THE SALT-MAKING INDUSTRY OF CLAY COUNTY, KENTUCKY*

Tall, gaunt redmen stalked up and down the trails along the mountain ridges when pioneer James Collins first crossed from Virginia over the ridge into what afterwards became eastern Kentucky. He came with a party to hunt in what is now Clay County, for the game which at that time abounded in the region. The wolf still howled on the uplands, the panther brought down the fawn, and the antlered elk walked in stately fashion along the forest trails.

About this time an Indian chief by the name of Redbird made his hunter's headquarters in a "rockhouse" on the upper portion of the beautiful stream which now bears his name, and it was also about this time that a white hunter some thirty miles away, at another stream, slew a huge bull buffalo, removed his skin, and hung it on the limb of a great walnut tree near the bank, an act which gave the stream the name of "Big Bull Skin," which takes its rise not a great way from the waters of "Hell-fer-sartin."

Over the ridge to the north of the place where Redbird Creek joins Goose Creek and Big Bull Skin are "Whoop-fer-larrie" and "Squabble." The former of the last two streams acquired its name from an incident told by a hunter upon returning from a journey into the forest where he evidently found both game and fire water. While sleeping one night, on his return, he was awakened by a voice which seemed to come down from the tree tops and cry out, "Whoop-fer-larrie! Whoop-fer-larrie!"

The voice was interpreted as belonging to some foul spirit of the mountains intent on doing harm to hunters. Without staying for investigation, according to the report, the hunter hastened out of the rugged region, assured that an evil spirit was abroad. For a long time thereafter many hunters declined to spend a night in that locality for fear that the strange voice might assume some horrible physical form and do them harm.

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"Squabble Creek" also received its name from an incident, or rather a series of incidents, of pioneer days. After a successful hunting trip, when time came for dividing the "kill," one man wielded the hunting knife and axe while the rest, save two, stood by to see that fair play was done. One of the two was blindfolded and stationed behind a tree. The other was placed there with him as guard. The blindfolded man was to act as judge and jury in making awards, and the guard was to see that all awards were made according to the demands of justice and the occasion.

Whenever the knife-man cut a share from the carcass, he would call out, "Who's here?" The blindfolded judge would shout back the name of the hunter who should receive it. This process of "cut and call" was continued until all the carcasses were equitably divided. The plan usually worked smoothly enough, unless a bit of fire water happened to seep into it.

But the hunters of that region quite often found fire water as well as game before the "cut and call" was begun. When this was the case, there was usually much wrangling or squabbling over the division. Such scenes were enacted so frequently that some hunter, with a bit of wit and a sense of the eternal fitness of things, called the stream "Squabble Creek," an appellation which it has ever since borne.

It was back in such days, during the latter part of the eighteenth century that Collins, as I have said, came over into the Kentucky mountains to hunt game. Who came with him, and how many, it is not known, but during his ramblings about on what is now Collins Fork of Goose Creek, in Clay County, he chanced to find a spring whose waters were salty.

An idea immediately came to this sturdy huntsman. Why not keep still about the find, mark the place well, return to Virginia, and secure the necessary equipment for starting a salt-making industry? Evidently being a man of initiative, and possessing a knack for bargaining, he soon set out on the return journey to make his dream come true. Just where he lived in the old Mother State is not told in the meager tradition, but he must have been a man of some means, as the following will indicate.

Some weeks later a cavalcade of men and mules, the latter bearing queer burdens, started back on the long, long trail to

Collins Fork in Kentucky. Some of the mules carried food and other supplies, but the majority carried on either side huge cast iron kettles, such as had long been used by the pioneer housewives for boiling the family washing. How the mules reacted to these burdens is not recorded, but it is quite probable that there was at hand someone who had an intimate knowledge of mule psychology and could direct the packing of the animals in a way to keep them from expressing violent opinions about the matter.

At any rate, the procession arrived intact at its destination on Collins Fork a few years before the beginning of the last century, and upon its arrival the important salt-making industry of Clay County began to get definitely under way. Most of the materials necessary to salt making were brought by pack train from Virginia. Lime was brought in bags and small barrels; so was the blood of pigs and beef cattle, for these two ingredients were always put into the kettles when the brine was being finished, for the purpose of insuring proper texture and whiteness to the product. As soon as the salt was made and a considerable quantity scooped into carefully sheltered bins, the small casks made of oak staves were filled. Two were firmly bound to panniers on each pack mule in preparation for the long journey back to the old settlements. There it became a popular medium of exchange.

