

Noted Carter County Feud Ended With Siege In 1879

Underwood Clan Wiped Out By The Holbrooks Near Olive Hill

Editor's Note: Recently I came across the following article in an edition of The Philadelphia Daily Evening Telegraph newspaper dated for October 28, 1879. It gives a brief account of one of Kentucky's earliest feuds, the trouble between the Underwoods and Holbrooks of Carter County. The story gives a view slanted toward the Underwoods. However, many accounts tell of how the Underwoods were an unlawful clan, forming a pro-Union guerilla band during the Civil War.

A correspondent of the *Mt. Sterling Gazette* gives a detailed history of the Underwood—Holbrook feud in Carter County.

The quarrel began just after the war, in September 1865. Jesse Underwood, a son of old George Underwood, got into a barroom quarrel with a man who called for a "Jeff Davis drink," and in the fight that ensued George Trumbo was shot and killed by Jesse. Many efforts were made by the authorities to capture Jesse, and in one of the raids on the Underwood "fort" 'Squire Holbrook shot and seriously wounded the young man, thus starting the feud between the two families. At length Jesse, to avoid so much fighting, went to Iowa, and then there was peace for a time. Hostilities were renewed, however, when old George Underwood posted bail for some men charged with horse stealing. The war was soon in full progress again, and many were killed on both sides. Lewis Underwood was shot through the stomach, and lingered two years with a wound through which the process of digestion could be seen. Jesse came back from Iowa to see his brother

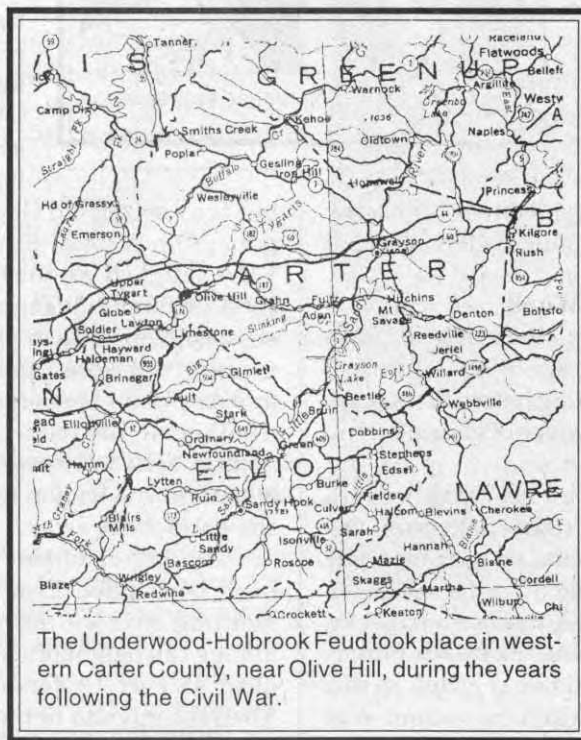
before he died, and the affair culminated in a siege of the cabin in which the whole Underwood family had gathered. The siege lasted nineteen days, and finally, when a surrender was agreed to, nothing was done by the authorities, and through the agency of Jesse peace prevailed again. Besides being an especially good shot, Jesse had fallen in love with a neighbor's daughter, and it would have been considered a breach of etiquette to shoot him during his courtship. From this point the correspondent goes on as follows:

Old George promised Jesse that he would sell out and move to Iowa, and Jesse again started for the West,

taking a young wife with him. Travelling overland to a point on the Ohio, where he intended to take a steamboat, he was followed by the sheriff of Lewis County as the old rewards for the killing of Trumbo, twelve years before, were thought to be still outstanding. The posse hid in the path of the bridal couple late one night, and as they passed opened fire on them, badly wounding Jesse at the first shot. But he fought desperately, killed one of the posse outright, and wounded two others before he fell, bleeding from half a dozen shots. He was taken to the Bath County jail, a new indictment for the murder of Trumbo was framed, and he was in jail awaiting trial, when, in the spring of 1878, he escaped and made his way back to Carter County. His wife was dead, meanwhile,

but his brother Lewis was still lingering from the wound of a year before.

