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THE WILDERNESS ROAD IN TENNESSEE*

By ROBERT L. KINGAID

The Wilderness Road of pioneer times did not really belong to Tennessee. It barely touched the eastern confines of the region where the state of Tennessee began. It reached into the state along the Holston Valley from Bristol to Kingsport, but quickly broke away from the inviting valley, wound into the difficult hills of the southwest Virginia region through the gateway of Moccasin Gap, and picked its way over mountains and through narrow valleys until it came to the long, forbidding wall of the Cumberland mountain range with its broken escarpment of Cumberland Gap, where Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia join. Thus Tennessee has small claim to the true Wilderness Road of history.

The reason for this denial of a pleasant historical claim can be laid to the great Cherokee empire. The vast mountain region which was the home of the Cherokee lay athwart the logical advance route of the westward-spreading white settlers. The friendly southern Indians were too strong, too proud, too patriotic to give way easily to the hunters, traders, and squatters who would settle the lower valleys of the Holston River. The better route to the paradise land in Kentucky was not the way that Boone and his thirty axe-men chopped out in 1775 from Long Island (at the present Kingsport, Tennessee) to Cumberland Gap through the twisting hills of southwest Virginia, but rather down the Holston to what later became Bean's Station, and then across Clinch Mountain directly north to the open gate into the Kentucky wilderness. It was ten years after Boone opened his more difficult route before the trail down the Holston on Tennessee territory was safe for travel, and became the more used and better alternate route for the thousands of settlers who poured over the Wilderness Road to conquer the Northwest.

But this inability of Tennessee to claim much of the great old road which opened up the wilderness reaches of the limitless west cannot take away its importance to Tennessee. The road which reached southwestward across the New River at Ingle's Ferry (near Radford, Virginia) and thrust itself into the upper Tennessee regions before it pivoted northwestward for its entry into Kentucky was the principal feeder line for the magnificent domain later to become the

*An address delivered at the annual banquet of the East Tennessee Historical Society in Knoxville, October 3, 1947.

state of Tennessee.

The front line of advance for the white settlers pouring across the Appalachian divide from 1750 to 1760 had halted at New River during the French and Indian War. But it broke into a wild plunge forward after the removal of major barriers by two important Indian treaties, one with the Cherokee at Hard Labor, South Carolina, on October 17, 1768, and one with the Six Nations at Fort Stanwix, N. Y., on November 6, 1768. For land-hungry Virginians poised in the Southwest, the second treaty was the signal to break away for the next dash down the valleys of the western waters despite a clear violation of Cherokee rights under the agreement at Hard Labor.

Some settlers were already beyond the established treaty line and had never withdrawn from the Indian lands as required by the royal proclamation of 1763. The Dunkard settlement remained west of Ingle's Ferry. Stephen Holston erected a cabin in 1748 within thirty feet of the headsprings of the Holston thus giving the stream his name. Samuel Stalnaker built his cabin eight miles farther down on the Middle Fork of the Holston. Other settlers fanned out along the streams draining into the New River from the west, and surveyors for Dr. Thomas Walker and the Patton interests, connected with the Loyal Land Company, mapped hundreds of tracts for sale. Grants for services in the French and Indian War were being located by official surveyors far in the interior.

Significant in the immediate sweep westward was the military road built by Colonel Byrd's men from Fort Chiswell (near Wytheville, Virginia) to Long Island in 1761.¹ This soon became known as "the Great Road" or "Island Road" traversing the Holston Valley and was the second important link in the Wilderness Road.² It was an open invitation for settlers to hurry down the Holston to pick out sites for homes. It was an easy way into the wilderness, crossing no hard mountains, winding through broad valleys and over rolling knolls and hills. Branching from it were trails leading toward hidden and land-locked coves and retreats the Long Hunters had discovered. The road soon became filled with families moving in with their household plunder to claim the land taken from the sullen but still friendly

