

M. d. J.

MAJOR WOODFORD MITCHELL HOUCHIN

Woodford Mitchell Houchin was born 1836, in Edmonson County, Kentucky, on the north side of Green River within what is now the Mammoth Cave National Park. He was a son of John D. Houchin, who as a small lad had followed his father, John Houchin, as he migrated from King William County, Virginia, and settled on the south side of Green River about half way between the mouth of Buffalo Creek and Mammoth Cave upon a 200-acre tract of land which was granted to him in 1797 by the State of Virginia for services rendered in 1776-1778 as a member of a company of light dragoons commanded by Captain Cuthbert Harrison in the American Revolution. Here he built his cabin on top of the hill, cut a clearing, farmed, hunted and fished, and in 1797 helped establish a road leading from Munfordsville by way of his settlement to the settlements at Bowling Green, and operated a ferry where it crossed Green River a little below the Stice Island. This road was the most direct route between these frontier settlements and continued to be the main-traveled thoroughfare between them until the cobblestone stage-coach road from Louisville to Nashville skirting the foothills around the knobs was constructed more than a quarter of a century later. He also acquired additional land adjacent to his original 200-acre tract; two of his brothers, Charles and Francis, settled nearby; and when Edmonson County was established in 1825, his settlement was seriously considered as a proposed site for the county seat, but finally was abandoned in favor of a more-centrally located site, then known as Point Pleasant, where a wharf for the loading of flatboats had been established on Green River just above the mouth of Big Beaver Dam Creek.

Among his other exploits he is reputed to have been the original discoverer of Mammoth Cave when he chased a bear into it , although Boone may have

preceded him into these underground recesses when he spent the winter of 1769-70 in this area.

His property included two faithful slaves, Harklis and Rose, whom he manumitted by the terms of his will probated in 1838, after he passed away "being old and infirm".

His son John D., — commonly known as "Johnny Dick" in order to distinguish him from his father, and also from another John Houchin of the community, — upon reaching maturity settled across on the north side of Green River and in 1811 married Polly Blair, the daughter of another veteran of the American Revolution who had migrated here from Virginia. Following her death he was married to Nancy, and continued to live in The Forks of Green and Nolin Rivers until he passed away in 1873, at the age of 87 years.

In whatever activity he was engaged he was so apt and agile that his name became a synonym for the characteristics he so aptly exemplified. Primarily he was a riverman, and was generally recognized as the most skillful pilot who ever plied the Green, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from the Mammoth Cave country with a cargo of hoopoles to the market at New Orleans. So skillful he was that never once did he fail to steer his flatboat safely around that sharp and treacherous bend in Green River about a mile above the mouth of Nolin where less-skilled pilots habitually wrecked their cargo upon the jutting rock which rises abruptly out of the water at the foot of Indian Hill; and it became customary for those who embarked from upstream and began the long voyage to the mouth of the Mississippi to tie up their craft upon approaching this danger spot until they could engage him to steer it past this menace; and the practice became so general that to this day, after the lapse of more than a century, that

treacherous phenomenon is still known as "The Johnny Dick Rock."

His name became even more widely associated with an expression he uttered to his wife one cold wintry night in December after he had toiled at the river all day in a blizzard of snow and sleet. In addition to having foregone his lunch at noontime, he probably had imbibed even more frequently than usual in a little swig of moonshine in order to perpetuate circulation and survive the sub-zero temperature. He was hungry. So when his good wife, Nancy, transferred to the table in the kitchen a heaping bowl of beans from the simmering pot suspended before the open wood fire and a pone of plain cornbread from the skillet upon the hearth, he took another swig from the jug upon the shelf and feasted ravenously. Then as soon as he could shed his boots and strip off his pants, he "hit the hay" for the night, embedded in eiderdown and tucked beneath a blanket of wool.

Ere long, however, a pain struck him with such an abrupt forewarning that he leaped from his bed and headed in his drawer-tail for the out-of-doors, only to be confronted with such a pelting of snow and sleet that he slammed shut the door and hurriedly scanned the room for to espy the empty skillet upon the hearth as the quickest convenience available.

As he hunkered down over it to ease himself before the warmth of the dying embers, his wife sat up in bed and demanded: "What on earth, Johnny Dick, are you doing that for?"

"Just to show you that I'm 'Johnny Dick', old woman! --- I'm Johnny Dick!" he shot back at her.

Thereupon, the expression, "I'm Johnny Dick," or "There goes Johnny Dick," sprang into common usage and prevails to this day hereabouts denoting wilful

determination, and a show of indomitable ego.