Jesse only left the fort thereafter to attend church meetings with the precaution of two revolvers and his



The Underwood-Holbrook Feud took place in western Carter County, near Olive Hill, during the years following the Civil War.

shotgun. The hatchet was buried for nearly five months. It was on the 20th of May 1879 that it was dug up, and the complete wiping out of the adult Underwoods was the result. On that day Elverton Underwood was shot while surrounded by his children. Two bullets passed through his body. They were fired from ambush. Jesse claimed that he traced the assassins to 'Squire Holbrook's, and that the tracks of one of them were these of the old 'Squire himself. But his brother Lewis was dying, and Jesse did nothing until in September, when death released the boy from two years of great suffering. Then the bloody work was renewed.

The boy died on September 1, 1879. Then on September 5, 1879, 'Squire Holbrook and his son Millard were shot as they were catching a horse in the pasture adjoining their house. A rifle ball passed through the old 'Squire's brain, and he fell dead. The son escaped. September 8 William Underwood was shot through the heart while at work. September 12 David Wilson, of the the Holbrooks, was shot at from ambush, and his left arm shattered. September 15, as old George Underwood was stepping out of the door of the fort, sixteen shots were fired from behind the trees opposite. He was badly wounded in the arm and shoulder, and the women dragged him in and sent for Jesse.

Jesse was out in the forests and at once hastened home. Just as he was entering the door one of three shots from the brush-covered hillside opposite struck him in the shoulder, and passing through his left lung, came out on the other side of his body. He fell across the doorsill, but the ready hands of the women dragged him in before another shot could finish him. Then began a drama unparalleled even in the history of these mountain outrages. The Holbrook faction rose from their ambush, and rushed yelling to the door. Inside there were huddled a dozen women and children, and on two corn-husk pallets the father and son were lying mortally wounded. There was little to eat or drink in the house. Around it the Holbrooks established a cordon of sentries, and for seventeen days after Jesse was shot, the wails of the women inside gave notice that the man was dead, but, as they had before refused to allow any doctor to go to the relief of the wounded man, so now the besieging party gave notice that any man or woman, either in the house or outside, who attempted to bury

the dead man, would need to arrange for his or her own funeral.

In the stress old George Underwood did manage to get a message to the county judge at Grayson, nineteen miles distant, asking him for protection. That official ordered the sheriff to take a posse, bury the dead, and bring to Grayson the women, children, and the one wounded survivor; but so great was the terrorism that the sheriff could induce not a single man in the county to accompany him. Then the Governor was telegraphed for a company of militia, but without success.

On Sunday, October 12, the four women, a daughter, two nieces, and the sister-in-law of the old man were keeping watch beside George's pallet. At a knock at the door the women peeped out through a loophole and saw a group of some twenty men with blackened faces in the yard. They demanded admittance, averring that Caleb White and John Martin had been seen to enter the house. They promised safety to the old man and the women if they were allowed to enter. The old man consented, and they searched the house without finding the men,

but they seized old George's arsenal. It consisted of six guns, five pistols, three Bowie knives, and a sword. They laughed as they uncovered Jesse's corpse, and then asked the old man to show his wounds. Old George stooped over to take off the bandage. "Let's bring this meeting to a close," said the leader, as he raised his gun and emptied a load of buckshot into the old man's body. Another at the same moment shot him through the head, and he fell forward on his face dead. Through the wound in his body a man's fist might be thrust. Then the band went away.

The father of the Underwoods had, in some time past, befriended Frank McFarran, of Olive Hill. The morning after the murder Agnes McFarran went about among the neighbors begging for assistance to bury the dead at Fort Underwood, but no one would venture. Then the girl and her father started for the house alone. They expected nothing short of death, but happily found that the besieging party, having finished their work, had disappeared. The scene inside the cabin cannot be described, but with the help of the Underwood women the two bodies were given decent burial, while the cries of the mourners echoed through the stillness of the forest.



The Holbrook faction rushed to the cabin.