coat with sleeves worn off at the elbows, and pigskin moccasins on his feet. The Judge had travelled extensively, including trips up and down the Mississippi, and had met a great many people of all classes, but never had he beheld a harder looking specimen of humanity than the one standing before him. The Squire, however, seemed tolerably civil and as the dogs had subsided the Judge dismounted, tied his horse to a small sapling, and went into the cabin.

The usual compliments had scarcely been passed before the dogs again broke out in a vocal bedlam which gave notice of the approach of another squatter. Since the house of Squire Cochran was centrally located, the neighborhood barrel of whisky was kept there and a neighbor had come to replenish his empty jug. In due time the jug was filled and each had tasted and commented on the quality of the liquor. Then something was wanted for a stopper. They searched in vain for a corn cob. In fact, it became evident that stopper material of any kind was exceedingly scarce about the Squire's cabin. Finally the lady of the house, becoming impatient, snatched a dirty rag from the wall and made a stopper of it. Although the Judge received a very cordial invitation to remain for dinner, his appetite seemed to have disappeared, so he declined and went on his way.

Although the social life of these people was limited, there were times when they relaxed in typical frontier fashion. Entertainment usually took the form of dancing. Important events were invariably celebrated by the consumption of large quantities of liquor. When news came in the autumn of 1842 that thousands of acres of rich land to the west would be opened for settlement in May, the Nation spontaneously gathered at the home of John Bonebreak to demonstrate their joy and approval. Joseph Smith brought two jugs of whisky, which were emptied into a large tin basin, two quarts of honey were

added, and the potent beverage was thoroughly stirred with a stick.

The crowd had assembled promptly and the evening exercises began early. The fiddlers struck up a popular tune and the dance began. Hour after hour the party continued with only an occasional halt to taste the contents of the old tin basin. From time to time the host passed around with the liquor, serving the ladies and then the gentlemen with an old tin cup. Several guests began to feel unusually gay. The party was undoubtedly a great success, though the motive of the celebration had long since been forgotten.

But it seems that the generous host had a mistaken conception of the capacity of a musician for whisky. He had apparently proceeded on the theory that the more whisky the fiddler consumed the better music he would produce. Now this may be a good theory up to a certain point, but like all good things it can be overdone. At last the musician went to sleep: he had reached the saturation point. And not another person was to be found who could "scrape the fiddle". Finally one of the party was prevailed upon to whistle. Again the merrymakers began to dance, but the puckering strings of the whistler's mouth soon relaxed and again the music ceased.

What was to be done? Abram Weaver came to the rescue. He too had tasted the contents of the old tin basin often enough to enter into the spirit of the evening. Seizing a large cat, which had been

a silent spectator up to that moment, Mr. Weaver placed its body under his left arm, and took the end of its tail between his teeth, grabbed the poker as a bow for his feline instrument — and lo, there was music. Biting the cat's tail produced a wailing sound, variations to which were obtained as occasion required by light or heavy pressure of the arm on the inflated, enraged, and frightened creature.

And so the fun continued till morning. Only when the gray light began to show over the eastern hills did the revelers prepare to depart. They had enjoyed themselves thoroughly. With a parting draught from the old tin basin and a few quaint remarks on the incidents of the night or compliments of the morning, the party ended.

Such was life in the Hairy Nation a few generations ago. Although these people were rough and uncouth they were pathfinders, the outposts of civilization. A feebler race would have perished. The Hairy Nation accepted life in the spirit of their environment and made the best of it.

HERMAN H. TRACHSEL