Is it any wonder that with the old pioneer veteran of the American Revolution for a grandfather, and with "Johnny Dick" for a father, Woodford Houchin was a unique and colorful character, and that his career was charged with action and was always incisive upon the course of events?

At the age of sixteen, gripped by the urge of wanderlust, he drifted by flatboat down the Green, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as far as frontier Missouri, where he disembarked, and during the winter wandered inland as far as Springfield; but in March he headed onward toward the "gold rush country" and arrived in Sacramento in October (1853). For a year or more he batched in his cabin, farmed a little, and operated his own mine in the vicinity of Diamond Springs; but in 1855, when he was nineteen, he teamed up with other young adventurers under the leadership of that "grey-eyed man of destiny", General William Walker, a Tennesseean and sailed out from San Francisco aboard the Golden Age commanded by Captain McQuin. After marauding in Lower California and Sovera, this buccaneering expedition landed in Nicaragua, where they instigated a revolution and overturned the government.

At first "Major" Houchin was under the immediate command of Captain McQuin, but by the time the revolution in Nicaragua had succeeded he had risen himself to the rank of Captain, was answerable only to General Walker, and was in command of the Vanderbilt Railroad across the isthmus which they had commandeered and expropriated in order to obtain the fabulous revenues it yielded.

After twenty-five months out from California, however, they were expelled by United States forces from the little country they had conquered, and

"Major", (who was probably adventuring under an assumed name,) made his escape by way of New Orleans and Cloverport, Kentucky, back to his home in the hills of Edmonson County. When he arrived here he was suffering from a gunshot wound in the temple received in Nicaragua and was half-dead of dropsy. By the calendar he was twenty-one years of age; by experience he was an old man. At any rate, his colorful career had only yet begun.

By 1861 he had recovered from his illness, operated a bar in Brownsville for William Hazelip, and stood stud horses for Jesse Houchin; and when hostilities opened he promptly raised a Company of Volunteers and headed for Calhoun, Kentucky, where they were mustered into the Union Army as Company E of the 11th Kentucky Regiment, with "Major" as their Captain, of course.

From Calhoun they proceeded to Owensboro, Nashville, and to Shiloh, participating in the battle there and in the advance onto Corinth. Then by way of Juke and Huntsville they reached Battle Creek about July 1, 1862. In another month they were chasing Bragg, proceeding by way of Bowling Green, Louisville, Perryville, Crab Orchard, Cumberland Gap and Silver Spring. At Carthage in the following spring they were "mounted" and headed for Bowling Green, Knoxville and Loudon, where they engaged General Longstreet. After the seige at Knoxville they wintered at Mt. Sterling, and in the following spring headed for Knoxville again, and then to Charleston and to Dalton, Georgia.

Meanwhile he had been promoted to the rank of Major and had led his Regiment in some of the toughest battles of the war. When mustered out in January, 1864, he was still not more than 28 years of age.

The young Major was still full of daring, but this time he sought adventure at home. He helped reinstate the local Masonic Lodge, which had become defunct during the War. He built a residence down Main Street half a square from the courthouse. He entered politics and was elected County Judge. Moreover, his old comrade, Captain Noah Morris, who had succeeded to the command of Company E. when "Major" was promoted, was on the ticket with him and won the Office of County Court Clerk. They immediately launched a building program for the County. A bridge across Nolin River was built at Dickey's Mills; a stone wall around the courthouse yard was constructed; and finally, they erected a new courthouse, which still stands as a monument to their memory after the lapse of nearly a century.

Both were re-elected in 1870; and in 1874 Captain Morris was continued in the Clerk's Office, while Major, having been admitted to the bar, was elected County Attorney.

For some time Major had engaged in the gratuitous practice of law for his friends without regard for his lack of a law license or credentials, — much to the annoyance of P. F. Edwards, who was then County Attorney. So when "Major" volunteered to attend Squire M. M. Logan's Court and defend young George Wright Lindsey and his brothers, Wood, John Thomas, and Little Joe, along with Asel Forbes, on a charge of ducking John Will Vincent in the icy waters of the baptizing hole at Holly Springs, and won their case because the victim had yelled "schoolbutter" at them, — that being a term of derision in those days, — County Attorney Edwards promptly had the "Major" indicted for practicing law without a license.

In those days a license to practice law here was not hard to come by. No formal education was required and the Circuit Judge issued law licenses in his discretion, — having due regard for his friends, perhaps.

