

Family feud

The Hatfields and McCoys now are friends, not foes

By RICH WARREN

Go to Kentucky or West Virginia this June and you might have the chance to see a few Hatfields and McCoys shoot each other. Only this time they'll be using cameras.

That's because the former foes, now friends, actually celebrate their historic feud in a variety of events strung across Pike County, Kentucky, and Mingo County, West Virginia, their ancestral homelands where the famous family conflict broiled between 1878 and 1891. Their festivities, open to the public, include family reunions, trolley tours to historic feud sites and festivals with events such as a "shotgun wedding" and a tug of war between the two families across the river that separates the two states — the losers get pulled into the river. There's even a Hatfield-McCoy marathon race for those inclined to take a good long run through the hilly terrain.

And yes, you heard correctly — you even can attend the family reunion if you've got a hankering to be a Hatfield for a Day. Or be a "Real" McCoy — take your pick. Last year's event included lots of reminiscing and revelry, including karaoke, a live band, dancing (barefoot optional), a poetry reading by Cousin Imogene, even a Hatfield-McCoy trivia contest. Can you name the three McCoy boys killed in the Incident at the Paw Paw Bushes? (Just for the record, it was Tolbert, Pharmer and Bud.) Last year, Jerry Hatfield and Bob McCoy tied for tops in providing the correct answers.

This year's event takes place June 13 at the Landmark Inn in Pikeville, Kentucky. Turnouts have been substantially smaller since the 500 people who showed up the first year in 2000, or in 2003 when the two families officially signed a truce ending the feud that actually ceased more than a century earlier. Nevertheless, you'll be assured a warm welcome, even if you ain't officially kinfolk.

You'll meet descendants of two families who actually revel in the conflict their ancestors once engaged in. There have been much bloodier and longer feuds in the mountains and foothills of Appalachia, but it's the Hatfields and McCoys who have become the stuff of legend, most likely because it was their feud that made it all the way to

the U.S. Supreme Court due to unlawful arrests and illegal extraditions between the two states, or perhaps because the governors of Kentucky and West Virginia themselves got involved in some saber-rattling, threatening to invade the other's territory to put a stop to the violence.

And yes, it really did all start in a quarrel over ownership of a pig, or so the legend goes. Actually, there had been tensions between the families for

years. The Hatfields lived on the West Virginia side of the Tug River, while the McCoys for the most part lived on the Kentucky side. Both had been among the first wave of settlers into the Tug River Valley when it remained extremely isolated from the rest of the world. Both families made and sold moonshine, and both apparently were involved in pro-Confederate guerilla activity during the Civil War. The Hatfields were led by the colorful "Devil Anse" Hatfield, while

patriarch of the McCoys was the more staid Randolph "Ole Ran'l" McCoy.

Through the years, the families had intermarried, acquiring much land in the area and some political influence. More than likely, it was tensions related to land ownership and property lines that sparked the feud, and not the famous pig that Randolph McCoy said had been stolen by Floyd Hatfield. A trial with a Hatfield judge and a jury with six Hatfields and six McCoys saw the verdict in the pig trial go in favor of the Hatfields.

And then the gunfire began. In actuality, there are amazingly few violent incidents that took place during the decade-long feud. One brutal murder of a Hatfield by three McCoys occurred at the "Election House," a place where much celebration and merriment usually went on as voters came to cast their ballots. The Hatfields took their vengeance on those three McCoys by tying them to paw paw bushes lining the Tug River and shooting them execution-style many times each. Their bodies were described as "bullet-riddled." There also was a New Year's night attack by the Hatfields on the McCoy homestead, who set the home ablaze and shot family members as they ran out, killing two and seriously wounding others, including Sarah, "Ole Ran'l's" wife, who lay on the ground so long her hair froze to it.

But perhaps the most compelling part of the story



Jerry Hatfield and Bob McCoy, descendants of two famously feuding families, attend the Hatfield-McCoy Reunion each June. (Photos by Trevor Brown).

was the “Romeo and Juliet” love affair between Roseanna McCoy, Randolph’s daughter, and Johnse Hatfield, “Devil Anse’s” son, who met one day at festivities at the same Election House where fighting between the families had occurred. Despite the hatred between their two families, Roseanna ran off with Johnse, first staying at the Hatfield homestead itself (albeit with Devil Anse’s stern disapproval) and then trysting with him at an aunt’s house not far away. One day Johnse was captured by a posse of McCoys. Knowing they intended to kill him, Roseanna rode bareback to Devil Anse, who sent out a party to retrieve his son. Johnse survived unscratched, but just as in Shakespeare’s tragedy, the story ended badly for the lovers. Johnse spurned Roseanna, who also was rejected by her family for her traitorous ride to the Hatfields to save her lover. Hopeless and pregnant, she miscarried her baby after contracting measles, dying herself at age 30 after seeing Johnse wed one of her cousins.

