

CHAPTER 40

The Kingdom Of The Happy Land

Going south on Highway 25 just after you pass Lake Summit, there is a road that turns to the left and crosses Staton Mountain. This area on the side and top of Staton Mountain, between Zirconia and Saluda and touching the edge of South Carolina, has been known for more than a century as "The Happy Land," or as some of the old ones sometimes refer to it "The Kingdom." The history of The Kingdom of The Happy Land is fascinating, unusual and interesting. It is the true story of the establishment of an absolute monarchy based on the principals of communism long before present day communism was thought of. It flourished for nearly three quarters of a century right here in Henderson County.

In 1865, after General Lee surrendered and the Confederate States collapsed, the South was a desolate, devastated, poverty stricken land. The slaves were freed but they were a bewildered and confused people. On one of the large plantations in Mississippi there was a freed slave by the name of Robert. He had been a house servant during his years of slavery. Although it was forbidden by law, his master and mistress had taught him to read and write. Because of his superior intelligence and his above the average education he became a preacher and adviser to the other slaves on the large plantation. He had been allowed to marry one of the slaves by the name of Luella. When freedom came they adopted the name of their owner, as many of the freed people did, Montgomery.

Amid the chaos, Robert Montgomery gathered the bewildered, newly freed people together and told them, "Follow me and I will lead you to 'The Kingdom,' 'The Kingdom of the Happy Land.' " Approximately 150 men, women and children listened and agreed to follow his leadership. They started wandering. They lived off the already devastated land. As the band moved from place to place, they picked up broken-down, abandoned wagons, carts and buggies pulled by scarecrow horses; mules and oxen that they caught running wild. How many miles they traveled and how many states they crossed will never be known. It must be remembered there were no road maps as we know them today; and if there had been, in their ignorance they would not have been able to use them due to their lack of knowledge of geography. Whenever they were questioned by the Northern military authorities occupying the South during the years following the end of the war, the answer was always, "We are going to The Happy Land." How many months they wandered is not known or ever will be because they had no calendars and the passage of time meant little to them.

What is known is that about the year 1867 or 1868 this band of wandering, freed slaves found themselves on the side and top of what you and I know today as Staton Mountain in Henderson County. How they got there in their blind wandering will never be known. But it is known that they were famished,

exhausted, still bewildered and unable to continue their wandering. The land where they found themselves was part of the large holdings of Colonel John Davis who operated Oakland, a famous stagecoach stopping place on the Buncombe Turnpike. When word of these black people and the pitiful condition they were in was carried to Colonel Davis, he had food sent to them. After conferring with the group's leader, Robert Montgomery, Colonel Davis told them they could stay on his land as long as they desired.

And then it was that Robert Montgomery established The Kingdom of the Happy Land, with his wife Luella as queen. All those in The Kingdom worked for the common good of all. They built their log cabins and each cabin had allotted garden plots. Robert Montgomery hired his subjects out to work for those white people in the area who could afford to pay wages, but their earnings went into the communal treasury. Enough money was finally accumulated to buy some 180 acres of land from Colonel Davis at the price of one dollar an acre. The deed is on record in the Register of Deeds Office in the court house in Hendersonville in the name of Robert and Luella Montgomery. They were a quiet, hardworking, gentle people who flourished and lived happily in their new isolated freedom for a number of years.

As the years passed the original older ones died and changing times and economic conditions caused the younger ones to drift away. When two of the king's assistants died — Casey and Wiley by name — and Robert and Luella passed on around the turn of the century, the few that were left in The Happy Land came to Hendersonville and Flat Rock and secured work as servants. When I paid a visit to The Kingdom of the Happy Land several years after it had been abandoned, The Happy Land was a tangle of jungle. The decaying ruins of the old log cabins were still standing. Apart from them was the largest cabin of all. It was the cabin that served as the royal palace. There was a wing for the king and one for the queen and a throne room for ceremonial occasions. When I visited the area the first time, remnants of tame rosebushes, lillies, violets and other flowers were still blooming and peeping through the wild growth surrounding the old cabins. On my last visit to The Happy Land, all of this was gone. All that remained was the graveyard. The mounds were still visible with crude headstones of native rock, but there were no engravings to identify the dead.

A few years ago I went to visit and talk to Mary Russell who lived near Oakdale Cemetery in Hendersonville. How old she was no one knew, not even Mary. I went to talk to her because she was the last of those to leave The Happy Land. At times her mind was clear and she talked freely about her life in The Kingdom. It had been a hundred years since Robert Montgomery and his queen Luella had reached Staton Mountain. I asked Mary Russell in the course of our conversation if she had been with the group when the slaves were freed and had started to wander or if she was born after they reached The Happy Land. From that point on I could get nothing from her but mumbles and head shaking. A few days later a black friend of mine who knew Mary Russell came to see me. He said that when I asked her if she had been born in

slavery she thought, in her aged, confused mind, I was going to force her back into servitude.

Who can tell of the dreams, the hopes and the aspirations of these simple, newly freed, gentle people as they left the land of their bondage in search of The Happy Land? The Kingdom of The Happy Land is now sealed forever in the forgotten graves hidden by the lush mountain vegetation. What were those people seeking? They were seeking that which mankind has sought since the beginning of time: peace, happiness and a place to live their lives as they desire.

