

A MOUNTAIN MOTHER

by Luther M. Ambrose

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She was the pioneering daughter of pioneer ancestors. Her great-great-grandfather came from across the water. His son, William Carmack II, enlisted in the colonial army from Washington County, Virginia, and helped George Rogers Clark win the West (Indiana). After the war he lived in Virginia. One of his sons, Levi, pushed down the Powell valley into the territory of Tennessee. There he raised a large family, some of whom swelled the tide of pioneers that settled the Middle West in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. One of the thirteen children, Isaac, was the father of our heroine.

"Ike," as he was called, married a young woman of unusual ability by the name of Comfort Hale. One mark of her ability was that she had learned to read and write, which was quite an accomplishment for a girl in a pioneer family. Previous to their marriage, she had entered one hundred acres of land. On this they made their first home.

After a few years they felt the urge of the pioneer, and with their two children they moved north and west into Owsley County, Kentucky, about 1839, and settled on Island Creek. Here they cleared some land and made a crop. Living, they found, was harder here than in the more settled section from which they had come.

In the early forties, in response to a call for volunteers to fight with Mexico, "Ike" went west. When after several months he did not return, Comfort gathered together her few possessions and with her little ones made the long five-day journey back to her own little home in Tennessee. Later "Ike" returned found his family had deserted the advance post, and went back to the old home. They never left this home again; there they raised their family.

Their house was of logs, two rooms, a lean-to, and a loft. There was an open fireplace from which hung pothooks for the dinner pot. In the side of the fireplace was a Dutch oven, built by Comfort's father, who had come from Holland. Despite this convenience it was quite common for them to have "hoe cakes" baked on a clean hoe held over the glowing coals.

The home was three miles from a school, where a school was taught. There were schools in the valley where the more well to do farmers lived, for they had rich land, owned

slaves, raised cotton, and were prosperous. But for the children of the rough farms there was little of schooling – little of anything except work.

The father worked away, when work could be had, in the distillery at Tazwell. He was at home very little except during plowing and planting. The mother and children cultivated the corn and cotton, tanned the leather for shoes, “ginned” the cotton by hand, carded and spun it’ they sheared the sheep, washed the wool, carded and spun, and the mother then wove the yarn into jeans and “linsey.” She knit the stockings; the father made the shoes. Soap was made from wood-ash lye and cracklings. Conditions were like those in other isolated mountain homes of that period. Into this home, Isabelle, the eighth child, was born, August 4, 1853.

The experiences of the early years of her life were such as to develop character and to inspire religious faith. The father could not read, but the mother read the Bible, their only book, and taught her children to read from it’s sacred pages. She prayed with her children and filled their minds with a reverence for God. One story from those early years has been repeated to me many times.

Billy Hale, the grandfather of this family was a very old man. He lived in a one-room log house near their home. He was probably past ninety years, though no records can be found to indicate his age. He knew he was nearing the end of his pioneering, but prayed that God would spare his life until he heard one more sermon preached. Preachers were not plentiful, and considerable effort was put forth to get one to come. When at last the appointment was made and the preacher arrived, the neighbors for miles around gathered in. The old patriarch with his flowing white beard sat with his chair tilted back against the wall. His eyes flashed with interest as he followed every word of the discourse. After the sermon was finished and prayer had been offered the old man said, Lay me down, I can’t die sitting up.” He lingered but a short time; then passed on.

So vivid was the impression of this scene on the mind of a little nine-year-old girl that sixty-five years later she could tell the story to her great-grandchildren with as much interest as if it had happened but yesterday.

Though Isabelle had learned to read, she had no opportunity for school. Little girls could not make the long trip to the school; and besides, when she was seven, war broke out, the schools stopped, men and boys left home for the armies north and south, and women and girls took complete charge of the plow and the hoe.

Her father and two brothers went to the war. The father wanted to enlist with the Confederates, for his sympathies were with his neighbors in the valley who owned slaves; and besides they promised to help his family while he was away. Jacob, just grown, sided with his father. Moses had no sympathy for his valley neighbors, and did not trust their promises; his was the spirit of most of the mountain youth. But the father won, with the argument that since Tennessee had seceded his family would be safer if the men were fighting with the south. Moses thought of going north alone, but the idea of perhaps meeting his father and brother in battle turned him south. True to his early convictions,

however, when his father was killed in the battle of Mills Springs, in Pulaski County, Kentucky, he deserted the Confederate army and joined the Union forces.

