

“Put Up Your Dukes and Make No Bones About It”

A Western Kentucky Feud

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Tonight I want to take you on a journey to the north part of Christian County. As we look toward the borders of where Todd, Christian, Muhlenberg, and Hopkins counties meet, we find Pond River, a body of water that divides the Christian and Muhlenberg Counties and runs northwest to eventually empty into the Green River. The major geographic formation of the area was known as Dukes Ridge, named for one of the pioneer families that settled this area. In the later parts of the 1800s, the area was very remote and isolated—the perfect setting for entrepreneurial ventures that needed to be free from the watchful eyes of law enforcement. To make some extra money, many of the families who raised livestock also grew tobacco and made corn liquor “moonshine.” It wasn’t quite the wild west, but things did get rather wild; especially when members of two of the oldest families got caught up in an exciting feud rivaling that of Shakespeare’s Montagues and Capulets or Kentucky’s most famous feuding families: the Hatfields and McCoys. Mr. President, Mr. Secretary-Treasurer, Fellow Presenter, and Members of the Athenaeum Society, I present to you: “Put Up Your Dukes and Make No Bones About It: A Western Kentucky Feud.”

Among the most prominent of the families that settled Dukes Ridge were the Dukes, Bones, Hills, Wells, Overtons, and Johnsons. These families were large and often intermarried for generations. Most of the Dukes who lived on the ridge were descended from Sampson Duke and his wife Nancy Holland Cope who had moved there during the Civil War. The couple had 12 children, and one branch of the family dropped the “s” at the end of the name to be known by the surname Duke. Our story heats up in the 1890s when one John and Belle Overton Duke gave birth to three sons: Harry, Stanley, and Gobel (Grover). One of the neighboring families, located a little further north and at a lower elevation than the Duke family,

were also celebrating the birth of a son—a young rascal named Markie Bone. The Duke brothers and Markie Bone were born into a time when temperance and prohibition were gaining popularity nation-wide, and so the family side business of moonshining had become extremely lucrative. Many of the families around Dukes Ridge became extremely competitive for sales, and these rivalries often manifested into physical altercations between members who wanted their family to come out on top.

As the story goes, when he was a young boy, Markie had to take their mules down to the spring on the Bone property to be watered after working. Small in stature, Markie told family members that the larger and older Duke brothers would come down to the spring, pull switches from the trees, and whip him. Markie was certain that the patriarch, John Duke, had put the boys up to it. Because of this, Markie developed a strong hatred for the brothers and their father. As he got older, Markie decided to learn how to defend himself. He was reportedly an expert marksman, especially with his 45 caliber pistol and 38 caliber revolver. The local legend was that one of Markie's favorite activities was "making people dance" by shooting at their feet. He became a triple threat when, along with firearms, Markie also developed skill at playing cards and running a moonshine still. As one might imagine, gambling, drinking, and shooting can make for quite the tumultuous time, and many of the old family rivalries soon escalated to dangerous, violent, and even fatal encounters. Once Markie reached manhood, he married a local woman named Lula and had five daughters. He had a lucrative moonshine business, a growing family, and land—but despite his good fortune, Markie never forgot the bullying he suffered at the hands of the Duke brothers.

Markie set out on quite the destructive path. Put on trial for car theft in 1931 and for robbery throughout the 30s on multiple occasions, his name appeared in the Kentucky New Era, the Louisville Courier Journal , and even as far as the Nashville Tennessean. But it is a fateful late August afternoon in 1937 where Markie committed his most heinous act. Markie decided to get some revenge on old man Duke who was about 80 years old at the time. John and Belle Duke were on their cabin porch that evening when Markie, sneaking his way through the woods, got behind a tree and took aim with his 30/30 hunting rifle. He then shot old man Duke in the head. Belle jumped up and ran for the door only to be shot in the upper arm by Markie. She made it into the house and hid. Meanwhile, Markie, who had resolved to put both bodies in the house and burn it down, lost some of his nerve and took off. Belle was taken to the hospital where she had to have the remnants of her arm amputated. From that day on, Belle swore a vendetta that Markie Bone would die, that she would outlive him, and she wouldn't rest until he was dead. Authorities arrested Markie, and he served 5-7 years in the state penitentiary until he was released near the end of World War II. Upon his release, Markie returned to Dukes Ridge where he became a marked man with now two generation of the Dukes family gunning for him. According to the Courier Journal, one of John Duke's grandsons, Woodrow "Woody" Duke caught Markie at the A & J Dispensary in downtown Hopkinsville and shot him seven times. Duke was arrested and Markie was taken to Jennie Stuart Hospital where he remarkably recovered from the attack. According to friends Pete and John Hill who visited Markie in the hospital, he was reported as telling them to move over because they were blocking his view of the door to his room and he needed to be ready in case any more of those Duke boys came for

