

# LINCOLN HERALD

FEBRUARY 1942

*Duke Hall of Citizenship in a winter setting, on the night of January 27, 1940, when the Southern States Premiere of the motion picture "Abe Lincoln In Illinois" was given at Lincoln Memorial University.*



# LINCOLN HERALD



*A Magazine of Education and Lincolniana*

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Miss Pettit in her favorite corner of "Big Log" Cabin at Pine Mountain Settlement School.

## Katherine Pettit

*A Memory and an Appreciation*

By MARY BEECH

A brass tablet on the wall of the Memorial Chapel of Pine Mountain Settlement School in Harlan county, Kentucky, has this inscription:

KATHERINE PETTIT

Pioneer

Trail-Breaker

1869-1936

Forty years she spent  
creating opportunity  
for mountain children  
here and elsewhere.

In life  
she ever refused praise  
In death  
she is too great for it.

When I read it, on a November day in 1941, I could almost, in my imagination,

hear Miss Pettit relating some of her interesting stories to a party, of which I was fortunate enough to be a member, that was making an auto trip through the region where she had performed her great work.

Early in the morning of June 30, 1934, (the day of Hitler's "Bloody Purge", though we did not learn of it until our return) Dr. Stewart McClelland, president of Lincoln Memorial University, Mrs. McClelland, Miss Fuller, the assistant librarian, Miss Pettit, who was visiting at that time in Harrogate and I left the campus for a two-days' visit to the settlement schools at Pine Mountain and at Hindman, each of which Miss Pettit has been instrumental in founding.

It was a bright summer day. The road over the Gap and to Pineville was a series of twisting curves, for it had not then been straightened. The laurel was still in bloom; the sourwood was white with feathery sprays. However, we had little time to admire the scenery, so absorbed in the stories of Miss Pettit, were we. Every house and stream and valley reminded her of some past experience, especially after we crossed the bridge near Pineville and followed the highway between the long steep range of Pine Mountain and the Cumberland River.

We soon came to a cross road that, Miss Pettit said, leads past the home of a family who long ago sold their tract of virgin forest to a lumber company for \$40,000. The owner insisted that he should be paid in hard money, as checks and drafts meant nothing to him. It was a long journey on horse-back



to a bank that could turn into cash so enormous a sum.

When he returned, he dumped a sack of jingling coin upon the cabin floor. "Did you get the oxshoes?" his wife inquired anxiously. Well, no, in the excitement he had "plum forgot" to purchase them. His wife was indignant. Oxshoes were all that they needed from the outside world. She and her daughters could card, spin, and weave wool for their clothes. Her husband and the boys could raise all the food they required on their mountain acres, but oxshoes they could neither raise nor make. Impatiently she shoved the sack of coin under the bed.

Afterward, whenever her husband or her sons wanted anything, instead of working for it they "took a reach" into the sack and bought it. The fields were neglected. More and more "corn likker" was consumed. One day the oldest daughter, who was married and lived on the other side of the mountain, appeared at the cabin door. Her husband had told her to put on her strongest, largest apron and come for her "reach into the sack." Her mother urged her to take home all the money she could carry, for it was doing her father and brothers more harm than good. Her husband was a hardworking thrifty man who made the most of his wife's good fortune.

Like William Phipps of colonial days, who built for Mistress Phipps a fair brick house in the green lanes of north Boston, this mountain farmer built for his wife a fair white house with blue shutters on the green slopes of Pine Mountain, where, let us hope, they lived happily ever after. What became of the rest of the money, Miss Pettit did not say.

In preparation for our journey Miss Fuller had looked up all the works of Lucy Furman that were in the college library, and we had perused them diligently. Miss Furman and Miss Pettit attended the same private school at Lexington, Kentucky, in their girlhood. After Miss Pettit and Miss Stone

founded the settlement school at Hindman, Miss Furman came to visit them, partly to renew an old friendship, and partly in the hope that a complete change of scene might help assuage her grief because of her mother's death. She intended to stay only a month; she remained for twenty-five years. During that time she wrote *The Quare Women*, *Mothering on Perilous*, *The Glass Winder*, and other stories, the material for which she obtained at Hindman.

