

The Hatfield-McCoy Feud

The Hatfield-McCoy Feud, a prolonged vendetta between neighboring families in the Tug Valley, was fought largely in the 1880s. The Hatfields lived mostly in Logan County (including present Mingo) in West Virginia, and the McCoys lived mostly across the [Tug Fork](#) in adjacent Pike County, Kentucky. Their leaders were [Anderson “Devil Anse” Hatfield](#) and [Randolph \(Randall or “Ran’l”\) McCoy](#). Both families were deeply rooted in the region and extensively intermarried with other families and with each other; several surnames were represented in the struggle, and Hatfields and McCoys were involved on both sides. The affair was the most notorious of several feuds taking place in eastern Kentucky and neighboring areas at the time.

The earliest known violence between the families was the January 1865 murder in Pike County of Harmon McCoy, a Union army veteran and brother of Randolph McCoy. Harmon was believed to have been killed by the [Logan Wildcats](#), a band of Confederate guerrillas usually led by Devil Anse Hatfield. While contributing to hard feelings which later found outlet in the feud, McCoy’s murder was typical of [bushwhacker](#) violence throughout the border states during and after the Civil War.

In 1878, Randolph McCoy accused Floyd Hatfield of stealing a hog. Both were Pike Countians, and the resulting trial was held at the home of their neighbor, William Anderson “Preacher Anse” Hatfield, who was a Baptist minister and justice of the peace. Floyd Hatfield prevailed when Bill Staton, though Randolph McCoy’s nephew, testified in favor of Hatfield, and juror Selkirk McCoy, Randolph’s cousin, provided the decisive vote for acquittal. Staton was harassed following the trial, then killed by brothers Sam and Paris McCoy, also nephews of Randolph.

Tensions increased at the spring 1880 elections at Blackberry Creek in Pike County. Devil Anse’s son, Johnse Hatfield, visiting from Logan County, slipped away from the election grounds with Randolph McCoy’s daughter, Rose Anna. Their off-and-on relationship, which may have produced an illegitimate child, galled both families for years to come.

Much worse trouble ensued at the Blackberry Creek election in 1882. Devil Anse’s brother, Ellison Hatfield, was mortally wounded in a drunken brawl by three McCoy brothers, apparently in an argument over a small debt owed on a fiddle. Tolbert, Pharmer, and Randolph McCoy Jr., sons of Randolph, were captured by the Hatfields. Once Ellison died of his wounds, the three boys were tied to pawpaw bushes on the Kentucky side of the Tug and shot dead.

Following the killings of 1882, the feud simmered as McCoys attempted unsuccessfully to have Hatfields arrested and tried in the courts. Perry Cline, a Pikeville lawyer who had previously disputed with Devil Anse over valuable timberlands, persuaded the governor of Kentucky to request extradition from [Governor E. W. Wilson](#) of West Virginia. Wilson refused, then and later, and at times it appeared that there might be armed conflict between the two states.

The McCoys suffered another great loss on the night of January 1, 1888, when Hatfields led by Devil Anse’s uncle, [Jim Vance](#), set fire to the family’s Pike County cabin. Calvin and Alifair, Randolph McCoy’s grown children, were killed, and their mother, Sarah, severely bludgeoned. This atrocity brought matters to a head, putting the Hatfields on the defensive for the duration of the conflict, hunted in their own West Virginia neighborhoods. Vance was soon killed by a posse of Kentuckians led by McCoy partisan Frank Phillips, and the two sides fought a pitched battle at Grapevine Creek, near present Matewan, on January 19. Eventually four Hatfield sons and others were indicted for the cabin raid, and their cousin, Ellison Mounts, was hanged in Pikeville, February 18, 1890. This ended the family war.

The Hatfield-McCoy Feud was exacerbated, especially in its later stages, by enterprising detectives, imperfectly deputized posses, sensationalizing newspaper men, and meddling lawyers. Historians, novelists, playwrights, and script writers have scarcely let it rest in the years since. Various explanations have been offered, including differences originating in the Civil War and strains caused by the rapid industrialization of the region. None adequately explains the

depth of bitterness and the amount of blood shed between neighbors on the Tug Fork.

Written by [Ken Sullivan](#)

Citations

1. Rice, Otis K. *The Hatfields and the McCoys*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982.
2. Waller, Altina L. *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys, and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860-1900*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.