him. He then lifted up his pillow and showed them his trusty 45 that he has somehow snuck into the hospital.

The attack left a bullet lodged in Markie's right elbow and he lost most of the use of his right arm, so naturally he taught himself how to shoot left-handed. Witnesses reported that he eventually got good enough with his left to hit a coin from a good distance with his 45. The feud, however, was not over. On another occasion, he encountered another Duke grandson on the street in Hopkinsville. Markie quickly pulled his gun but since the boy was unarmed, Markie held his fire. Left paranoid of another attack, Markie began complaining of being haunted by the ghost of John Duke. He had trouble sleeping and began using his own spirits to keep the ghost away. In October of 1952, the New Era reported that he had gotten drunk on moonshine and went crazy. Grabbing his pistols and jumping on his John Deere, he drove several miles up Dukes Ridge shooting everything in sight. Upon returning home and in a drunken stupor, he confused his cousin Ethel Wells who had been living with them with the ghost of John Duke and yelled, "I'm going to kill you old man!" The two began shooting at each other. While there is much speculation as to who shot first, evidence showed Ethel took the first shot. Markie took two bullets to the chest but shot Ethel in the upper hip on his way to the floor. Ethel put Markie out of his suffering by putting two more bullets into his back as he lay on the floor.

Neighbors who had witnessed Markie's countryside tirade had gathered near the Bone homestead. In light of all the shooting and Markie's reputation, most were afraid to go into the home once all went quiet. Finally, one Buck Hill and Frank Johnson went in and found Markie's body. Ethel had left the scene and driven to get Christian County Sheriff Tony Grace.

Grace drove Ethel to the hospital, but it was too late to save him. Ethel Wells died from his wounds. Before he died, however, Ethel turned over a bag containing \$1600 cash that he and Markie had made from running the still. Afterward when the Sheriff returned to the Bone home, he confiscated Markie's 500 gallon still as well as those famous guns—one of which was apparently property of the U.S. Army, who filed suit a year later to reclaim its stolen property.

Old Belle Duke lived to be 91 years old and was on her deathbed when news of Markie's death reached her. According to family tradition, she jumped up and shouted with joy, fulfilling her promise to outlive her hated adversary. She died a few days later on November 2, 1952. You can visit Belle's grave at Riverside Cemetery along with other members of the Duke family. Markie and his wife Lula share a tombstone at Johnson Chapel cemetery on Dukes Ridge, not far from where they lived. Most of their children stayed nearby, with one daughter, Sylvia, moving to live in Hopkinsville where she led quite a checkered life. One of her children, born from an affair she had with a local official in Hopkinsville, resulted in a son named Rick—and an eventual grandson named Brett. Needless to say, I don't go around making people dance with pistols or running a still like my great grandfather, but it is great having a story like this to share whenever the opportunity affords it. The Duke/Bone feud is an interesting bit of local history that has fascinated me since I happened upon an article while doing family research. By piecing together newspaper clippings, genealogical blogs, and musings of folks that I was lucky enough to speak with, I have attempted to present to you as factual of a presentation possible considering the rough and tumble subject of my study—but as a dear friend of all of ours is known to say, why ruin a good story with the truth? I think Markie would agree with that completely.