One, which appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*, was the experience of a young surgeon. While on a horseback trip through the Cumberlands, he came upon a mountain cabin where many neighbors were congregated. Dismounting and entering the crowded room, he saw a young woman, her body convulsed by pain, lying on the bed. The granny woman had heated water and made hot applications, to alleviate her patient's suffering, but to no avail. The surgeon, who fortunately had his instruments in his saddle bags, made a quick diagnosis and announced that only an immediate operation would save the woman's life, as she was having an acute attack of appendicitis. But her husband did not hold with "carvin' up humans" and refused to give his consent. Finally, very reluctantly, he agreed, with the warning condition that if his wife died he'd shoot the surgeon. And all through the operation which, I'm glad to say proved successful, he sat with his gun aimed at the benefactor.

"Nothing like that ever really occurred, did it?" we asked Miss Pettit. "I don't know where Lucy picked up that plot," she answered, "but this is something that did happen."

"Many of the children who entered the Pine Mountain School had diseased tonsils," she continued. "I persuaded a distinguished surgeon from Lexington to come to us for one day and perform free tonsilectomies. Each child who wished to take advantage of this offer was told to obtain a written statement, signed by parent or guardian, giving his con-



sent. On the appointed day a frail little girl pleaded, 'Please, may I be the first?' As I knew she was half sick with nervous dread, and as she had her permit with her father's signature, I granted her request. Unfortunately, she proved to be a 'bleeder' and for a time nothing the surgeon could do would staunch the flow of blood. During the crisis a young teacher came to me, pale and trembling. 'That child forged her father's name,' she cried, 'He knew nothing about the operation. Now, he's here with his gun, and he says if his gal dies, he has a bullet for each of us'. At last the bleeding ceased and the danger was past. Whether or not he would have made his threat good, I'll never know."

A few miles beyond the city of Harlan we came to the trail leading over Pine Mountain. Since then the C. C. C. boys have constructed a good gravel road over this route, but at that time, it was in such a deplorable condition that Miss Pettit insisted Dr. McClelland would ruin his car if he tried to drive its eight steep miles and she had engaged a farmer to take us in his old Model T.

When we drew up at his home, the farm women came rushing out, eager to greet their old friend. In fact, all along the way, there had been beaming smiles and cordial salutations, for everyone seemed to know and love her. She resolved, when she resigned at the Pine Mountain School in 1930 not to revisit it for five years. Consequently she stayed at our driver's home while we made our visit at the school. "Don't forget to look for the gun over the door in the boy's workshop," she called as we drove away.

This is the story of the gun. She was in the midst of an important conference with some distinguished visitors when she was called from the room by a nineteen-year-old, who was in great distress. Someone had just shot and killed his father. By the unwritten law of the mountains it was his duty to avenge the murder. "I'm just learning to read. Don't you think I might wait until I'm through the second reader?" he asked

anxiously. "Of course you may", she assured him.

In proof of his sincerity, he gave her his gun, a weapon with several wicked notches on its stock, to keep until he was ready to use it. By the time he had finished his reader she convinced him it was not necessary to add another victim to the gory list. The gun was there in 1934, but when I asked to see it on my last visit, I was told by Mr. Morris, the principal, that it has been sent to a state museum.

Pine Mountain Settlement School is beautifully located and seems at first glance more like a resort for the wealthy than a school for mountain children. At the gate, waiting to welcome us and guide us over the grounds, stood Mr. Henry Creech, a quiet spoken, courteous farmer, whom Miss Pettit had summoned from his work to do the honors of the place. After we had seen the weaving room, toolhouse, schoolhouse, chapel, dormitories, and dining hall, he led us to the windowless log cabin near the gate where he and his seven brothers and sisters spent their childhood. His father, Mr. William Creech, in 1913 deeded his farm "to be used for school purposes as long as the Constitution of United States stands", hoping it might make bright and intelligent peoples when he was dead and gone. It was at this request that Miss Pettit and Miss DeLong came to manage and supervise the school.

