

THE ROWAN COUNTY WAR

TWO FACTIONS THIRSTING FOR EACH OTHER'S BLOOD.

AN OLD FEUD WHICH HAS COST THE LIVES OF 30 MEN AND TERRORIZED THE COUNTY FOR YEARS.

PHILADELPHIA, July 5.—The Kentucky troops who participated in the national encampment at Fairmount Park expect to see lively times when they get home. They believe they will be ordered to Rowan County to assist in suppressing the riot that has been raging there with more or less virulence for several months. The Rowan war is an outgrowth of the old Underwood-Holbrook feud. An officer of the Third Kentucky Regiment gave the following graphic account of the troubles to a Philadelphia Times reporter:

John Martin, who heads one of the factions, was indirectly at the bottom of the Underwood war, during which 30 men lost their lives, and the male members of the Underwood family were all killed. Martin is the son of a respectable farmer, and he was at one time clerk of the Rowan County Court and the proprietor of a large store at Morehead, the county seat. Early in 1877 Martin fell into bad company and in a few months dissipation and cards compelled him to give up his store. Soon after his failure in business he was accused of falsifying and mutilating the records of the County Court in the interest of a rising politician, who was known to be his friend, and, the fact being pretty well established, he was defeated for the office at the next election.

In the Spring of 1876 Martin was arrested in Mason County for horse stealing, and being released on bail, went back to Rowan. Old George Underwood, the father of the Underwood boys, lived at Olive Hill, which is just across the line in Carter County. He rented Martin a piece of land, and the latter began to make a crop, living meanwhile at Underwood's house, whither he had brought his young wife. One night some horses were stolen in the neighborhood, and Squire Elijah Holbrook, who was Underwood's nearest neighbor, accused John Martin and Jesse Underwood of stealing them. He consulted with his friends and, after several meetings, a notice was sent to old man Underwood that Martin must go. Martin's wife was sick, and Underwood told him he could stay until she got better. This defiance of the orders of Judge Lynch incensed the Holbrooks, and war was declared. Several of the Underwood boys were shot down, George Underwood's house was besieged, and Jesse, his favorite son, was compelled to take to the bush.

The section of country in which this happened is heavily timbered, rough and rocky. Bodies of armed men, swearing allegiance to to one or the other of the two factions, patrolled the country, and skirmishes and battles were of daily occurrence. The Governor ordered two companies of State troops to the scene, but they were powerless to quell the disturbance. The Holbrooks insisted that the Underwoods and their friends must leave Kentucky, and the latter were equally determined to stay.

For two years the Holbrooks kept up the siege, and George Underwood's double log house became famous as "Fort Underwood." One night in 1880 the old man ventured out into the yard to secure an armful of wood. He was fired upon and severely wounded. Jesse was in the vicinity, and word was sent to him that his father was wounded. The next night he stealthily approached the house, but was discovered by the Holbrooks and shot down just as he was entering the door. The women dragged him into the room amid a shower of lead. Before morning he died, and when his young wife gave utterance to a loud wail of agony and the other women joined her with loud cries of grief, the listening Holbrooks set up an exultant shout and, discharging their rifles, they posted notices on the trees along the road warning everybody on pain of death to keep away from Fort Underwood, and no one was found brave enough to disobey the mandate.

For three days and nights the weeping women and children in that old log house kept guard over the dead body of their kinsman, and old George Underwood, desperately wounded, clutched his rifle with a firm hand and refused to surrender. On the fourth night a party of masked men came to the door of the house and demanded admittance.

"We learn that Jesse is dead," said the leader, "and we want to see if it is so. If he is really dead we will go away and there will be no more fighting."

Old man Underwood would have defied them, but the women prevailed upon him to treat with the party outside, and he finally agreed to hand out his arms and open the door to them, they promising not to molest any one if Jesse were really dead. Seven of the men entered the house, and one of them, lifting the cloth from Jesse Underwood's face, identified him as the dreaded outlaw. Old George Underwood sat on the bed watching them. His little granddaughter nestled beside him holding his hand. The invading party disguised their voices, but the old man recognized one of them and called him by name. With an oath the ruffian stepped up behind Underwood and emptied both barrels of his shotgun into the defenseless man's body. He fell forward into the arms of his grandchild without a groan, and with a coarse jest and a wild hurrah the murderers fled from the house.

For the time being hostilities were suspended, and the women and children of the dead Underwoods left that section of Kentucky. John Martin took up his headquarters at a moonshine distillery on Possum Ridge, overlooking the little village known as Licking City. He was arrested several times for illicit distilling, but always managed to evade the penalty when brought to trial. About three months ago he quarreled with one of the Underwood faction at Morehead and shot him dead. The war reopened, and since that time Rowan County has been at the mercy of two lawless factions thirsting for each other's blood. The Sheriff of the county and the Marshal of Morehead have been killed, and it is estimated that nine out of every ten men in the county take sides with one or the other of the two factions. It is to disperse these rioters and restore order that the Kentucky troops will march into Rowan. As one of the Louisville men said, "We have been playing soldier here. When we get back home we'll go at it in earnest."