¹Major Andrew Lewis, under Colonel William Byrd III, used three companies to cut out a usable wagon road from Fort Chiswell to Long Island (Kingsport) in the summer of 1761. This was the aftermath of the dilatory and fruitless effort of Colonel Byrd in 1760 to relieve the besieged garrison of ill-fated Fort Loudoun. Major Lewis and his men probably constructed Fort Robinson at Long Island immediately after the road was built. S. C. Williams (ed.), *Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake, 1756-1765* (Johnson City, 1927), 38n; S. C. Williams, *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History* (Johnson City, 1937), 265; S. C. Williams, "Fort Robinson on the Holston," in *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications*, No. 4 (Knoxville, 1932), 25.

²See R. G. Thwaites and L. P. Kellogg, *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1744* (Madison, 1905), for numerous references to "the Great Road," which was an important factor in the movement of defenders of the Holston frontier during that prelude to the Revolution in the West.

Cherokee.

To understand the importance of this road, let us describe this picturesque empire west of the mountains using present-day names for identification. The parallel Blue Ridge and Allegheny chains take up their general course into the Southwest after being cut by the defiant New River flowing north out of the mountains of North Carolina. But the valleys become broadened and are ribbed by intervening smaller and irregular chains, running in the same direction. The troughs between these ribs give rise to the three forks of the Holston.

Parallel with these streams on the north but separated from them by the long escarpment of Clinch Mountain, is the Clinch River, named for a long hunter. It heads a few miles east of Tazewell, Virginia, and a southern affluent is Maiden Springs Creek, rising in Bowen's Cove in Tazewell County. Wedged in against the Cumberlands, the final northern ramp is Powell's Valley with its river. Like the little finger of the hand, this valley is much shorter and begins fifty miles west of the source of the Clinch.

Thus five distinct but irregular parallel valleys between sharp upthrusts of hills and mountains, crossed here and there by wind and water gaps, stretch long fingers southwestward into the East Tennessee country. Here the valleys are multiplied south of the Holston by the Watauga, Doe, Nolichucky, French Broad, and Little Tennessee, all ultimately to form the noble Tennessee River.

"The Great Road" coming out of southwest Virginia followed the Middle Fork of the Holston and cut at a slender angle the southern limits of Virginia on latitude 36°30' at Bristol, Virginia. From that point to Long Island, the road was in North Carolina (subsequently Tennessee) territory, unknown to Virginians until later surveys established the true boundary. It bisected a rich and fertile limestone region of vast reaches.

On this southern sector of the long frontier of the Allegheny crest converged three separate tides of expansion. One stream rolled southwest through the main trough of the Shenandoah Valley, which tapped the pools of population in central Pennsylvania, Maryland, and northeastern points. Another was along the broad front of the Blue Ridge, from the east, trickling over the chain through widely separated gaps and pouring into the valley traversed by the "Great Road." The third stream gathered in the Yadkin country of North Carolina, picked its way through the Blue Ridge and the Great Smokies, and pooled in the Watauga country for convergence with the main tide flowing down the Holston.

³See map on end papers, R. L. Kincaid, *The Wilderness Road* (Indianapolis and New York, 1947).

One of the first men to follow the military road beyond the Stalnaker settlement was Arthur Campbell, who settled at the present site of Marion, Virginia, in 1768 on land purchased by his father three years before. Married to his first cousin, Margaret Campbell, he build a home which he called "Royal Oak." For forty years this violatile, temperamental, red-headed son of a Scotchman was a prominent figure on the frontier and his home was a familiar way-station on the Wilderness Road. He was the progenitor of a clan which became well-known in Virginia and Tennessee history.

Soon after Campbell's arrival at Royal Oak, a first cousin, William Campbell, settled one mile east of Seven Mile Fork on the Middle Fork of the Holston. This tract had been patented by his father several years before and encompassed the then unknown mineral land where later the famous salt works of Saltville, Virginia, were developed. William married Elizabeth Henry, sister of Patrick Henry. His career, cut short by his untimely death soon after the surrender of Cornwallis, was more spectacular than that of his cousin because of his heroic participation in the battles of Point Pleasant, King's Mountain, and Guilford Court House.

