

**FOR THE HATFIELDS AND MCCOYS,  
THERE WERE NO WINNERS.**

# THE FEUD

1 x 60 **HD**



**PBS**

INTERNATIONAL

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The most famous family conflict in American history, the Hatfield-McCoy feud evolved into a mythic American tale of jealousy, rage and revenge—and one which helped create the negative “hillbilly” stereotype that has shaped attitudes towards Appalachia for more than a century. Yet the truth is much more than a tale of two warring families. It is the story of a region and its people forced into sudden change by Eastern capitalists, who transformed Appalachia from an agrarian mountain community into a coal and timber producing workplace owned and run primarily by outside interests.

Deep in the rugged and remote mountains of Central Appalachia, the Tug Fork Valley was the edge of the American frontier in the early 1800s. The Hatfields and the McCoyes were among the earliest white settlers in the valley, inhabiting both sides of the Tug Fork, which formed the border between Kentucky and Virginia (later West Virginia). Like most families in the area, the Hatfields and McCoyes eked out a living by farming the narrow and steep hollows and foraging for game and wild edibles in the surrounding forests.

Anderson Hatfield, also known as “Devil Anse,” grew up on the Virginia side of the Tug. Randolph McCoy lived on a neighboring farm before moving with his wife and family across the river to Kentucky. These men would become the patriarchs of the legendary feud.

After the Civil War, which had divided loyalties in the region and created the new state of West Virginia, Tug Valley residents worked to rebuild their community. With industrialization increasing at a breakneck pace, investors began eyeing Central Appalachia for its natural resources. Industrialists saw the pristine forest not as a source of life and livelihood, but as the promise of great wealth.

Anderson Hatfield also saw new opportunities. He started his own timber company, and, despite being illiterate, proved to be a savvy and opportunistic businessman, hiring relatives and neighbors to man his crew. His workers floated logs down the Tug Fork to the Big Sandy River and on to the Ohio where sawmills churned out the lumber that was building America. Randolph McCoy, who struggled to support his family of 16 children on his small farm, bitterly resented Hatfield’s success.

On a Kentucky Election Day in 1882, an altercation sparked a dramatic escalation in the tension between the two families. A fight broke out leading to the death of one of Anderson Hatfield’s brothers at the hands of three of Randolph McCoy’s sons. Anderson decided to take justice into his own hands. With the help of family members and employees, he captured the three McCoy brothers and executed them. The violence shocked the community and Randolph wanted revenge, but there was little effort to bring the Hatfields to justice. A few years later, the feud was reignited when Perry Cline, a politically influential attorney and relation of Randolph McCoy who also had a grudge against Anderson Hatfield, convinced Kentucky’s governor to help facilitate the arrest of Hatfield and his men.

But it would be New Year’s Day 1888 that made the names “Hatfield” and “McCoy” famous across the country. That night, a group of men, led by two of Anderson Hatfield’s sons, surrounded Randolph McCoy’s cabin, intending to kill McCoy. As a gunfight broke out, the attackers set the cabin on fire. Randolph managed to escape, but two of his children were killed and his wife was severely injured.

News of the brutal crime made national headlines. The press decried not only the violence, but the mountain people’s entire way of life. “I have been away in Murderland for nearly ten days,” wrote a New York City journalist who published *An American Vendetta*, the first book to tell the tale of the feud. “No one would believe that there is in this country such a barbarous, uncivilized and wholly savage region.” To outside industrialists and urban America, the people of Appalachia were seen as backwards, violent and an obstacle to progress, and characterizing local families as uncivilized and different became part of a justification for dispossessing many of the mountaineers from their land.

After the Norfolk & Western completed its railroad through the Tug Valley, massive timbering operations denuded the hillsides, and company-owned coal camps spread along the creek bottoms where there once had been farms. By that time, Anderson Hatfield had sold his land to a coal agent and moved farther up in the mountains out of the Tug Valley. Like many of his neighbors, he had lost his land to outside capitalists.

The Hatfields, McCoyes and other mountain families found ways to adapt to the new economic and social order or moved out of Appalachia altogether. But the legacy of the feud remained. And the “hillbilly” image, popularized by reports of the Hatfield-McCoy feud, continues to permeate American popular culture.

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## CREDITS

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