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R Y A N

Captain James Buckner Ryan

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CAPTAIN JAMES BUCKNER RYAN

By Bobby Anderson

Some family genealogies in the Mud River district of Muhlenberg County are brief -- but few as brief as that of the Ryan family. It is almost completely contained within the generation of Capt. James Buckner Ryan himself.

Ryan was a Confederate soldier who came to the Mud River district in 1870, seeking the quiet and solitude of the area to which he moved. With the exception of his influence on the mining of coal at Mud River, he left little behind at his death in 1906 -- not even a tombstone. Had it not been for the granddaughter of a close family friend, Buckner's grave at Mt. Moriah church might still be unmarked.

One thing he did leave for future generations was a brief biography contained in less than half page of a book of subsidized historical accounts of many of the prominent residents of the state. His was printed in the Muhlenberg County section of a late 1800s biographical history of Kentuckians.

From it we learn that James Buckner Ryan was born in Bath County, Ky. on June 24, 1838, the son of Major Moses Ryan and Dulcinea Payne Ryan, the daughter of William Payne. James B. Ryan had six sisters.

His father, Moses Ryan moved from Kentucky to Nashville, Tenn. in 1853, and there James Buckner Ryan was educated. His collegiate years versed him in English and the literature of the day.

In 1861, he joined the Confederate army with the rank of second lieutenant, in the second battalion of the Tennessee cavalry. This position was short-lived, for in 1862 he resigned to recruit his own Confederate company. He was commissioned a captain, and served with General John Hunt Morgan until the end of the conflict.

Ryan grew restless in Nashville, and in late 1870, a friend, Dr. B. W. Hall of Nashville, who was active in the mining of coal at Mud River, lured Ryan to Kentucky. Here Ryan limited his activities in the coal business and spent much of his time in the wilds of the area, secluded with only his gun and dog as companions. He fished, hunted, studied from such books as he could procure, and in his own word, found the "quietude" he much craved. It was said that after coming here with Hall, he disagreed with the owner over methods of mining coal, and took little part in the operation of the mine the first several years.

However, in 1873, he began to notice the rich deposits of minerals, ore and coal along Mud River and turned his energy toward development of the industry.

As Dr. Hall began to withdraw, Ryan grew more interested, and organized the Mud River Coal, Coke and Iron Manufacturing Co. in 1873. He became superintendent of the operation.

Heretofore, coal operations has been on the "river side" of the giant ridge, with coal being shipped by wagon, or down river on a barge. Ryan opened the first mine on what was to be known as the "railroad side", and caused the rail line to be laid from Penrod (then Laurel Bluff, Pleasant Valley or Albrittain) to the mine. A new tipple and many modern (at the time) mining innovations were

brought to the mine by Ryan. Historians differ as to the size of the operation, and the extent of the community developed around it. Billy Hoskinson, whose father, Jackson Hoskinson, sub-leased the mine from Hall and Ryan in 1871-72, said no more than eight houses, barns and a blacksmith shop existed in the Mud River community. However, others say more. For instance, there is historical proof of an office where "flickers" were issued to the miners which were good for merchandise at the company-operated store. A post office existed there prior to 1900 and almost everyone above, and a distance from Rochester, and those below what is now Forgy Mill Bridge, received their mail at Mud River. The organization of the post office at Gus, and a type of rural mail delivery spelled the end to the post office at Mud River, as the mining industry also was being curtailed. Some of the "flickers" from Mud River Mine are still in the possession of Claude Travis at Beechmont. Oldtimers says that at one time there were as many as 40 houses in the general area of the mine, many owned by Ryan and the mining company.

Ryan sold his interest in the mine sometime before 1900 to William G. S. Anderson of Nashville, the son of a Scottish immigrant. The Andersons were remembered for their beautiful home, exciting parties and well-educated young daughters. With the advent of larger mines on the L&N Railroad, the demand for coal from Mud River declined, and soon the operation became unprofitable. The Andersons left shortly after 1900 because of the slow demise of the mine, and the pulling of the railroad steel by the L&N Railroad.

