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The Hatfield & McCoy Feud after Kevin Costner: Rescuing History

Mr. Tom E Dotson

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For a century we read in books and newspapers and saw on screen, the legend of what is the most famous feud in American history: the Hatfields and the McCoys. What we had was legend, and not history, because the story consisted of a few historical events inside several layers of tall tales and fables reported by the yellow journalists of the late nineteenth century.

Except for the raids into West Virginia by Frank Phillips' posse in 1887-8, all the documented events connected to the feud occurred in Pike County, Kentucky. The feud story, like the Phillips posse, was largely made in Pikeville, in 1888.

The Pikeville stories were manufactured by men who had two primary goals: 1) They wanted to see a story published which would facilitate the conviction of Wall Hatfield and the other eight members of the Hatfield faction who were in jail in Pikeville, and, 2) They wanted to justify the two cold-blooded murders that had been committed only days before the reporters arrived by the leader of their posse, Frank Phillips.

Everything in the early writings of the big city reporters was given to them by men with those two interests foremost in their minds.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the fact that none of the original feud story, which forms the basis for all the succeeding iterations, was taken from the actual record. It is all hearsay, and the hearsay came from the most prejudiced sources imaginable. The Pikeville elite not only had "a dog in the fight," they had the whole damn pack in it.

The same moneyed interests that owned the newspapers also wanted the vast mineral riches underlying the land occupied by the Hatfields and McCoys, and their reporters' depictions of the people of Tug Valley as immoral and violent barbarians helped to make the swindle more palatable to the public.

The Hatfield and McCoy feud is probably unique among all the events in history in that writers of feud-based fiction are more constrained than are writers of feud history. The good fiction writer is always careful to avoid writing something that is patently impossible. A fiction writer would never say that twelve hundred people regularly attended a church in an isolated mountain hollow that had only two dozen members. A "True Story" of the feud, can say that and still have reviewers from prestigious media organs laud its factual accuracy.

As fiction can be made just as exciting as the screenwriter or author desires, the 2012 TV epic, "Hatfields & McCoys," and the recent fictional 'history" books are great entertainment, but they are not history.

Some of the books that followed the Kevin Costner movie contain an even greater ratio of fable to facts than did the movie. With a rare combination of facts and humor, this author calls them all to task.

Tom E. Dotson, holder of a Cornell masters degree in labor history, and descended from both the Hatfields

and McCoys, asks the question: "When only five Hatfields (along with three McCoys) were among the twenty men indicted for the vigilante slaying of the three McCoys in 1882, and only nine of the forty who rode with the Phillips posse in 1887-8 were McCoys, why is it called 'The Hatfield and McCoy feud'?"

With solid research and a unique insight, Dotson answers that question.

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