Alumnus Of Fayette County ‘Pest House’

BY SHIRLEY DONELLY

When mania was made in that corner recently that I was planning an expedition of exploration in the ghost town of Fayette County, traveling from Thurmond on New River to Clifton Hill, some miles west, the idea fell under the gate of my long-time friend Ben Keller, dean of the Official Court Reporter in all those parts. This is the early morning, and Ben Keller, when he was a boy and peddled the celebrated weekly The Pennsylvania Grill from house to house in Central, Echo, and Benton, was communally bowing with a big ginger as a boy when the Grill company gave him a rubber stamp with his name, his business, and home address on same, he thought. Then he raised to pass at the end of days when he found collecting money that did not exist to be quite a job, he retired from the Grill selling game.

Then the men grew further reminder in his consciousness he fell to wondering if he had the only living descendant of the Fayette County Pest House which was once located on Burke’s Creek, between Sewell and Fire Creek.

About the year 1705 there came to the Keller home at Central, a “fledgling” girl who developed a taste of smallpox and was consigned to the county Pest House. It wasn’t long after the N.G. came down with the smallpox that Ben Kittler, he himself, became similarly afflicted and was flouted off to keep Gentle Annie with all her films company. There in the company of General White and her infant daughter, who was a solid mass of the virulent pestilence from the crowns of her head to the sole of her foot, they remained until the day of the wrinkle of the pestilence had passed.

Here the most pleasant re-education of his colours in the pest house was the huge peach cobbler that Gentle Annie prepared daily. As a matter of fact, that peach cobbler of the huge proportions was just about their only article of diet for quite a spell. However, at rare intervals the cobbler was supplemented, with some rare canned delicacy like corn and/or tomatoes. After that, with all the care and tenderness had great appeal to the haggard and pale face of the young miner who had come down with the terrible plague.

Suppose it to pay that the word of the man who was tempered to the stern laws by the wave of medium, no amount of alluring romance, very plentifully supplied with growing cast, knot each and wrench each and wrench, on a stormy night with the side slouching down and the wind waving, while nobody near but the doctor clear around the point. It was not a wholly attractive place to dwelling.

Soooky was the nights that the miner—Gentle Annie—a man, a miner, a man, and received from the Doctor a revolver to ward off whatever varmints, human or feror, might approach. One particularly ghostly night the eerie sounds were too much for General Gentle Annie. Some little distance away, standing on a ridge, was a dandy re-modeled box car in which patients in the pest house were transported to and from the asylum institution. Sometimes, at night, were they transplanted from the place. Filled with fear and evil forebodings, Gentle Annie announced she was going to the box car."

At that point young Ben discovered and tenderly announced he wasn’t going alone. Traveling the loaded revolver at Ben’s side, Gentle Annie told him he was to “Grab that lamp” since the day of his ability to discern right from wrong. Ben had known that discretion is the better part of valor. So then and there Ben instantly changed his mind. Off the trip started, Gentle Annie with her in front in one area and the loaded revolver in her other hand, and Kid Keller carrying the lamp. The starting ceremony with which Ben Keller charged his mind that night is still one of the Seven Wonders in his latest and spectacular career. Now come that old oil lamp out to be blown out by the gusty winds still puzzles Ben when he thinks about it. Beside the three who had fled the pest houses in a moment of fright were bedded down in covering mercy in the re-modeled box car. Any old port is a good one in a time of storm, they figured. Upon all this seems the Doctor and what did that medicine man do but order them back to the scene of the novelous position in the woods place from where they had beheld insurgents in awful terror? There they remained until permitted to pull over into a hill of health, both relieved and a great deal wiser.

When Ben Keller arrived home, with his smallpox experience and some of my older relatives today—had brought bloody violence. Times were just only tolerable. At the last the men who had killed on Echo Mountain and fired two shots over ladies in the fire to drive away Ash L驾le, being one man into Kinghorn Creek, and woundingly another, Ben’s father had secured employment as a man painter on Laural Creek then being developed by Harvey Hardesty and his associates. The new mine was known as Henkock Hollow. When the Keller family got in the new diggings they had to secure passage at Quinclid, before they could go up the creek. More of Keller’s story tomorrow.

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