

**CORDELL HULL – HISTORY OF A MAN AND PLACE
IN THE UPPER CUMBERLAND**

Cumberland Tales

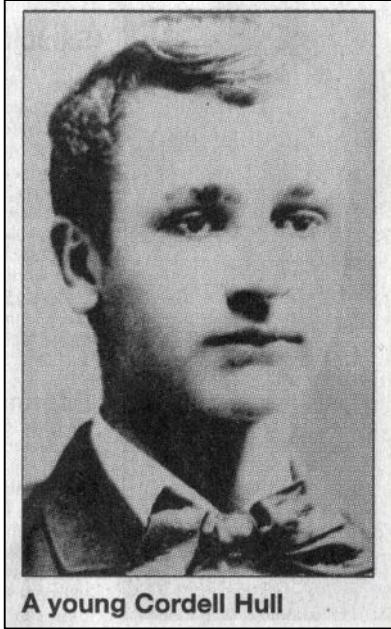
By Robin Peeler

Wooten, Park Manager

Cordell Hull Birthplace State Historic Area

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In the north central region of Tennessee, where the Highland Rim meets the Cumberland Plateau, is situated Cordell Hull Birthplace State Historic Park, just a stone’s throw from Kentucky and very close to the popular Dale Hollow Lake. The park is not large but emanates a strong sense of the personal history of former Secretary of State Cordell Hull and his family, as well as the cultural heritage of the region.



A young Cordell Hull

The famous U. S. Secretary of State from Tennessee was born in present day Pickett County near Byrdstown on Oct. 2, 1871. Prior to 1879, the property was in the community of Olympus in Overton County. Parts of Fentress and Overton County were combined to create Pickett County by the Acts of Tennessee, 1879. The son of civil war soldier William Hull, Cordell Hull was the middle son, with two older and two younger brothers. The young family consisted of father William (known as Billy), mother Elizabeth Riley, and brothers Orestes, Senadius, and Wyoming. Youngest brother Roy was born in 1881 after the family had moved to their next home.

The Hull family moved to the area from nearby Fentress Country. Cordell’s grandfather Allen C. Hull moved to that area of Tennessee from Asheville, North Carolina, on the heels of the Revolution. Going back further, both the Hull and Riley ancestors were from England and fought in the American Revolutionary War.

Like most families of the rural Upper Cumberland, the Hulls were subsistence farmers. They rented the two room cabin and sharecropped the land. To supplement his income early on, Billy Hull made moonshine down at Buncombe cave in a “one gallon” still. At the time, moonshining was not frowned upon heavily, and most families operated a small still. Those were the days before prohibition and clandestine operations were merely used to try to avoid paying the unpopular taxes.

The Hull’s primary income while at the cabin was to grow a variety of crops. An 1870 agricultural census recorded Hull’s crops as Indian corn, oats, sweet potatoes, and Irish potatoes. Hull also grew and harvested sugar cane to produce an annual amount of 15 gallons of molasses. Additionally, the family had a kitchen garden where they grew vegetables to eat and put up for the winter. Their garden likely included many row crops such as corn, potatoes, cabbage, tomatoes, and onions. Particularly important to the farmers of the era were beans and most families grew multiple varieties. Some of the favorites were colloquially known as: “Methodist Beans,” Granny Dillon,” “Paterge (Partridge) Head,” “Quailhead Beans,” and “Missouri Wonders.”

The Hull Farm likely consisted of typical farm buildings for the time period and many are documented in writings and historical photos. The outbuildings that probably surrounded the cabin include a corncrib, smoke house, barn, chicken coop, pigsty and outhouse. A water well was located near the cabin, and it was expected that the cabin had a swept yard near the entrances for hanging laundry and to keep varmints away from the home. The brothers undoubtedly had a dirt patch for their marble playing field as well as a beaten down path to Buncombe (now Bunkum) Cave that was one mile away.

Farm life was busy but the young boys, including Cordell, helped out their father and mother as much as they could at their early age. Harvest time usually involved the neighbors and turned into a community

affair. Evenings were spent in the cabins where lamp oil and candles were a precious commodity. Elizabeth was a spinner and spent the evenings spinning, weaving or quilting. She and Billy encouraged the boys to read from a young age and it is likely they spent time learning to read and write by candlelight. Evenings were also a time for music, singing, storytelling and indoor games such as jacks and checkers.

The cabin was dogtrot style with an outdoor breezeway in the middle between the rooms. The living quarters and sleeping area were combined to make one room of the cabin and included an upstairs where the boys would have slept on straw tick mattresses on the floor. The kitchen was a separate but connected room where meals were prepared and eaten. Many of the household chores occurred here such as drying of herbs and candle making.

When Cordell Hull was four years old in 1875, Billy Hull was able to purchase a piece of land near the Obey River and the family moved into a small shack while Hull built an impressive cabin on the new property. Billy Hull then commenced to log the area and was a pioneer in this field for the Upper Cumberland. As they grew, Cordell and his brothers helped their father cut logs and then raft them down Obey River to the Cumberland River and on to Nashville where they were sold in the market. Billy Hull became a successful businessman through the logging business and was able to provide comfortably for his family for the long term.

Cordell's education continued as he grew, and at an early age he had a keen interest in politics and affairs of the world. His father established a schoolhouse in Willow Grove, which the boys attended. Cordell had the strongest desire for learning and his father also hired tutors to guide the boy through his studies. Later, he went to Montvale Academy in Celina and Bowling Green, Kentucky. He completed his undergraduate education at National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio. As his interest in law developed, he apprenticed at law firms in Celina and Nashville, and then received a law degree from Cumberland University in Lebanon in 1891 at the young age of 19.

In the following 64 years, Cordell Hull enjoyed a fulfilling career and personal life. He married Rose Frances Witz of Virginia in 1917. The couple had no children and lived in both Carthage, and Washington D. C. Hull's professional roles included occupation as a successful lawyer, judge, military captain in the Spanish American War, U. S. Representative, U. S. Senator, and U. S. Secretary of State under President Franklin D. Roosevelt from 1933-1944, which included World War II. It was in this last capacity that he gained the most distinction as the "Father of the United Nations." Cordell Hull received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1945 for his role in creating the international peacekeeping and security organization.

The birthplace and countryside that nurtured and sculpted Cordell Hull to be an international leader and Nobel laureate are still there. The cabin and parts of the farm have been reconstructed and are now part of a state park. While there are many changes through time, some things are unwavering. The landscape remains as the rolling, beautiful hills that Cordell Hull and his brothers enjoyed. From the son of a sharecrop farmer to a strong voice in the international arena, this Upper Cumberland inspired Cordell Hull and continues to inspire people today.

To learn more about Cordell Hull and life in the rural Upper Cumberland, visit Cordell Hull Birthplace State Historic Park in Byrdstown. For more information, please call the park at 931-864-3247 or you can look online at www.tnstateparks.com or www.friendsofcordellhull.org.

"Cumberland Tales" created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tentech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu

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