An old ledger examined by Miss Georgia Reid of Manchester, Clay County, shows that hides, furs, skeins of thread, flour, whiskey, and other commodities were traded for Clay County salt.

People came from long distances with ox-drawn wagons for a supply of the precious product, which they distributed at a profit among the people back at home. Wagons from Knoxville, Lexington, and other points, laden with flour, dry goods, and numerous other supplies, made the long, slow journey to Goose Creek to exchange the incoming load for salt. Now and then some staunch old pioneer might be seen trudging along the trail driving one or more milch cows for the transportation of a supply. The salt was loaded upon the cattle in the same fashion as upon the pack mules. The advantage in using the cows lay in the fact that they not only transported the salt but also, on the same amount of grazing required by mules, fur-

nished fresh milk for the drivers. Furthermore, they were less likely to leave a driver shipwrecked along the road.

After Collins had demonstrated that such an industry was financially profitable, other men came into the region, prospecting for salt water. They drilled wells and established industries of their own. One man, a moulder of pewter dishes, had come from Connecticut. His son married a Clay County girl and settled down in the salt-making business. Among the owners of works, at different times, appear the names of White, Daugherty, Bates, Reid, Horton, Potter, and Garrard, who was the son of Kentucky's second governor. Not all were actively interested at any one time, but shortly after Collins was well established, enough salt works were started to create no small amount of rivalry in the business. This rivalry was sometimes a contributing cause to serious misunderstandings between some of the families interested in the business which made that region famous.

Not only on Collins Fork but on other streams in Clay County salt works were established. The Potter works were on upper Redbird Creek and at the head of South Fork of Kentucky River, just across the stream from where Oneida is now located. At most of these old sites evidences of the furnace pits and mounds may still be seen. Collins in his *History of Kentucky* says that in 1846 fifteen furnaces produced 200,000 bushels per annum.

The wells were usually sunk near streams in order to facilitate the work of transporting the product. Sinking the wells was a tedious and laborious business. It was in the day long before the rotary diamond drill, or even the steam trip drill. Horse power was sometimes used, but quite often man power was the only means for operating the machinery. A favorite device for drilling was the sweep-drill, which was ideal for simplicity, if not for service. A long pole was secured and firmly anchored to the ground at the large end, the middle resting in the fork of a substantial stake set in the earth. To the small, free end of the pole the heavy drill was tied with a long rope. It was operated by two or more men who, with the end of the spring pole, lifted the drill and let it fall on the surface to be bored. Various other cunningly constructed devices were employed which greatly multiplied the man power, and thus expedited the work.

During the early days while the sweep-drills were pounding away, one man was constantly on guard at the charcoal pit, keeping the earth carefully thrown over the stack of chestnut or other wood to assure charcoal of the proper quality for sharpening the drill point and doing other necessary blacksmith work.

The water was sometimes pumped from the wells by hand, but not infrequently mule power was employed. Huge wooden pumps were made of soft wood, in which plungers, wrapped with strings, were operated with substantial levers. This drew the water into troughs made from halves of yellow poplar logs. Occasionally cleverly devised wooden wheels and transmission connections were made on the spot and operated by mule power for pumping the water. A steady mule was hitched to a long lever and started around in a circle. Sometimes an old coat, or a bag, was tied over the animal's eyes to prevent seasickness. From the trough at the well the water was sent to the evaporating pans.

For carrying the water wooden pipes were used. Whenever possible, these were made of red cedar poles. These were cut some ten or fifteen feet in length, trimmed smooth, laid in a rack, and bored lengthwise with a long-stemmed auger operated by hand. The man at the auger took particular pride in driving the bit from end to end without cutting too near the outer surface at any place. When the pipes were laid, they were so arranged that water would flow from the head trough to another near the furnace.

The old furnaces were simple in construction, but highly serviceable. A trench was dug and walled in on either side with stones or brick and clay. Over this trench a line of kettles was set and carefully walled in with stones and mortar or mud. The fire was placed in one end of the trench, a draw chimney being at the other end. At first wood was used entirely as fuel, but when coal was discovered close at hand, it was mined and burned.

About once a week the entire furnace had to be cleaned. To do this it was necessary for a man to crawl the entire length of the tunnel with shovel and scraper and torch, braving the heat, the soot, and the dust to put things in order.