On April 29, 1878, Capt. Ryan married Isabela D. (Dorcas Isabela) Bowling in Muhlenberg County. Though she was a Bowling when he married her, Capt. Ryan often referred to his wife as "formerly Miss Steele", indicating she was a Steele prior to previous marriages. Those who knew the Ryans say Mrs. Ryan was indeed related to the Steele family, the daughter of John Edward and Nancy Steele, Tennesseans, who later lived at Mud River. John Edward Steele is the forefather of most Steeles in Muhlenberg County today.

Isabela acquired her Bowling name when she married James M. Bowling in Muhlenberg County on Oct. 19, 1867. At the time of that marriage, she was Isabela Johnson, indicating a previous marriage to a (James) Johnson -- that marriage license yet to be found.

Lending credence to a former marriage to James Johnson, is found in a survey of her children, and those belonging to Isabela and Capt. Ryan.

The 1880 census, the first after his marriage to Isabela, shows in the Ryan family, a son, John, born in 1866; a daughter, Carrie, born in 1874; a son, Herbert, born in 1875 and a son, Buck, born in 1878.

Buck was, and is known to be, Ryan's son with Isabela. He is buried beside his father at Mt. Moriah. Herbert and Carrie were Isabela's children after her marriage to James Bowling, though there are indication Bowling may have died before 1870, and thus could not have been Herbert's and Carrie's father. John almost certainly is Isabela's son by the Johnson marriage, for in 1900 John was gone from the Ryan household, and is unaccounted for, yet two grandchildren, George and William Johnson, born in 1891 and 1893, live in the Ryan home. They were listed as grandchildren. These are probably John's children.

The reason to assume Bowling died prior to 1870 is that Isabela was censused in that year, with her son John, in the Arch Pollock home at Mud River, where she was listed as a servant. Mrs. Pollock, Julina, was Isabela's sister. Carrie and Herbert were born after that--but apparently prior to her marriage to Ryan. Current generations, children of Ryan's family friends, have always believed Herbert and Carrie were Ryan's own children, even though they were born prior to the date officially recorded at Greenville for Ryan's marriage to Isabella.

Even his biography, written from information given by Ryan to the book editors reads: "His wife, formerly Miss Steele of Muhlenberg County, is a lady of rare accomplishments. They are the parents of one daughter, Carrie and two sons, Herbert and Buck."

Only one descendant of Capt. Ryan is known today. She, a niece, Mrs. Johnson, lives in Louisville, and was sought out by Penrod Postmaster Sarah Dean Clark Wood, to sign necessary papers for the erection of a veteran's monument at Ryan's grave several years ago.

Mrs. Wood, granddaughter of Samuel Clark, a close friend, companion and employee of Capt. Ryan, had been shown Ryan's grave many times by her father and grandfather. When veteran's markers became available, she applied for one for the man who then slept in that heretofore unmarked grave.

Information available to her showed only Ryan's second lieutenant commission in the Confederate army. Hence the marker reads: "2nd Lt. James Buckner Ryan, 1st Bn. Tenn. Cav. CSA, June 29, 1838 -- Aug. 14, 1906". However, Ryan, in his own words to the history editor, told of being commissioned a captain in the Confederate army. Until recently, most believed the monicker "Capt. Ryan" had come from his captaincy of a steamboat, the "Buck Ryan" which he used to tow barges of coal from his mine. Now, it is known that he also was a Confederate army officer with the official rank of captain.

Mrs. Wood said recently, that in searching for Ryan's kin, she learned that after Ryan's death, Isabela went for a visit "down toward Owensboro", and there she took sick and died. She is buried near the community where she was visiting.

Captain Ryan, after his years of solitude in the dense forest surrounding the Mud River tract, became a community leader following his organization of the mining company and subsequent marriage. He was a Mason at the Rochester lodge, and a member of the Democrat party, though by his own admission, voted only twice after 1860. His religious beliefs were described as "liberal".

His house, considered one of the finer homes in the area, remained for many years following his death. Later residents of the home included the Boone Jenkins family and the Milam Porter family, who lived there in the late 1940s.

Capt. James Buckner Ryan left many marks on the early mining industry in his adopted community, but only a few people today, if any can claim a heritage as Captain Ryan's descendant.

Thus, an era began -- and also ended within the generation of James Buckner Ryan.