During those four years life was hard; at times the food supply was very low. Cumberland Gap, nine miles north, was a strategic point, and it was taken and retaken by both armies. First the southern, then the northern, troops would march past the home where the mother and her four little girls were living. The food supply was partially saved only by ingenious hiding places being used to store it. Meat was hidden in straw beds, corn in the loft, and potatoes were buried in the ground.

Not only was food scarce but life was often in danger. The farm horse had been taken by the soldiers; the family was out of meal, the gristmill was then held by the Union forces. The soldiers had never tried to harm or rob children, but a child could not carry a turn of corn five miles to the mill. Therefore the mother went, leaving the children alone (the oldest girl was about fourteen) to wait anxiously for her return. At the mill she was questioned by soldiers who, when they learned her husband was a Confederate soldier, accused her of being a spy. She protested but was taken to headquarters at Cumberland Gap. Questioned by officers there, she declared her innocence and begged to be allowed to go home to her children.

The children at home waited, filled with fear. As the shadows lengthened, the little ones began to cry, and when dark shut the little cabin in among its mountains, the terror and dread of death kept sleep away. The sisters huddled together in the doorway and waited and listened. They prayed. Finally nature took charge of weary bodies, and one by one they slept.

A prisoner for the night, the mother waited for the dawn. She knew spies had been shot. She prayed for her children. But the daylight brought release, and she trudged the weary miles back to appear before her little girls as one raised from the dead. To them it was evidence of answered prayer.

Then came the news of the father's death. Soon after, the mother took to her bed with her last illness. The end came in 1864. The brothers returning from the war, Jacob from the south and Moses from the north, found their home without father or mother but with four girls who needed parents.

After a family council they decided to migrate to Kentucky, where two of their father's brothers had settle before the war. Packing their few movable belongings they began the overland journey. When they finally reached the home of their uncle Abraham, on Sturgeon Creek, in what is now Owsley County, they found that he lived in a small cabin and already had a family of eight children. But he received them all gladly. The brothers soon moved on toward the west, and the older sisters found homes where they could work for their board and keep.

Isabelle, now called "Ibby," lived with Uncle Abe two years. She was thirteen. She could cook, wash, feed cattle, hoe corn, card and spin, weave, knit, mil, scrub floors – in

fact she was trained in all the work of the mountain girl of her day. And she was strong and able to work.

In these two years she got about one month's schooling. She wanted a place where she might be allowed to attend school, and this wish was partially fulfilled when she went to stay with a Mr. Lucas of St. Helens. He was to supply clothes, a home, and a chance to go to school. In the two years spent in this home she attended about a month of regular school and a short session of a subscription school, during which time she finished the Blueback Speller. The work there was hard, from before daylight until after dark. The home could not afford candles except for company, so that any reading, which the little hired girl did, was done in front of the open fire before it was covered with ashes for the night.

Occasional travelers stopped for the night and told to eager ears the happenings in the world outside the mountains. In the spring, with every "tide" some of the men went down the river on rafts of logs as far as Frankfort, where the logs were sold. They walked back, and when they stopped for the night on their way upriver they had wonderful stories to tell. In the fall, buyers would pass through with great droves of cattle, which were driven to the markets in the Bluegrass where the children went to school five and sometimes six months in the year. To "Ibby" Carmack, this sounded like heaven. She would rather go to school than do anything else in the world. But it was only a dream, with no hope of realization. She would have to work on and read what little came her way after the day's work was done.

She worked hard and cheerfully, and the Lucas family loved her as one of their own. She had stayed with them two years, when the family lost all their savings through the treachery of a friend. Mr. Lucas was a cattle buyer as well as a farmer. He and a partner bought a large drove of carrel, investing in it all they had and all they could borrow. The partner, a younger man, took the drove to market, but never returned with the money. The family was reduced to poverty in the payment of the debts, and "Ibby" had to look for another place to work.

