

## SIX MONTHS OF HARD 'PAINTING'

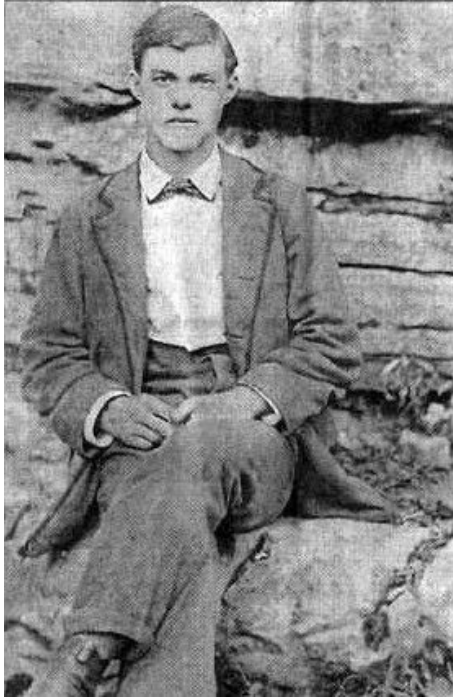
Cumberland Tales

By Randal D. Williams

Special to the Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN

Sunday, 3 May 2009, pg. C-9

My grandfather, L. H. Williams, was a storyteller par excellence. He was born in western Putnam County in 1910, and grew up in a rough-and-tumble environment full of colorful characters and tellers of tall tales. Many of the stories my grandfather heard as a young man took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One such story was that of John "Red" LaFever, the veracity of which is known only to history.



(Pictured: Lawson Williams (1879-1910). Lawson was one of the Williams boys; he was a raconteur, gambler, moonshiner, riverman and colorful character of the Upper Cumberland).

The William boys – Tim, Tandy, John Riley, Joseph and Lawson – were the sons of Joseph Williams and Parsetta Maynard. The senior Joseph was a veteran of the War Between the States, having first served in the 12<sup>th</sup> Confederate artillery, until things went awry at Vicksburg, after which the idea of wedded bliss and the status of home-grown Yankee held a strong appeal for him; he finished the war in the 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Mounted Infantry, USA.

The Williams clan lived above the Caney Fork River near Bozarth, DeKalb County, in the heart of the "Bloody Eight" Civil District, a noman's land of sorts, with a lawless reputation. The Williams boys never worked "regular" jobs. As a matter of fact, they had the reputation of being averse to regular employment of any sort. Their idea of gainful employment and contributing to society ran toward producing the best corn liquor in the Upper Cumberland, which could be

used for entertainment and medicinal purposes, thereby providing a much-needed and appreciated social service; they were altruists to the core, in the finest tradition of their Celtic ancestors.

Besides being known as whiskey makers, the Williamses also had a reputation as expert rivermen, capable of lashing great log rafts together and floating them to Nashville on the Cumberland River. Before the days of highways and railroads in the Upper Cumberland, commodities were shipped to Nashville and other markets via the Cumberlands and its tributaries such as the Caney Fork of the Cumberlands. The Caney Fork of that time was unimpeded by dams such as those at Great Falls and Center Hill. There were no reservoir impoundments; the Caney Fork was a wild, untamed river, and only the hardest of rivermen would attempt a run to Nashville on a raft made of hundreds of hardwood logs, thousands of feet long. One such would-be riverman was John LaFever, who, because of the events his first and only river excursion, would be forever known as "Red."

One day in 1899, the William boys were working at a log chute on the Caney Fork, preparing logs for rafting. A good trip to Nashville would provide a year's earnings, especially when combined with whiskey revenue. The men, or "hands" who helped guide the logs to market could make up to \$4 for a trip to Nashville. John Lafever signed on as a hand.

On the scheduled day of departure, the William boys were assembled at the chute by daylight. The raft oars had been made, provisions stowed in the raft shanty, and the earthy aroma of the river whetted their appetites for the adventure to come. John Lafever arrived just as the sun was coming up. He was dressed as an adherent to the Lost Cause in butternut homespun, brogans and a slouch hat. John also had a bandana with several days' rations wrapped in it, a 32-20 pistol and a gallon crock jug of moonshine. John had

never been on a log raft, nor had he ever been out of DeKalb County. The Williams boys laughed at John, and asked him what he intended to do with the liquor and pistol, to which he replied, "Paint the town red!"

The raft trip to Nashville was arduous, but the rivermen were in good spirits. Over the course of the four-day trip, they shot snakes, yelled at girls on the riverbank, told lies and had a good time. When they arrived in Nashville, at the foot of Broad Street, they sold their logs to the Farris Lumber Company, and John was given his \$4 payment for services rendered.

By this time the Tennessee Central Railroad had traversed the Upper Cumberland, so the rivermen could enjoy the relative luxury of riding the train home from Nashville, with their earnings in hand, which is what the Williams boys did. But John spent his \$4 on whiskey, women and song. He used his 32-20 pistol to shoot out storefront windows along Broad Street, for which he received a sentence of six months hard labor on a Davison County chain gang.

Life went on as normal in Bozarth for those six months. One cold winter day, John showed up in Bozarth looking for all the world like the specter of some veteran of the Chickamauga campaign. John was humbled and swore that he would never step foot in the big city again, even if it was worth \$5.

John Riley looked at John's sad condition and said, "well, John, did you paint the town red?" John studied the question for a moment before replying, "You're damn right I did. It just took a hell of a lot longer than I thought it was going to!"

Within a few years of this episode, only the old timers of Bozarth remembered the name of the erstwhile riverman as John; to everyone else he was known as Red LaFever.

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