After we rejoined Miss Pettit, she told us of Uncle William's conversion. He married a pretty girl of sixteen, later to be known to all as Aunt Sal, who had a will of her own, a fact that young William was soon to discover. He and his family built the cabin; the garden with its long rows of beans, was planted; the wedding ceremony, at which the bride wore the sprigged pink-and-white dress that is still preserved in the cabin, was performed; relatives and friends departed; and the young couple was about to settle down to the realities of a work-a-day world.

"I'll go over to the store and buy you a hoe so that you can hoe the beans," observed the



bridegroom. "You'll git two hoes," was the bride's firm response. "I don't aim to hoe the garden unless you help me." That was an innovation. No mountain man demeaned himself by such a task in those days. The deadlock was on. The weeds grew apace, and the beans were slowly giving up the struggle. Secretly the bride grieved at the appearance of her garden, but she would not yield. Finally, a chastened young William bought two hoes, one of which he used in the weeds with telling effect. The beans were saved and Sal had won her first battle.

Soon afterwards, though, a much more serious problem reared its ugly head. William came back from the other side of the mountain plainly under the influence of "corn licker". Sal had seen too many women and children of her acquaintance suffer because of a drunken husband and father. "My folks and I built that cabin," Uncle William used to say with a chuckle, "but she ordered me to git right out of it. Finally when I helt up my right hand and swore I'd never take another drop of corn likker, she let me stay in my own house." And he kept his word until the day of his death in 1918.

On we drove up the Cumberland valley, which grows narrower and narrower, through Hazard, a mining city of ten thousand that sprawls over the hillsides, until we came to the Settlement School at Hindman in Knott County. The paved highway is very different from the narrow mountain trail over which jolt wagons moved with difficulty when Miss Pettit and Miss Stone put up their tents on the Hindman hillside in 1903 and founded the first settlement school. Now, instead of tents, there are many substantial buildings, including a high school that would be a credit to any community.

We saw the one-room log cabin where Miss Pettit and a volunteer teacher lived an entire winter. To its door came a boy carrying his small bundle of personal possessions. He wanted an education and proposed to live with them. "I've fetched a quilt to put

under the table," he announced. "I'll sleep there at night and sit there and study in the daytime while you are working." "You'll work too," Miss Pettit announced, but she did not turn her uninvited guest away.

When the settlement workers first came to Hindman they were young women, according to our standards. Why they were not married caused much discussion among the mountain people. No wonder they were named "The Quare Women." "It's no use for you to look for a man," was the frank comment of one old lady when they acknowledged they were over twenty. "You're both on the cull list." A widower with no visible possessions except a brood of nine children came to inspect them, matrimony being his object, but left in disgust, taking no chance of proposing and being accepted, when he found neither could milk a cow. He was particularly emphatic in his refusal to consider Miss Pettit. "She's too feisty," was his criticism of her.

She really was a "feisty" (quick-tempered) and imperious person. When she gave an order she expected it to be obeyed,—and it usually was. On the other hand, no one could be more sympathetic and charming.

The good she did cannot be measured in words. In 1932 she was given the Sullivan medal by the University of Kentucky as the outstanding citizen who had done the most for the state that year. Frances McVey, wife of the president of the university, wrote in the April, 1934, edition of *Mountain Life and Work*: "Her courage, vitality, efficiency, initiation, and independence of judgment are still demanded and needed by the mountain people."

She was spared only two years more. I count myself privileged to have met her, if only for a brief time. "I'm afraid I'll forget some of the stories you've told us," I said when our trip was over. "Why not? They're my stories," was her quick retort. Now that she is no longer here, I hope no one will care because I've attempted to preserve some of them in print!