

The Real McCoys of Summerfield, Tennessee

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Uncle William “Billy” and Aunt Sarah “Sally” (Cawthorn) McCoy’s lives colored our narrow little plateau ridge from as far back as when the American Indians were still crossing from Pelham Valley to the Battle Creek area – those who dodged the removal. To understand the living circumstances of these two characters fully, I found it necessary to draw on my memories from my youthful years of the **1940s**. when I was allowed to visit for a few days with my maternal grandparents, Mack and Maggie Meeks, at Clouse Hill. Or maybe I need to say, “as far back as I have strong, vivid memories of objects like an old ladder-back-style porch chair with woven white oak splits for the seat, broken and sagging, enough for a small child to go right on through the bottom to the porch floor. When electricity was still straining to get to Clouse Hill and indoor plumbing, central heat and air were out of the financial reach of most families. There was a long path to the spring, and a two-seater outdoor toilet. If the weather was such that the family could enjoy the evening air, a gathering of folks like at the McCoys’ cabin collected. Then there was inevitably a small gnat/mosquito smoke curling around looking for the eyes of the prettiest girl to blind. Snuff and tobacco spittings on the ground just made the chickens’ droppings of the day more noticeable, so one could avoid them. I flitted around all the excitement like a fly looking for a wall.

In **1850**, William “Billy” (**51**) and Sarah “Sally” McCoy (**52**) were living in Marion County, District 12. This well could have been on the plateau because Summerfield was in Marion County until around **1868** when Grundy County’s line moved considerably over into Marion County. (*It took a while to adjust to this happening, so folks often still spoke of living in Marion County.*) The McCoys neighbors were Benjamin Wooten, Osborn Thompson and Benjamin Trussell, three men who were named in the book, *John Gamp*, as being first settlers on the plateau in the Summerfield/Tracy City areas. And of course, I must not leave out old Basil Summers for whom the area was named.

In **1870**, William McCoy (**76**) and Sarah McCoy (**73**) were still living in Marion County in District 10. Their ages given were a little different in that year. Lucinda “Cinda” Martin was living with them as a domestic servant. She stayed with them, or nearby, until after both had died, at which time she received the little one room log cabin in Summerfield as her own home. Sally’s mother, Jane Cawhorn, who came to the mountain with the couple, was listed as **103** years of age in Marion County, TN in **1870**. This would have put her death around **1879**. The surname “Cawhorn” is also spelled

Cawthorn, so it is used both ways in this story. The following is an excerpt from the book, **John Gamp**:

"...This is the home of old Uncle Billy McCoy and his wife, Aunt Sally. The two old people had come to the mountain from Sequatchie Valley for health; it would seem that it was found, since the old mother-in-law, Mother Cawhorn, lived to be one hundred and twelve years old, and Uncle Billy was one hundred and two years old when he died, and "wouldn't a-died so soon,"..."ef the rattlesnake hadn't a-bit him." "Aunt Sally was one hundred and five years old when she died..." In the book we also read, "Next to them, on wooden slabs, were the names, almost unreadable, of old Uncle Billy McCoy, Aunt Sally (his wife), and the old Mother Cawhorn..." These burials are in the Summerfield Cemetery, Grundy County, Tennessee, at the end of the long Thompson family row of white, identical markers.

Let's go back in time to Old Summerfield and visit the McCoys on a Sunday afternoon in **1885**.

A Transcription from *The Daily American*, July 30, 1885

A Sunday Morning Call on a Strange Old Couple

"Uncle Billy" and "Aunt Sally," Centenarian Hermits of the Hills

"Sunday afternoon is not given to amusement by the good people of Monteagle, but we newspaper people are not put on the list with the "Eaglets," so a ride and a visit to perhaps the oldest couple in the State being offered, we gathered our pencils, stifled our conscience and started. With a good horse and better company, we were not long in reaching the home, if one may call it such, of old Uncle Billy McCoy. There was no road to the house, so we lowered the fence, scrambled over, and beat our way through briar and brush to the tall picket fence that shut in the little hovel where the old couple had lived for almost fifty years. A dog met us, of course; who ever heard of a mountaineer who did not boast a great, good-for-nothing dog. We dared not open the gate with those white fangs directed in our way, so we stood and waited until someone came to our aid. We had not long to wait. A great rough stick, really a diminutive fence rail, was thrust at the enemy and a cracked voice said, "Come along, come right in; he won't bite you, the nasty thing." We accepted the promises and opened the gate. O Hecate!

"By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes!"

Was it one of the weird sisters indeed, this queer looking little old woman, who brandished the great ash club in our behalf? She was small and wore a very short calico frock and big leather shoes which stood out from the thin shriveled ankles like the picture in Mother Goose. She wore a great calico bonnet and a long white cap within it. Her dress opened to the

waist, and a worn white flannel cloth was thrown around the neck and pinned at the waist, half disclosing the thin sunken chest. Close in her wake followed Uncle Billy. Had both worn dresses it would have been impossible to distinguish one from the other; as it was, Uncle Billy's short, ragged pants, reaching half way between knee and ankle, proclaimed him the master of the manor. Both were brandishing their sticks and both talking, both inviting us to "come right in, if we could get there for dirt and nastness."

We did get there; the house was a low dingy structure, dark and dismal beyond imagination; they gave us chairs under the little rotten shed that served for a porch, and which might have fallen to pieces forty years before and still have done good service. Uncle Billy took a seat on the floor; Aunt Sally brought a chair, and gave herself to our special entertainment. Both were deaf, almost entirely so; and the woman was nearly blind. Both began talking at once, and all they asked was that we listened.

"How old are you?" we asked.

"I can't tell," replied Aunt Sally.