She returned to her Uncle Abe's home and there learned that Marion Ambrose, a Baptist preacher who lived on the river below the mouth of Island Creek, wanted a hired girl. Applying for the job, she was taken in as a godsend, for there was a young baby to be cared for besides all the other house work and chores. This job had appeared very attractive because Mr. Ambrose was a preacher, was well educated, and would of course have some books and papers to read. There was more to read, but there was less time to read it, for quite regularly she worked from before dawn till after dark, as much as eighteen hours a day. Her desire for knowledge was again subdued by the demands of work.

But she did find time to read her Bible, and she was permitted to go to "meetings," which were held once a month during good weather. She has laughingly told me how she walked to church dressed in her one good dress and carrying her shoes on her arm until she came near the meetinghouse. She carried the shoes for two reasons" to save the

shoes, for they were her only pair, and to save her feet, which were not often burdened with shoes in warm weather.

During the two years in this home "Ibby" learned a great deal. She saw the girls of families who had wealth, that is level land, cattle, and "brought on" shoes. Some of them ignored horses to ride, and money for store clothes and her; others "made fun" of her. She realized that she must make a place for herself, not by what she had, but by what she was. Her decision was wise, for her worth was shortly recognized.

Marion Ambrose, for whom she was working, was the son of one of the largest land holders in the county, who, having entered large tracts when the territory was opened to settlers about 1820 or after, had managed well, traded, bought, and improved until he was well-to-do for that time. The youngest son of the family, Barton, was still at home. E had served in the Union army, and was a moral, sober, and very religious young man. Still unmarried at twenty-five, he was considered a very desirable catch by the marriageable daughters of the well to do. But to the disappointment of these, he chose to marry his brother's "hired girl." Her beauty of character had been recognized by a man worthy to be her husband, and she was happy in the anticipation of her new home. Again hope sprang up within her. Surely now she would have time to read; surely now she could learn the things she wanted to know. She was seventeen, and life ahead looked bright.

But her training had been in work, and in her new home she found plenty of work which must be done. Her schedule of working hours changed very little. The difference was one of attitude: now she was responsible for the work. Her husband's father, mother, and sister were part of the family, for the parents were old and the youngest son, of course, must take care of them. His mother was an invalid and needed a great deal of care, which the young wife lovingly gave her until her death.

Soon there were babies to love and feed and clothe. To clothe the children warmly meant washing wool, carding, spinning and weaving it. Cotton prints could be bought, but they did not wear well, and besides they cost money, which even in this rather well to do home was scarce. This home, like most mountain homes of that day, was self-sufficient. Salt was gotten from a near-by salt works in Clay County. Coffee and sugar had to be bought, but little sugar was used since sorghum cane supplied the sweet. They tanned leather, and made their own shoes. (A goose quill filled with sulphur placed between the outer and inner sole produces a lasting squeak which made folks think they were new even after they were well worn.) The geese supplied feathers for the beds and pillows. The only cash income was from the sale of cattle, hogs, and sheep driven to market in the Bluegrass, or from an occasional raft of logs sent down on the spring "tides."

But this regular round of family duties was not all. Their home was the regular stopping place for the river men returning from "down below." Aunt Ibby, as she was now usually known, became famous for her cooking, for besides the river men she always kept the preachers when they came for the monthly meeting or the annual associations. This

program spread the fame of the hospitality of the home, but it also began to wear away the vitality of the little woman who did the work.

When the older children were big enough to help care for the smaller ones and when it was possible to get a dependable hired girl, life became less strenuous. When the children began going to school, mother began with them – teaching them, studying with them, learning from them. This she determined to keep up, and except in arithmetic she did – her own system of mental calculation was faster and simpler and served perfectly for all the calculations she was called on to make. When her three oldest girls finished the country schools and were able to teach, she was happy. They had caught her spirit.

In the summer of 1897 a visitor stopped for a night and brought news that was to change the course of the family history. He was an extension worker from Berea College bringing the good news that in Berea boys and girls from the mountains could go to school and at the same time earn most of their expenses. Some money was necessary for the first payment; some homespun could be bought by the college.

This news raised a new ambition in the breast of this ambitious mother. She had six children at home to be educated, the oldest of whom was a girl already beyond the teachers in the schools near home. Next were three boys, sixteen, fourteen, and eleven. They must be sent away as soon as they were old enough if they were to be saved from the drinking and shooting which were so common among the young men there. Plans were made to send the girl in September.

