

STORY OF ASHE COUNTY'S WORLD WAR DESERTERS TOLD IN ENTERTAINING WAY

By IRA T. JOHNSTON
In The Winston-Salem Journal

Jefferson, N. C., June 29.—In the early month of 1918, Ashe County received its first widespread publicity. For a brief season it occupied the headlines of the first pages of the daily newspapers of North Carolina and even received mention in the metropolitan press.

However, the publicity was not of the kind usually sought after. And it was based on misinformation in many respects, or at least on a misunderstanding of the facts. Perhaps this is a late day to set history straight. But there are some who read of Ashe county in the hectic days of 1918 and who remember that it was headed far and wide as the scene of a rebellion against the government who would not welcome the facts and a correction of the error innocently made by newspaper writers then.

During War

The war was on and America had entered. Woodrow Wilson had stood before Congress and asked for a declaration of war. The Congress had responded. The draft law had been passed and the nation-wide registration of man power had taken place. Sons of Ashe County had marched away to take their places in the improvised training camps that dotted the South.

And yet, as 1917 passed, the war seemed something remote to the people of Ashe County. Shut in by the hills, had roads, and poor communication, the great majority of them did not fully realize that a world catastrophe was on. True, there was great excitement and thousands followed the embryo soldiers to the railroad stations. But France was very far away.

War Is Closer

Then came the spring and summer of 1918. The papers were full of the actual transportation of drafted men to France. The age limits were extended and a new registration held. The calls for men came more often to the local draft board. The war came nearer.

And some of the boys who had been in training camps for several months obtained furloughs and fished in their uniforms came home to spend a few days with "the folks." Parents took this as a sure sign that they were hooked for France. The boys were having a good time in the home neighborhood. Ten days slipped by before they scarcely realized it. The temptation was strong to stay as long as possible. It was pleasant to linger with the girls, to go to public gatherings with a uniform and be the center of attraction.

Frightened by Tales

Unfortunately, some of the boys overstayed their furloughs. And then the parents and misguided friends became frightened and advised them that they would be classed as deserters should they go back to the camps. Tales of what happened to deserters in the Civil War were freely circulated. Perhaps the relatives of some of these boys had deserted from the Confederate Army in the sixties. Perhaps some of them had received the punishment then meted out to offenders. Perhaps some of them had successfully evaded capture by taking refuge in the mountains.

Hide in Mountains

Is it any wonder that some of these inexperienced mountain youths went to the bushes under the circumstances? They were not cowards. They were not afraid to go to France. They yielded to temptation first, then to sentiment, and finally to panic, sheer panic, and the fear of the imagined face of deserters. A few of them hid themselves in the mountains and did not go back to the camps.

A young man, perhaps influenced by patriotic motives, decided that he would capture one of the soldiers who had overstayed his furlough. That was back at Horse Creek where they once fought, according to tradition, for a pasture. It is rumored that one can still by persistence strike a fight on Horse Creek. No doubt there was some whiskey mixed in with the plot. Someone was shot.

Then the Headlines

Then the newspapers got the story. Large headlines proclaimed to the State that deserters had armed themselves in the mountains of Ashe, that they had banded themselves together and were resisting arrest; that there had been a pitched battle between the deserters and the authorities, and that Ashe County was the scene of rebellion against the draft and against the government.

There was much talk of what should be done. It was suggested that a company or regiment of troops be sent here to round up the deserters. How fortunate that this was not done!

Bickett Sympathetic

And fortunate, too, it was that Bickett of the great heart and the golden tongue was Governor of the State of North Carolina. He had been raised in the foothills of the Blue Ridge. Several times on his campaigns he had crossed the mountains. And he knew the type of citizenship to be found in Ashe and neighboring counties. He knew that this was not the soil to produce traitors and cowards. He knew that the mountain people had been slandered and maligned before by well-meaning friends who prated about the "poor mountain whites" and pictured their poverty and their ignorance, taking the most extreme conditions as typical. He was not afraid.

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Makes Appeal

So Bickett came to Ashe County. He asked that the people should be informed that he would speak in the courthouse. And the people came. Out of the hills they came and overflowed the courthouse. Bickett spoke to them as only he could speak to them, out of an understanding heart and with that same eloquence which had won the governorship in spite of the machine that ruled North Carolina. He explained that the meaning of the war as it has not been explained before. He exploded the theory that the boys who had overstayed would be shot if they returned to camp. America had progressed from that barbarism. If the boys would go back to camp, said Bickett, he would personally vouch for their safety from extreme punishment.

Never has been witnessed such a scene in our Jefferson. The Governor was here. He had not come with armed forces and harsh measures. He had come with an understanding heart and an eloquent tongue and he had an olive branch in his hand. He had found not that bands of desperate deserters were among themselves in the mountain fastnesses, but that only a few misguided boys were hiding from a boggy.

Speech Fruitful

And the people responded. The boys came out of their hiding places. One of them, Green Ham, steward son of the hills, came and took his Governor by the hand. Bickett looked him in the eye and said, "All I want is your word. Go back and tell the boys their Governor vouches for their safety. Tell them to go back to camp." And Green Ham gave his word.

The boys came out from their hiding places. As the anniversary of Independence Day dawned in the hills of Ashe, there was a new birth of patriotism. Young Bob Taylor, of honored ancestry, and bearing an honored name, came out of his place of concealment, and tentatively walked up to the courthouse square. "Hi, see you, Bob!" a friendly voice. "I am glad to be seen" was the cheery response. And Bob Taylor went back to the training camp and then to France. He came back home, leaving a leg in Flanders. But he will look you in the eye today and tell you that he is glad that Bickett came to Ashe County.

Respond to Campaign

The other day there was a campaign on in Ashe to raise a fund to erect a memorial to Woodrow Wilson, the war President. One of the first to contribute was Green Ham. And no doubt, if Green Ham has ever given the opportunity, he will contribute to a memorial to Bickett, of the great heart and the golden tongue.

Most of the boys went back to the camps and made soldiers who measured up with their fellows. A few evaders only were left. There were evaders everywhere. The headlines had ceased to herald Ashe County as the refuge of deserters.

The Swashbuckler

Some of the latest evaders promised to go to camp, if an arrangement should be made. The local board asked that a man be sent here to accompany them. The boys agreed to meet him at one of the railway stations. Then S. Glenn Young, he of Herrin history written in blood, and gunman of the Ku Klux Klan at its worst, came to take the boys or camp. He came with a swagger and a threat and with two guns buckled around him. Where Bickett found response Glenn Young found resistance. No wonder mountaineers can be led a long way but they are had to drive.

The number of volunteers from Ashe County brought its war record to a high degree, the Provost-General's report, showing that 461 men were called to service in the draft and that 536 actually served with the colors.

The man who owns as many as twelve cows should have a silo. Free building plans will be furnished by the agricultural extension service of State College.

Tom Tarheel says the only well-watered stock he needs is the livestock of his own place.

Common field corn will make an excellent hay and forage crop if planted in rows three feet apart and given two or three plowings.

The Bride's Prerequisite

A prominent film star was being married.

"So," said the bridegroom, "we are agreed. On Monday morning at 9 o'clock we visit the registrar. After that we go to the church and then you are my own dear wife. Have you anything to say about the arrangements?"

"Only that the film rights will, of course, belong to me." — Berlin Lustige Blaetter.

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