"The old man's long gone a hundred but it makes him mad to say so. He don't know; he's done forgot long go."

"How old are you?" someone asked Uncle Billy.

"I'se ninety-two; the old gal says I'se moure'n a hundred, but she don't know; she's forgot long go. I ain't so old; I goes to town when I has a call to go."

Craddock, thought I._____

"Onc't a man, Twict a chile," croaked the old woman. He runs off and goes to town; folks has to look over his doings. I can't help it. I can't keep no clothes on him; just look at these thar rags."

"My mother was a hundred and twenty years when she died," said the old man.

"Does you know that song 'bout,

We're marching? We're marching on, I'll see you at the judgement day?"

"Well, I low that's so, may be; I don't sing it, I jes thinks it."

But to tell all this quaint, old couple said would be too much. They were alone, without kindred. "Their thirteen children were under ground," the old woman told us. She gave us a bit of warning, too, as we started, which left a feeling of sadness in our hearts, serving to increase our pity for the old and desolate.

“It’s mighty nice while ye’re young and kin git about; folks thinks a power o’ ye then; but jest wait till ye gets old, and yer children die, and yer friends furgets ye, and yer lives and don’t live. It’s a mighty bad ter be old – mighty bad.”

Poor Aunt Sally! It isn’t confined to just be alive and yet not live. If it’s bad to be old, and watch the sun go down, it is infinitely worse to watch in youth for its rising and never see it.

Aunt Sally’s complaint had made us sad, and scrambling over briars to our horses, we thought this little path to the secluded hut of age was no more overgrown with brambles and thorns and briar-weed than that which marks the way to happiness.”

Oh, to have been sitting under that dilapidated shed on an old stump seat waiting for my turn to ask questions, or to “be a fly on the wall of Billy and Sally’s little cabin,” would have been as exciting as hugs and kisses from my grandchildren. By the time 1885 came along, they would have known my Layne and Meeks ancestors and maybe helped bury some of them in the Summerfield and Clouse Hill Cemeteries.

Sally McCoy lost all thirteen of her children; my gg-grandmother Elender Tennessee (Kilgore) Layne lost fifteen of her eighteen babies. The two old ladies would have known each other, both living in the Summerfield area, and possibly had their own support group meetings sitting in the chairs under the little rotten shed. It would not have phased my gg-grandmother who was dirt poor beyond description.

In 1880, William McCoy (86) and Sarah McCoy (84) were still living in Marion County, District 12. Lucinda was still living with them as a boarder. The following newspaper story tells me that they were still marching on in 1885. In the story, it appears that Billy was correct about his age not being 100 when the visitors came that Sunday. It seems that Summerfield was blessed with Centenarians, or maybe blessed with no close neighbors and relatives who may have traveled all over the State collecting diseases that if transmitted to the McCoy’s, probably would have killed them.

The Daily American, July 12, 1886

“A party of pleasure-seekers visited Alpine View. The road to it lies over the level top of the mountain and is very good. Shaded by trees, it is a favorite drive. There is on the way a double log house with great pear and peach trees around it, and an appearance of sleepy old age. This is the house of Aunt Sally McCoy, now 100 years old. Uncle Billy, her husband, died last winter at the time of that very severe weather. His remarkable age was 112 years. The old man was a consistent, patriotic citizen; the first settler on these heights anywhere near; a member of

the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and a staunch Democrat. His memory is respected. Aunt Sally has twice in late years been the subject of a sketch by well known artists. E. Sutton has an unfinished sketch of her in the studio, and Mr. French, of Chicago, made another. Prof. French's sketches were the ones from which Miss Will Allen Dromgoole had the plates made for her book illustrations. There is great interest centered in her work..."

The Daily American, April 17, 1888

"Monteagle, April 16 – Yesterday, April 15, the first settler on the mountain at this point celebrated her 102d birthday, and the forty-first anniversary of her coming to the mountain. We visited the old lady in her home, a log house with chimney to each end, and found her cheery and talkative, although almost blind and very deaf. Mrs. Sally McCoy in her own home, is a person never to be forgotten when once seen. It may be recalled that her husband, Uncle Billy, who died three years ago, was twelve years her senior, having lived to the age of 112.

The church committee of the Cumberland church to be built here received recently from the old lady a liberal donation for the new edifice. She has been, since first she settled upon what was then known as the Wicho Jack Trail, celebrated for her courage, integrity and Christian virtue. She declared yesterday that the occupations which must seem so useless to the vigorous were essential to her as a rest and stay to an active mind. She expressed regret that she had never learned to read, and told us that if her baby had lived it would have been 71 years old now. She has no living relative that she knows anything of.

French, the Chicago artist, made several sketches of the picturesque old homestead, and others have made mention of the couple in The American before the veteran pioneer was called to his rest. Aunt Sally's house is three miles from Monteagle, reached by a pleasant road. She has many visitors."

Note: "Wicho Jack Trail" should have been written as Nick-A-Jack Trail. The artist, French, would have been William M. R. French.

The Daily American, Apr. 18, 1889

"Monteagle, April 17 – Aunt Sally McCoy, the oldest woman of this community, died last night, aged 103 years and 1 day. The first settler in this region, her life has been one rich in experiences. Her husband died four years ago, aged 112. Both were members of the Presbyterian Church, widely known for their integrity, and greatly beloved. The funeral services will be held today."

The precise ages of the McCoy family are not important. Their endurance in a new territory, basically alone, far from friends, is their legacy. After **1870**, when John Moffat founded his town, then in **1883** when the Monteagle Assembly opened its first season, Billy, Sally and Lucinda were happy to tell stories to any of the visitors who came walking toward Old Summerfield.