In August the two younger boys and the mother became sick, presumably poisoned by something they had eaten, and the boys died. She recovered slowly, but by the time for her daughter to leave for school she was at her work again. The daughter, however, postponed leaving until her mother was stronger.

When in December the extension worker returned to get other students started, the daughter was ready. A man was hired to drive the team the fifty miles to the school to take her and a neighbor girl. The little mother tucked into the baggage a few yards of brown “linsey” which could be sold to help meet expenses. Then with a feeling of great joy mingled with fear she sent her girl forth.

[This must have been Great Grandmother Ruth Ann Ambrose – William R. Turner]

The following summer her twelfth child was born. Since four boys had been taken by death, this boy was welcomed. That winter, due to the fact that his mother had engineered the plans and provided the means, the seventeen-year-old son found himself in Berea in the seventh grade. The daughter was taking normal work, preparing to teach. At home, the mother, with only three little ones to care for, found time to weave jeans, “linsey,” and blandest, for which there was a good cash market even in the mountains.

Her children away at school had written that there was a better market there for coverlets. She had never woven anything except plain weaves. She had from her mother-in-law

some faded brown strips of paper with figures on them, which she had been told were drafts for threading up a loom for pattern weaving. She did not know what the figures meant and nobody in the community knew, but coverlets were worth five dollars a piece and she must weave them. Horseback, she rode to visit other weavers. She found a great many old drafts, which she copied carefully, but no one seemed to know how to use them. At last she and a neighbor woman decided to experiment until they discovered how to use a pattern in threading up a loom. They succeeded. (Only those who have had experience with looms realize what this success meant.)

Soon coverlets were growing on her looms and on those of other weavers in the country, for she was willing to teach anyone who came to learn and she allowed her drafts to be copied by anyone who might have use for them; she was not selfish. She made a very large collection of drafts; in fact she would ride all day to get a new one.

During this time of collecting drafts for coverlets she had taken subscriptions for a farm magazine. She wanted the farmers to learn how their farms could be improved, and she wanted the encyclopedia, which was offered as a premium for a certain number of subscriptions. When the red-backed volumes arrived she read them, she reveled in them.

In the spring of 1900 she and another mother in the community decided to ride horseback to Berea to visit their children. Her boy was sick and she must see him. This was the first trip which she had made away from the mountains. It was her first trip into a town larger than the county seat. She visited her children, spending several days with her son in the hospital. She sold her first coverlets; the head nurse buying three at one time. Provided with money, she yielded to desire and took her first train ride, to visit a sister-in-law. It was a great experience.

The following year at commencement time she made another trip to Berea, taking coverlets and blankets to sell, coverlets improved in workmanship and finish, for she was learning the art. That summer, Mrs. Frost, wife of the President of the college, accompanied by a woman who was starting the fireside industries for the institution, visited the Ambrose home. This worker needed to know how the dying was done, and she needed a great many drafts of patterns. For several days she stayed and asked questions. Mrs. Ambrose showed her all she could and gave her copies of all the drafts she had. When they said goodbye, Mrs. Frost urged their hostess to make the president's house her home the next time she came to Berea.

The next commencement found her again in the college town. Mrs. Frost entertained her as a guest, along with the donors and trustees, for that was before Boone Tavern was built and the president had to entertain visitors and guests of the college in his own home. She trembled a little as she was seated at breakfast beside a banker trustee of the institution. But her fear gradually left as she realized she could enter intelligently into the conversation, that her reading and thinking and living had really given her an education.

The conversation turned to the dyeing and weaving industry. One of the trustees proposed that it would be profitable to have a home-spun fair, that prizes be offered for

the best dyeing of various colors, for the best spinning, weaving, etc. This would attract more women and collect more information for the fireside industries. The president agreed and Mrs. Ambrose silently vowed that when the next commencement time came she would have an entry in every class offered.

While a guest in the president's home she learned that there was a demand for hand woven linen for men's suitings. This was good news, for plain weaving was faster than the patterns, and few people were buying jeans any more since the mail order catalog had penetrated the mountains and machine woven goods could be purchased so cheaply. Having determined to weave linen, she inquired of other weavers who were producing linen where she might buy flax. The professional-secret idea had crept into the industry and nobody would tell her. She was not to be defeated, however. When she was at home again she went to her encyclopedia and there under "flax" found the name of a firm in Scotland that sold it. She wrote to Scotland and from them received a letter giving the address of an American firm from whom she could buy the desired material. Flax came, beautiful silky golden flax. The little wheel began to hum its steady monotonous tune, and the flax became linen thread. The loom soon produced men's white linen suiting.

