

RABBITS OF THE HILLS

by Gary Knehans

As three Pulaski County hunters discovered in 1894, hunting or fishing in the sparsely populated area south of what is now Fort Leonard Wood was downright dangerous. That area, if newspaper accounts of that era can be believed, were inhabited by families of Ozark hillbillies, who referred to themselves as "Rabbits."

Although they were not a lawless group of people, they had their own code of behavior and of what was right and wrong. While they were aware of existing laws, many "Rabbits" interpreted them in peculiar ways. They laid claim to all land and wildlife of that area. Any tenderfoot or outsider who thought otherwise was rudely handled, especially by the older men of the hills, who were called "Senior Rabbits."

Not many outsiders were trusted enough by the "Rabbits" to travel freely in the hill country. Only a few of these were able to observe the life and culture of these clannish people of the hills. B. H. Rucker, a tie contractor, was one of a select few who were invited to participate in the social life of the "Rabbits." His account, reprinted from the "St. Louis Globe Democrat" in the March 8th, 1894, edition of "The Rolla Herald", proves interesting reading:

"I have spent several years among those people. I have ridden over the hills at all times of day and night--have seen the 'Rabbits' under all conditions--at work, at play, in desperate fights and in their frolicsome moods, and have taken a hand with them sometimes by way of diversion. The men, as a class, are brave and fearless, and love the freedom they find in the Ozarks as much as do the wild deer. The young women are courageous and not uncomely; free and easy in their intercourse with men, and entirely devoid of the simpering country manners. They possess an individuality entirely their own.

"When I first went up into Texas County I fell in with a crowd of the young men of the hills, who used to hang out at our store at Blooming Rose, and one day a couple of them came in to invite me to a dance about four miles back in the hills, which was to be held at Critchfield's. When I told them that I had no lady acquaintance, I was taken across the river and presented to a blooming daughter of Jake Oldfield. Would she go? Well, she was ready to swim the river for the pleasure to be found at Critchfield's. About 6 p.m. I appeared at her home, mounted on an old white mule that didn't mind fording the river. The girl was ready.

"'Whar ye goin', Susan, with that ere youngster,' queried the old man, as he sized me up.

"'Goin' ter Critchfield's ter a dance, paw.'

"'All right, Suse; take keer uv the youngster,' and the old man lit his pipe and walked away. "Old Chalk," the mule, was brought up, and the young lady, after I had mounted, sprang on behind me, put one arm about my waist and we started for the ford. Away off in the hills I could hear the

shrill Ye-ee-ee! of the 'Hill Rabbits' as, bubbling over with hilarity, they gave vent to their feeling in prolonged yells that brought echoes and answers from all directions.

"'The boys is feelin' good ternight' said my companion, over my left shoulder. 'Hev ye got a gun, Mr. Rucker? Reckon there'll be some pizen fights 'fore the dance is over. I heerd that a bar'l ov white whisky wuz brought up yes'day. That means lots of fun. If ye got er gun, keep it handy.'

"That sort of talk didn't harmonize with the tranquil splendors of the moonlit mountain scenery that lay all about us, but I assured Susan that I was ready for war but preferred peace.

"About 8 o'clock we came into the opening where Critchfield's double log house fronted the bluffs. There were horses and mules tied in the timber, and the flaming light of a big Jack lamp showed a group of young men and women in animated conversation about the doors. Just as Susan and I dismounted the first stroke across the old violin gave notice that the dance was on, and we were soon in the midst of the group gyrating beneath the white oaks, for the cotillon was formed outside. Nearly every girl wore a red calico dress, and most of them were barefooted, while the young men were decked out in jeans and hickory shirts, and from the back pocket of each the handle of a gun protruded. Before the second 'all hands around' had been called, two young men full of whisky and fight came dashing up to their horses, whooping like cowboys in a border town and firing off their pistols just to emphasize their presence.

"'Don't be afeared,' said Susan, reassuringly: 'old man Critchfield'll tend them fellers.' And he did. As soon as their guns cracked the old man appeared with Winchester in hand. He strode up to where the horsemen had reined their steeds, and, with his gun dead on one of them, said:

"'Drop thet pop, Dan, or Dod'll drop you! Not er durned bit mo' thet bizness is goin' on here ternight.

"The man was ugly and seemed determined to have trouble. He flourished the weapon just once, and was pulling it down on Critchfield when the old man's gun flew upwards, knocking the pistol from the horseman's hand, and the next instant he was pulled from the saddle. Before his companion had a chance to show his mettle Critchfield had dragged him to the ground also. Then Dave and Jake Critchfield came forward, and in five minutes the would-be bad men were securely tied to a giant oak, where they could view the festivities, and were admonished to keep their mouths shut or they would be gagged.

"During the little fracas not a dancer lost a step, except a couple of girls whose bare toes got beneath my boots, and when the dance ended the couples wandered off, some into the house, others down to the edge of the bluff, which rose 300 feet from a V-shaped hollow that opened out to the

eastward.

"While several couples were chatting there an incident occurred that had all the incidents of the dramatics in it. One of the girls, a barefooted beauty, stood right on the very edge of the precipice, her back turned to the fearful abyss. She was gaily chatting when she exclaimed: 'I'm stand'n on somethin'! I b'lieve it's a snake! It's a bitin' me!' She didn't seem much alarmed, although a death-dealing reptile was sinking its fangs into her ankle, and one step backward meant destruction on the jagged rocks below. A man reached forward, pulled the girl toward him and we all saw the head and about 7 inches of the body of a copperhead snake protruding from the dry leaves where the girl had stood. The reptile was quickly killed and the girl taken to the house. About two inches above the ankle blood was trickling from two little wounds where the snake's fangs had entered. 'That pizen must be sucked out,' said Dore Critchfield. 'Boys, git one of them bad shooters we tied to the trees out thar. We'll make him do it.'

"'Nawye don't,' said a strapping young fellow. 'Thet's my gal. I'll do it myself,' and down on his knees he went, like a man stooping to drink from a brook. He took the wounded foot, and without a second's delay began to draw the venom into his mouth. Two or three times he stopped to spit out the blood and poison, and to rinse his mouth with whisky, before he got up. The girl, pale and passive, with the stoicism of an Indian, stood the ordeal, and when it was over both she and her preserver

took long draughts from the whisky flasks, while Mother Critchfield poured on the wounds some preparation which is considered infallible in cases of copperhead bites. The limb was tightly bandaged, and in fifteen minutes most of the party were again dancing as if nothing had happened.

"The night soon passed away. A few more bad men were sent back by old Critchfield, and two or three little disputes were cut short at sight of him and the Winchester. A supply of cold wild turkey, roast-shoat, hot corn-bread, coffee, milk, and plenty of corn whisky lightened up things about 1 o'clock. The 'Rabbits' then wound up the dance just at daybreak, and by the time the fellows and their girls were mounted, a couple on each animal, the woods were ringing with the songs of birds. The girl that was snake bitten remained at Critchfield's but was not complaining except of a slight headache. The two men that had spent the night tied up were let go, and then Susan and I mounted Old Chalk; she looking as fresh and rosy as when we started for the dance in the evening.

"'What ye think uv the 'Hill Rabbits?' she asked as we rode along.

"'Mighty nice people. Don't get excited easy. Hardly think the crack of doom would startle them,' I replied.

"'Wall, I don't know 'bout the crack uv doom, but a United States Marshal is 'bout the only thing as I ever knowed ter skeer the Rabbits.'

"And I guess, from later observations, Susan Oldfield sized them up about right."