At that time J. E. Halsell was Circuit Judge, but when the March Term, 1871, of Court convened, he was too ill to attend; and the local bar agreed upon James P. Bates to hold Court in his stead. One of the first things Judge Bates did was to issue a law license to the "Major". When the indictment against "Major" came on to be heard the case was continued until the following term of Court. By that time the Old Judge had resigned and Judge John A. Finn had been appointed to succeed him. At that term the charges against "Major" were dismissed, — at his costs.

The costs amounted to about \$50.00; and as "Major" paid this amount to the Clerk he is reputed to have remarked facetiously, "Mighty high tuition for what little law-schooling I got!"

There was laughter in the courtroom. Anyway, the Major was now a full-fledged lawyer, — de jure as well as de facto, — and was destined to be the next County Attorney, replacing his adversary, McIntire, who had served in the Confederate Army.

In one of his campaigns for County Judge Major won over his Democrat opponent, Perry Smith, by a scant margin of only a vote or two. When Smith threatened to contest the election Major challenged him to run it over. They did so, — elections being conducted rather informally in those days, — and in the re-run Major swamped him by a landslide.

Major hardly could have been considered a handsome man. He limped when he walked, because of an incurable sore on his leg caused by a Civil War bullet in the leg. Measles suffered at Calhoun in the epidemic immediately following his enlistment in the Army had impaired his eyesight. A scar across his temple was the memento of a gunshot wound incurred while marauding in Nicaragua. But his old battle-scarred comrades always rallied to him in politics

as they had done in war. Truly, he was a natural-born leader of men.

He was not a polished orator. His only schooling had been on the far-flung fields of adventure and of carnage. Moreover, he stammered terribly, a defect of speech he attributed to his habit as a boy of mimicking John Lindsey. Yet in spite of his "and-ah's" he was a powerful stump-speaker, for with a well-chosen metaphor he could drive home a point as if charging a regiment of Rebels at Shiloh. So when it was bruited about that Major would make a campaign speech at a given time and place, his old comrades and friends always poured out to hear him.

He especially hated prohibition and all that it implies; and when a local option election was about to be held in the County he promptly took the stump in defense of our personal liberties which he had protected on many a rampart of battle-gore.

At Beaver Dam, some four miles out from Brownsville, a tremendous crowd assembled to hear him pour it on. The weather was fine and the rally was held out-of-doors in a recently-cleared new-ground where the field was dotted with stumps of the virgin timber which had recently been cut and removed. Many of the crowd took up their seats on these giant stumps, sometimes four or five finding room on the same stump.

"Major" was at his best that day. In his stammering but effective manner he explained the evils of prohibition, — wrong in principle, wrong in practice, disastrous in results. George Washington, who gave us our Nation, was a drinking man, he reminded them. So was General Grant, who preserved it.

At the mention of the name of Grant his old

comrades let out a war-whoop which reverberated up the Creek for miles.

"Doctors recommend the use of spirits", he continued, "and so does the Bible:" and the crowd cheered again.

Having aroused them to fever pitch he now proceeded to rally them for the final charge at the polls on election day.

"And-ah!" he stammered, "What are you going to do about it!"

They whooped and yelled.

"And-ah! Are you going to sit a-straddle of these stumps and let the enemy take us!"

"No!" the crowd roared.

"And-ah!" he commanded: "Mount your steeds, then, and tell your neighbors!" After a brief pause, he continued: "And-ah! Charge the enemy as we did at Shiloh and at Corinth!"

There was pandemonium.

After another pause: "And-ah! Never look back! Never look back!" ~~We never looked back~~ at Shiloh, did we!"

"No!" The crowd yelled.

"Nor at Corinth!"

"No! No!" They yelled again.

"And-ah! We won't look back now."

They threw their hats in the air and yelled like hyenas.

"And-ah! Don't be like Lot's wife!" he persisted. "And-ah! She looked back! And-ah! You know what happened to her!"

Some half-drunk interrupted to inquire in all seriousness: "What, Major?"

"And-ah! Lot's wife looked back!" Major replied. "And-ah! was turned into a pillar of salt!"

After a pause he added: "And-ah! After all these 3,000 years they tell me that the cows still come a-licking her salty old stern!"

There was bedlam. One old comrade, Hart Souders, perched high on a stump, threw his hat high in the air and yelled, "Gig'em again, Major! Gig'em again!"

The Major was finished and the crowd rushed forward to grasp his hand. Unfortunately, Hart Souders, had no grip to grasp him with, for as he had let out his war-whoop and thrown his hat into the air, he had lost his balance, fallen from his stump and broken his arm. But casualties were to be expected in any charge when Major led it.