Twenty-eight miles west of Royal Oak was the territory known as Wolf Hills, later to become Abingdon, where in 1770 a group of settlers took up land which they bought from Dr. Thomas Walker of the Loyal Land Company. By 1773 the people in this region had become so numerous that they organized a church at Sinking Spring. The Rev. Charles Cummings, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian preacher, famous in pioneer history, became their pastor.

The next outpost developed around Evan Shelby's home at Sapling Grove, the future site of Bristol, Tennessee-Virginia, where the road intersected the dividing line between North Carolina and Virginia. Shelby, born in 1720 in Wales, migrated to America with his father about 1735. Residing near North Mountain in Maryland, he became a noted woodsman, hunter, and Indian trader, and served as a captain in the French and Indian War. In 1770 he came to the Holston country to look over the prospects. Finding the new region to his liking he returned to Maryland, disposed of his property, and in 1772 bought lands north of the Holston which he thought were in Virginia, built a home and opened a store. He prospered at this outpost, and was soon joined by his sons, Issac, James, and Evan, Jr. Thus the Shelby family embarked upon careers which were to shape future events.

But Captain Shelby's settlement at Sapling Grove was eclipsed by another center farther along the road to the west, where embryonic statesmen learned the first lessons of self-government in their new

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freedom. William Bean, of Pittsylvania County, Virginia, was the first to hide his cabin deep in the wilderness which became the state of Tennessee. By 1772 hundreds of home seekers had made their way to the Watauga, and north of the Holston in Carter's Valley.

But this advance was not without its difficulties. Within two years after the treaty of Hard Labor, the Virginians had violated its provisions by swarming west for more than a hundred miles beyond the boundary line at New River, and it was necessary for another "talk" with the Cherokee. On October 18, 1770, at Lochaber, South Carolina, the long-suffering Cherokee gave way again and agreed to a new line following the Virginia-North Carolina boundary (36°30') to a point six miles east of Long Island and then running north to the mouth of the Great Kanawha. Accordingly, in 1771, Col. John Donelson, with Attakullakulla, "half-king" of the Cherokee, and Alexander Cameron, the southern Indian agent, as observers, surveyed the new boundary. Instead of surveying the 36°30' parallel, they accepted the South Fork and the Holston as the line, thus placing Shelby's Sapling Grove settlement in ceded territory and temporarily in Virginia. When they reached the headwaters of the Kentucky River, Attakullakulla in another moment of generosity agreed that the line might proceed along that river to its confluence with the Ohio, provided the Virginians would give five hundred pounds for the much increased area. The line was so established but the Cherokee never collected the promised and unauthorized payment.

This new concession took care of the Virginians west of the New River, but when the men on the Watauga discovered they were still on Cherokee territory they were dismayed. After considerable negotiation, they temporarily solved the issue by obtaining from the Indians a lease of the lands for ten years.

The Wataugans were an undisciplined frontier group made up of many elements, — hunters, adventurers, dissenters, home-seekers, and even some criminals trying to get beyond the reach of the law. The majority were from the counties of western North Carolina and still bore smouldering resentment against oppressive measures which led to the Regulators' War. Quite a few had fled from their mother colony before or after the tragic battle of Alamance, May 16, 1771. Scourged, persecuted, and threatened in this prelude to the universal revolution of 1776, they sought refuge in the freedom of the wilderness far from the seat of authority. Mingled with these revolvers against exorbitant taxes and unreasonable measures were many men from southwest Virginia of like boldness and spirit. In the alchemy of necessity, hardship, danger, and isolation on the frontier

a new government was in the making in defiance of the authority of North Carolina.

One of the ablest of the first Wataugans was John Carter, who in 1770 had come from Albemarle, Cumberland County, Virginia, to settle in Carter's Valley west of the Holston River a short distance below Long Island. Here he had a post for trade with the Indians, and although originally beyond the first Watauga settlement he was soon brought within the perimeter of its development. To him is credited the idea for the formation of an independent government whereby civil and political affairs could be regulated.

