

Travelers in the Old South. Eugene L. Schwaab. Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1973. From Vol.II

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EMIGRANTS ON THE FRONTIER

This is a brief but vivid account of that hillbillies.

element in our population later designated as

Any month of the year, in passing through South Western Virginia or Eastern Tennessee, you may meet the huge and heavily-laden covered wagons of the country, filled with emigrants, the children of the soil, seeking new homes far away. In the depth of last winter I came upon a family among the mountains, where something like a northern winter is known; the father was on the ground in the wet snow and ice, urging on his horses over wretched roads, and the cumbrous wagon creaking lazily along. "An odd time to be moving, isn't it, stranger?" he called out. "How far do you go, my friend, in such weather-not a long journey, I hope!" "Oh," said he, "over in Kaintuck, about sixty miles further, I reckon." By such modes of travelling thousands have changed their homes every year. Every variety of condition in life is to be encountered on the road, but especially those on whom the world has not smiled. They are the hardy descendants, many of them, of the early Scotch and Irish settlers of this mountain region; and the peculiarities of that frontier and com-
"Movers' in the South-West," Dollar Magazine 7(January 1851): 21-22

paratively rude state of civilization, are far enough from having vanished to this day. Their ancestors fought well, as King's Mountain in North Carolina, and the fierce fight victoriously maintained there, against British valor in the Revolution, bears witness. At this time these mountaineers are essentially a military population. Naturally they have steady sense and acuteness of mind, and particularly shrewd at a bargain. Their learning is seldom such as is seen inside of school-houses; it may not even include an ability to read and write; but they are pretty good judges of a stump speech, of a sermon, or of an argument at the bar; from these is drawn their education. They are moreover good horsemen, marksmen, and hunters, and capital judges of horseflesh and stock in general; but the men, at least, are not remarkable for agricultural industry, for the patient thrift and intelligent skill that make the successful farmer. They are squatters rather than farmers. It is certain at least that very considerable tracts in the mountain districts of Carolina and Tennessee have been occupied and cultivated in no other way, and the rightful owners of the soil have found it

difficult and hardly profitable to dispossess those occupants. ¹

Mark the courteous manners even of the lowest and most ignorant; there is a frank, ready, and kindly address, seldom seen in the same class elsewhere. Withal, the sallow gaunt visage of poverty and sickness is too often to be observed. Some are not too proud to ask an alms as they go on their way. I met a family group near the Cumberland mountains this summer that had travelled on in sickness and feebleness, one hundred miles on foot, and one of the boys asked for money to buy some coffee for his sick sister. The poor girl was borne along in the arms of her mother. "He" said the wife,-meaning her husband, "he would not take a house or live in one, lest he should have to work." At the next cabin in the woods I called for a moment; "your money will go for liquor," said the man of the house, "I know such movers right well." "Perhaps not, my friend: they may be very honest folk, and at any rate the will and the effort to help them in their want does me some good."

Families make these journies in ponderous wagons, closely stowed with all sorts of culinary apparatus, when they have it, or perhaps in lieu of this, a man or woman of African descent is lodged among the other household stuff, the sole indication of wealth or station on the part of the family that is moving. Some are tramping on foot, the men stepping off straight and erect like Indians, with trusty rifles slung at their backs. At night they camp out in a wood, or under a big tree by the road-side, heap up a huge fire of logs, prepare corn-cakes and bacon for supper, tie up their horses fast to the waggon and soon all are stretched out seeking rest for the night. This is the life of great numbers

for weeks together, and the weather is so mild during a large part of the year as to make this pleasant. There is an independence about it that has a charm, and there is good in it, also, for the pilgrims, of a higher kind, if their travels are not protracted too far, or pursued too long; they shake off the effects of poor training and unfortunate associations at home; they develop new resources, impart new energy, and are often the beginning of successful and honorable endeavor. Among their rich neighbors these persons had been neglected, and to some extent depressed and kept down. They were not wanted as neighbors, and were not cared for; they grew up untaught and ignorant. They knew the road to the great man's door in their vicinity, and in some parts could hardly tell another road but the one to the mill. Even the negroes looked down in scorn upon "poor white folks." Their houses were the rude log cabins of frontier backwoods life, sixty and seventy years since, when the Indian was still powerful, and spread over the land. Two rooms is a large allowance in such establishments, each consisting of a square "log-pen," plastered more or less thoroughly at the interstices with the strongly adhesive clay of the country, but few attempting to exclude the air, or starlight: to have them quite close, were it practicable, is not considered healthy. Those who lived year in and year out, contentedly in such tenements, have the same Anglo-Saxon blood coursing through their veins, that beats proudly in the hearts of the wealthy and the great; and, what is better, they possess the mind, and sense, and resolved will of the same bold race.² Leaving

1. Tennessee land laws were very complex and made fraudulent sales of land possible. Thomas B. Jones, "The Public Lands of Tennessee," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1968): 13-36.

2. One authority on the southern mountaineer discusses in some detail the ancestry of residents of this region. He does not limit himself to the "poor whites," and he concludes that there is no information to prove certain national backgrounds. John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (New York, 1921), pp. 50-71.

behind them their old homes in the upper country of the Carolinas, in Georgia, and Tennessee, they go, a small part of them to Texas, and to Mississippi; they, chiefly, have settled Arkansas and Missouri; there they rise to affluence in real

respectability and consideration; and their children rank often among the truly eminent and noble of the land. From this stock have sprung senators and statesmen whom the whole people have delighted to honor.