Some years ago I talked with an ancient African whose task, when a young man, was to clean the furnaces at one of

the principal works. He told me of the darkness, the cramped working space, the constant fear that he might get hung in a tight place, and other difficulties he experienced. He told how now and then a wild rabbit was chased out into waiting hands. The animal, seeking a refuge from the cold outside, had found its way back into the furnace only to end its career in a pot of hot soup for the workers.

The disposition of the salt was not without its exciting and romantic features. Ox-drawn wagons from Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and other sections came for a supply. Pack animals from all the surrounding country came and went, but perhaps the most exciting method of transportation was by freight boat down the Kentucky River. Much of east central Kentucky was supplied in this way.

Boats were built near the works by laborers from material cut with whipsaws driven by water power. They were substantial craft with a walk-way from end to end along each side. They could be run only when a freshet was on the streams, and when travel was slow, they were hurried along somewhat by means of poles. A man would step to the front end of the walk-way, set one end of a long pole against the bottom of the stream, with the other end resting in his hand laid against the pushing shoulder, and walk to the stern of the boat, pushing all the while, whereupon he would return to the prow of the boat and repeat the walk.

Very little poling was necessary during high tides. On such occasions the boats were guided almost altogether with long oars. One oar, some thirty or forty feet long, was fastened by a pin to the front end and another similar one to the stern. These were "bucked" or manned by husky workers who remained on the job twenty-four hours of the day, loafing when the water was good, but working like mad in shallows and sharp bends.

One treacherous shoal on Redbird Creek known as "The Narrows," four miles below Oneida, was the scene of many disasters. It is a long series of dangerous shallows ending at the lower reaches of a cataract among huge, threatening boulders over which the high water breaks and rolls up like a miniature gorge of Niagara.

He was a skillful pilot who could carry a heavily laden, low-running boat through this place without an accident. If

the overhanging rocks in the sharp bend of the river above the cataract were safely passed, the cargo was liable to come to grief among the huge boulders further down. Quite often human strength with all the careful brain work at command could not keep the boat going right. Time after time boats capsized, spilling and destroying valuable cargoes, and sometimes drowning men.

Whenever a fatality occurred, some boatman with a knack for rhyming told the details of the tragedy in uncertain measures, and thus gave to all his fellows another river song full of pathos and local color. Such songs were sung for many a day afterwards by the saltmakers and many of their friends.

The making of salt was kept up in Clay County until some twenty-five years ago. All the works except one were abandoned long before then. Some discontinued operations during the Civil War as the result of measures taken by Federal soldiers.

In the days before Kirby Smith drove the Union troops from Cumberland Gap with a small contingent of soldiers, foraging bands of Federal troops found their way throughout much of southeastern Kentucky, picking up food, stock feed, horses, mules, and other things which might be useful to the army.

When it became known that a great area of seceded territory was dependent on the Clay County works for salt, and that large numbers of Confederate soldiers were drawing supplies from the same source, detachments of Union soldiers were dispatched to the various salt works with instructions to plug up the wells and dismantle the furnaces. These orders were promptly carried out, and both friends and foes of the Union were the sufferers. Most of the works were never reopened.

Later on claims for damages were filed by some of the people against the Government and were recognized, but I am informed that these claims were never paid.

An incident connected with these foraging expeditions is not without interest. Some of the substantial people of the section had very fine horses and other stock. They were anxious to keep these for their own use rather than suffer them to be ridden or led away by soldiers of one of the contending armies. So whenever news reached the neighborhood that soldiers were headed that way, the stock was promptly got together and hurried far away from the road through fields and

woods to the top of the mountains where enormous boulders conveniently arranged by nature formed large comfortable rooms. In these inclosures the stock was concealed, the feed being taken in stealthily by night by the work hands.

Watch was kept by day and by night, and after the war was over, more than one proud, high-spirited mount carried his rider along the highways because the horse, with many others, had taken his place in the spacious hallways among the "Town Rocks" far up on the mountain tops where marauding soldiers never suspected that valuable war booty was in hiding.

As salt-making industries became established in other states, and as railroad transportation became more efficient, efforts to revive the Clay County works finally ceased. Those who had depended on the industry for a livelihood turned their attention to farming, lumbering, and other occupations. With the dismantling of the works near the mouth of Horse Creek some twenty-five years ago one of the great early industries of the Kentucky mountains came to an end.

JOHN F. SMITH