Another Wataugan was James Robertson, a Virginian by birth but later of Orange County, North Carolina, who first visited the region in 1770 and brought out his family and a large group of friends the following year. At twenty-eight he was making the first important step toward a career which was to establish his name as "the Father of Tennessee." Familiar with the type of associations formed in North Carolina to deal with the perplexing problems which culminated in the Regulators' War, he pooled his views with those of the older and more conservative Carter.

In the spring of 1772, Carter, Robertson, and other leaders drafted the articles which launched "The Watauga Association" as the first independent governmental body formed by native Americans. It was a loose, flexible type of agreement but it provided for a skeleton government with five commissioners to direct the affairs of the settlements. A majority of these directors had the power "to decide all matters of controversy and to govern and direct for the common good." Carter and Robertson were members of this original body.

Historians have been complimentary in their accounts of this bold experiment in self-government on the frontier, and none have been more eloquent than Theodore Roosevelt in his *Winning of the West*: "The Watauga settlers outlined in advance the nation's work. They tamed the rugged and shaggy wilderness, they bid defiance to outside foes, and they successfully solved the difficult problem of self-government."⁴

Another person who was to have a large share in its fortunes soon entered the Watauga country. Young John Sevier, born of Huguenot heritage in Augusta County, Virginia, September 23, 1745, followed the road leading to Watauga in 1771. Fair-haired, blue-eyed, debonair, and of powerful build, he took along a load of goods for trade. In 1772 he made another trip, and on this occasion attended a horse race at Watauga Old Fields where the Doe meets

⁴Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 6 vols. (New York, 1905), I, 242-243.

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the Watauga. Here he saw a rough, savage fellow forcibly take a horse from a travelling stranger pretending that he had won him in a bet. Sevier was so disgusted that he remarked that he did not want to live where such things were permitted. Wise old Evan Shelby told him: "Never mind those rascals; they'll soon take poplar," — meaning get in canoes and leave. Whether Shelby's rejoinder had anything to do with Sevier's decision is speculative, but late in 1773 the future governor of Tennessee brought his family to the new country where he was to rise to fame.

So it was that deep in the Cherokee country rose a cluster of settlements which was the supply pool for the migratory flood funnelling through Cumberland Gap and spreading over the future states of Tennessee and Kentucky. Here the Wilderness Road pivoted on its stretch down the Holston to turn northwestward to Kentucky. From the stations along the Holston from Sapling Grove to Long Island, and on the Watauga, came the pioneers who fought back the occasional uprisings of the Cherokee, helped to win the revolution by marching to King's Mountain, and furnished relief parties for besieged and insecure settlements in far-off Kentucky. "The Holston Men," as they were commonly called, responded many times to the appeals of their distressed Kentucky neighbors and set out in swift expeditions over the dangerous road through the great wilderness to drive the red hordes back across the Ohio. Likewise, some of them were recruits of George Rogers Clark in his history-making conquests in the Northwest.

No point on the Wilderness Road had greater activity from 1775 to 1795 than the Watauga area. At the supply stations from Bristol to Long Island the many thousands of travelers to the West stopped to visit with neighbors and friends, gather their supplies, repair their guns, fill their packs, and push off into the wilderness in large companies with armed guards.

But more important to the future of the embryonic states of Kentucky and Tennessee were the leaders trained in frontier life on this section of the Wilderness Road. Prominent among these was General Isaac Shelby, hero of King's Mountain and worthy son of Captain Evan Shelby at Sapling Grove. Destiny beckoned strongly to him and he followed the Wilderness Road to fame and distinction as the first governor of Kentucky. Also, it was at this point that General James Robertson emerged as a frontier statesman. He took to the Wilderness Road in the hard winter of 1779 with a small company of brave men to found the settlement of the future city of Nashville at Old French Lick on the Cumberland. This Wilderness Road through Virginia was the only overland route between

Watauga and the future Cumberland settlements. It was also from the boat yard at Long Island that Colonel John Donelson, who captained the good boat, *Adventure*, took off with a fleet of vessels on December 22, 1779, and made the memorable voyage down the Holston and the Tennessee, and up the Ohio and the Cumberland to join General Robertson's company, who had preceded them by the overland route. This voyage of the Donelson party, so well known to all students of Tennessee history, is one of the most gripping and memorable sagas in pioneer history.