With clan hatred at a fever pitch, eight Hatfields eventually were kidnapped and brought to Pikeville, Kentucky to stand trial for the murder of Randolph’s daughter on the New Year’s raid of the McCoy home. Seven received life imprisonment, while the eighth, a man named Ellison Mounts, whom some described as “feeble-minded,” was hanged, going to his death riding on his own coffin and repeatedly shouting “The Hatfields made me do it!” With the execution, the two families agreed to stop the fighting, and the feud came to an end.

Or did it? In 2002, headlines trumpeted a new dispute between the families when a Hatfield descendant tried to block access across his property to a cemetery where several McCoys are buried, including the boys shot at the paw paw bushes. A judge ruled that the McCoys could not be denied access to the cemetery.

Still, such tensions are the exception, not the norm. You’ll experience this for yourself if you travel to these beautiful counties in mid-June to take part in the reunion festivities and see how the two families now embrace each other as friends. If you can’t attend the family dinner in Pikeville, consider taking the trolley tours to various feud sites. Two tours leave at 9 and 10 a.m. on June 14 from the Pikeville-Pike County Tourism office at 781

Hambley Boulevard in Pikeville. Sites visited last year included the reconstructed “Election House” and the riverbank where the McCoy lads met their maker tied to the paw paw bushes. At every stop, costumed re-enactors will tell the stories of the feud. You’ll also see the site of the McCoy homestead burned by the Hatfields and pass by the cemetery so recently disputed in court.

If you prefer to take a tour at your own pace, a drive-yourself map or audio CD is available at the Tourism office along with books and videos describing the feud. Just next door is the Big Sandy Heritage Center, a treasure trove of local history with newspaper clippings, portraits and photos related to the Hatfield-McCoys, including the hanging of Ellison Mounts. Also on hand are Civil War memorabilia, railroad displays, and even a voting machine from Palm Beach County, Florida, used in the 2000 elections and complete with ballots and even the infamous chads.

Across the river in Matewan, West Virginia, you can attend Hatfield-McCoy Days on June 14, a daylong street festival with food vendors, music, a concert, an ATV parade, fishing tournament and a Civil War re-enactment. This is also where

the “shotgun wedding” and tug of war takes place. Available nearby to be enjoyed all year long are the Hatfield-McCoy Trails, a system of 500 miles of scenic trails open to ATVs, dirt bikes, horses, mountain bikes and hikers.

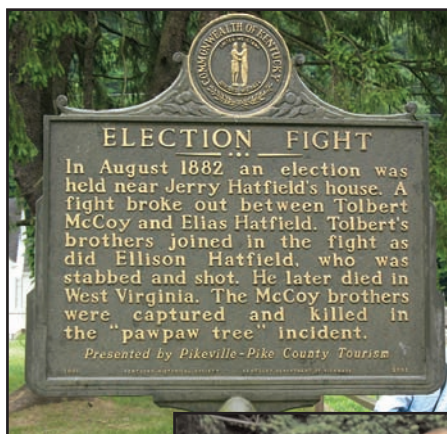
In Williamson, West Virginia, a dinner theater show will take place June 14 as well as a “Beans and Taters Buffet” and a motorcycle tour of feud sites on June 15.

If you wish to go farther afield, the outdoor drama “The Hatfields &

McCoys” can be seen in southern West Virginia at Grandview Park near Beckley. Shows are presented through June and July. Call 800-666-9142 or visit the Web site www.theatrewestvirginia.com. □

Rich Warren is managing editor of Country Living.

For more information on Hatfield-McCoy events in Kentucky, call the Pikeville-Pike County Tourism office at 800-844-7453 or visit their Web site at www.tourpikecounty.com. For events in West Virginia, call the Tug Valley Chamber of Commerce at 304-235-5240.



On June 14, trolley tours in Pike County, Kentucky, will travel to sites associated with the feud, where costumed re-enactors will tell their stories.