So it was that in the decade between 1775 and 1785 the settlements from Sapling Grove to Long Island and on the Watauga furnished much of the man power, the provisions, and the leadership which maintained the far-flung, frail settlements on the Kentucky and Cumberland frontiers. Boone's Road through southwest Virginia was the first route used, but after Robert Bean, son of William Bean, settled at Bean's Station, the new alternative link down the north side of the Holston came into common use. From 1785 until the Wilderness Road lapsed into oblivion in the middle of the 19th century, this new route down the Holston to Bean's Station and across Clinch Mountain to Cumberland Gap was the accepted link between the populated areas of the Southwest and the Northwest, which had leaped into a national empire by 1800.

It is not possible to detail the history of the settlements along the new road from Long Island to Bean's Station. But significant and interesting is the development of Rogersville, Tennessee. No story of this important pioneer village, which even today retains much of the flavor of colonial times, is complete without mention of Thomas Amis, a staunch old Huguenot, who settled there about 1781, erected a stone house, and operated a tavern, grist mill, and distillery.⁵ Until his death in 1797 he was a prominent man on the frontier and entertained in his home many distinguished travelers passing along the Wilderness Road. These included the elder Andre Michaux, the French botanist and explorer; young Andrew Jackson; and the swash-buckling John Sevier.

Bishop Asbury often stopped at the Amis tavern in his many journeys to the Kentucky outposts. In 1790 the good Bishop was considerably annoyed by the hardend frontiersman who was host to so many travelers. Writing in his journal the Bishop commented:

We came back to Amis', a poor sinner. He was highly offended that we prayed so loud in his house. He is a distiller of whiskey and boasts of gaining three hundred pounds per annum by the brewing of his poison. We talked very plainly; and I told him it was of necessity, and not of choice, that

⁵*The Huguenot*, Publication No. 4, of the Huguenot Society of the Founders of Manakin in the Colony of Virginia (San Francisco, 1929), 31-35.

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we were there — that I feared the face of no man. He said he did not desire me to trouble myself about his soul.⁶

However, on later trips the Bishop and Amis had pleasanter visits and perhaps Amis, in his old age, became better prepared for his departure from the troubled world. Amis was married twice and had sixteen children. His descendants are still numerous throughout Tennessee and Kentucky. One son, Lincoln Amis, removed to Clay County, Kentucky, where he became the founder of the famous Goose Creek Salt Works.

The stone house erected by Amis near the town of Rogersville is still standing. Forty-six feet in length by sixteen feet in breadth, with a wall eighteen inches thick, it was originally constructed so that it could be easily defended against Indian attacks. A son-in-law of Amis was Joseph Rogers, a native of Ireland, who settled on a portion of the Amis estate and gave his name to the county seat. No story of the Wilderness Road in Tennessee is complete without prominent mention of Thomas Amis and his family at Rogersville. He is worthy of a fuller treatment in a monograph.

Few places in East Tennessee history are more significant than that of Bean's Station, although it was never more than a small group of houses. Established by Robert Bean, son of William Bean, Tennessee's first white settler, it was the point on the road from the East to the Southwest through Tennessee where practically all travel turned north toward Cumberland Gap for the entrance into Kentucky and the Northwest. For a hundred years it maintained its prominence as an important way-station. In 1813 a beautiful brick tavern was erected which for more than a century served travelers passing along the Holston Valley or starting their journey across Clinch Mountain to Cumberland Gap. Here many pioneer and ante-bellum leaders often stopped, including Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson, and James K. Polk. This tavern was in continuous operation until 1941, when it was removed by the TVA because the area was to be inundated by the Cherokee Dam. It is the plan of the TVA to re-erect this tavern at a convenient site on the waters of Cherokee Lake. But the original site of Bean's Station, so important in our history, is now but a memory.

The section of the Wilderness Road from Bean's Station to Cumberland Gap is not of particular interest, but from 1785 until well past the Civil War period it constantly groaned under the burden of heavy traffic passing from the valley of the Holston across the mountain ranges into the Bluegrass of Kentucky. As a postroad and stage route it was an important unit in the rapidly developing

⁶*The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (New York, 1821), II, 71.

highway system of America. It was always a difficult route because of the high backbone of Clinch Mountain which had to be negotiated. A narrow road of chugholes, boulders, precipices, and winding declivities, it certainly was not a thoroughfare to inspire poetic effusions. It was, however, a good counterpart for the Kentucky section of the road, which James Lane Allen portrayed as one which taxed the patience and Christian fortitude of the travellers. Allen in writing of the Kentucky road in 1890 said: "Perhaps one of the provocations to homicide among the mountain people should be reckoned this road. I have seen two of the mildest of men, after riding over it for a few hours, lose their temper and begin to fight—fight anything—fight their horses, fight the flies, fight the cobwebs on their noses."

In the many diaries and travel accounts there are many picturesque descriptions of the Tennessee portion of the road. One account of the road from Bean's Station to Cumberland Gap was given in the *Knoxville Times* in 1839, written by J. C. Trautwine,⁸ a civil engineer then living in Knoxville, who made a trip to see some of the wonders around Cumberland Gap. At that time, the best route from Knoxville to Cumberland Gap was by way of Bean's Station. A portion of Trautwine's description gives a good picture of what he found along the way over a hundred years ago:

At Bean's Station, the Kentucky road turns off to the north, nearly at right angles to the main line to Virginia. The Kentucky road, in consequence of its mountainous character, requires constant attention to preserve it in travelling order, and is on that account placed under the superintendence of commissioners appointed by the legislature. The only means at their disposal are the tolls, which being collected at one gate, are paid by those only who happen to pass through it, and probably bear but a small proportion to what would be obtained by having one or two more gates. Small as the funds thus collected are, however, a judicious appropriation of them has rendered this, generally speaking, a capital summer road; many parts of it, in crossing the mountains and intervening ridges, are very well graded at easy slopes. . . . The crossing of the Clinch is rather too steep, and in some places too narrow to allow two carriages to pass each other. . . .

Half a mile after leaving Bean's Station, immediately on the right edge of the road, and about two hundred yards beyond where it first strikes a

⁷"Mountain Passes of the Cumberland," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, LXXXI (September, 1890), 565.

⁸John C. Trautwine was a civil engineer from Philadelphia, Pa., who served as chief engineer of the Hiwassee Railroad from 1836 to 1842. He returned to Philadelphia to continue his distinguished career, serving on important engineering projects. He was a frequent contributor to scientific journals. While in Knoxville he was a member of the Knoxville Lyceum and Junto, local literary societies. In 1839 he wrote a fifteen-page pamphlet, "Some Remarks on the Internal Improvement System in the South," which was published in Philadelphia. He died in that city in 1883.

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small stream, are three sulphur springs,⁹ where those who affect such "odorus abominations" may indulge their sulphurous propensities *ad libitum*, for I am informed by a medical gentleman who has submitted their waters to chemical analysis, that although they rise within a few feet of each other, they differ materially in the proportions of their components

The road runs very prettily along the stream before-mentioned until nearly two miles from the Station, there the creek turns to the left, and you find yourself at the foot of Clinch Mountain.

As you begin to ascend, look back, and you will find what the trees along the road before prevented you from seeing, that you have been riding through the deep gap of quite an elevated ridge, or small mountain. During the ascent you occasionally catch a glimpse of some fine scenery through the trees, but it is not until you have reached the summit of the Gap, that the view breaks upon you in its full force.

Ridge after ridge rises before you; at your feet lies the one you have just passed, dwindled to a mere hill, and apparently so near that you can almost count the leaves on the trees; another lies just beyond it, but less distinct; —another beyond it, still less so, and so on until the strained eye can scarcely distinguish their faint outlines from those of the floating clouds. Bean's Station, distant between two and three miles, appears, with its race-course, to be within a few minutes walk. The summit of the Gap is very narrow, a mere edge and you begin immediately to descend its north slope. . . .

Leaving the toll-house, the road follows the deep valley of a small creek, which leaps in a succession of tiny cascades, along its rocky bed of hard blue limestone, as if running a race with our vehicle. We had the advantage of it, however, in a road McAdamised with stones varying in size from a man's head, to that of a flour barrel; over which we rattled, with a motion truly edifying to the peristaltic organization of a dyspeptic. Oh! John Loudon McAdam, Esq., how is thy worthy name abused; however, peace be to thy ashes, John, (if they burned thee,) albeit thou hast been the innocent cause of surpassing misery to thy fellow-men.¹⁰

Trautwine's uncomplimentary reference to John Loudon McAdam was perhaps justified in the light of conditions in road-making of that day. The efforts to improve the Wilderness Road were continuous but largely ineffectual from the time it was widened for wagons. Bishop Asbury, who slogged and jolted over it so many times in the early days, finally abandoned it for his journeys to and from Kentucky, using instead the route from Nashville to central Kentucky. But travellers passing back and forth from East Tennessee and eastern points to the Bluegrass land continued to use the link from Bean's Station to Cumberland Gap. Its more difficult stretches were worked on periodically by local crewmen to keep it

⁹These springs were frequently mentioned in travellers' accounts. It was here that the Mineral Springs Hotel was built by the roadside many years ago, which continued in operation until 1941. The area is now flooded by back waters of Cherokee Lake on the Holston, one of the series of TVA reservoirs in the Tennessee River system. These springs are not to be confused with the famous Tate Springs resort, two miles east of Bean's Station, which is now operated as a private school.

¹⁰The Knoxville Times, May 24, 28, 1839.

passable. McAdam's new system of paving with stones was the first scientific approach to a permanent road bed after the old-time pole or corduroy method was tried. But pioneer roads through mountain areas could not adequately be maintained with the materials and methods then used. Certainly the Wilderness Road from Bean's Station to Crab Orchard, Kentucky, for the century of its effective use is best described in the words of Bishop Asbury as "the worst on the whole continent."¹¹

But there is a noble dignity about the rough old road which was most important to the growing West. The proud commonwealths of Tennessee and Kentucky must credit it with their founding and maintenance, during the period when the great wilderness was being conquered. Many other states carved out of the Northwest and Southwest territories were made strong and powerful by the countless travelers who came over the road from the populated centers east of the Appalachian range to seek their fortunes in the West. Never more than a thin, narrow, difficult trail winding over the mountains, across streams, and through morasses in small valleys, it was the life-line which maintained a rapidly growing new empire.

But any road is a dead, inanimate thing, with no beauty, no soul. That may be said of the Wilderness Road around which cluster so many associations of hardship, danger, suffering, and death. But place upon its long winding defiles a continuous caravan of men, women, and children trudging along on foot in rain, snow, and ice or pushing forward on horseback or huddled together in rumbling wagons, with strong and resolute faces lined with care and weariness, always moving toward the setting sun, toward an unknown but challenging destiny, and the road becomes a living thing. Then look upon the road in the perspective of history. Every turn in it tells of heroic deeds; every camp site is hallowed ground; every river crossing is a new conquest; every spot where bodies of nameless brave people have returned to dust becomes a sacred shrine guarded by phantom sentinels. Then it is easy to hear the shuffling feet of countless legions marching to greatness in building a new nation.

The Wilderness Road is the epic of young America on the march.

¹¹*The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, III, 118.

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