The "fair" prizes were not forgotten. The dye-pot with its odor was ever present. Apple tree bark, hickory bark, walnut bark, walnut hulls, sumac berries, indigo, madder – samples were dyed of each. Many samples were dyed, and the best selected. The dyeing instructions were carefully written out on cards and pinned to the samples. Coverlets, white bed spreads of the Honeycomb pattern, and other articles for which prizes were to be offered, were woven carefully, every thread put through with an eye to perfection.

Once more the two-day journey. This time she was the guest of a daughter who had married and was living in Berea while her husband continued his education. The entries were made in the fair, one article for each prize offered. This time it was Mrs. Ambrose, the artist of the loom, who awaited the decision of the judges. Her joy was complete when the doors were opened and she found every exhibit bearing her name decorated with a blue ribbon. Every first prize offered was hers. Sixty-five dollars in prize money made the effort financially worthwhile. Besides this she sold all the coverlets, blankets, and linen she had brought. Ninety-two dollars was her purse as she returned to her home.

These visits to Berea lead to a desire to live closer to the great school. Why not sell the mountain farm and move there? After all, the most important thing in the world for her was the education of three little ones left at home, the youngest now old enough for school. During the winter of 1904-05, the important subject of discussion was, to move or not to move. The two years preceding she had suffered from rheumatism, so that she could walk only with the aid of crutches. Her body was drawn, her fingers knotted and stiff. Her condition was perhaps the deciding factor in persuading the father to move. He hoped that away from the fog and dampness of the river and in a place where there would be less work to do she could regain her health. The next August, with three loaded wagons and with the family cow in the procession, the men made the hard three-day journey. On account of her rheumatism, the little mother with her children made the trip by train – after a thirteen-mile ride in the jolt wage? Her body might have complained,

but her spirit, unmindful of the jolts, was moving towards the realization of one of the dreams of a lifetime.

In Berea she soon found that children must have better clothes, and shoes, and books. These called for money, more money than father could supply. Again she set up her dye-pot and her loom, but her strength was unequal to the task. So she kept boarders, thus turning into cash the produce of her garden, poultry, etc. The surplus produce was sold, and everybody worked.

Soon the children were big enough to get work. After they were eleven or twelve they were able to earn all their school expenses. This brought a period of more leisure for the mother, more time to read and attend lectures. She took magazines and papers, and kept posted on matters of public interest. She visited with members of the faculty and made friends with them as well as with her neighbors. Seldom did she miss a debate, oratorical contest, or other meeting of educational value. Her mind was always open, and active.

In 1916 the father and mother moved to Colorado to pioneer again. They entered a claim of land near where two of their children had staked out claims, and in a rather comfortable two-room shack they homesteaded it. She had taken her loom along, but a prolonged illness prevented her using it. The next year the youngest son went west for a summer's work and to bring his mother home. They left the father to complete the homesteading and prove up the claim.

The severe winter of 1917 brought more illness; but she never complained under suffering or disappointment, not even when sickness prevented her ambitious spirit from hearing her son participate in the important debate of the college year.

In these later years her ambitions were all for her children; their successes constituted the rewards for her sacrifice. At last she saw her youngest son deliver his commencement oration and receive his diploma, and her heart was full of pride, especially when she learned that he had been retained as an instructor in the college. She might have said, "Lord, let thy servant now depart," for she had seen the fulfillment of her life-long dreams.

She was spared, however, for seven years of further realization of the fruits of a useful life. They were years of suffering, but in them her soul showed its perfection. In January 1922, she suffered a stroke of paralysis. She had never stopped work; when the stroke came she had just returned from the little farm where she had helped her son milk the cows. For some weeks her life hung in the balance, but finally she began to improve. In a few months she was herself again, except that she could not walk or use her left arm. Leaning on her son, she learned to walk again. She enjoyed auto rides, radio programs, church services, etc., once more.

In the summer of 1924 she made her last trip back to the mountain home where her children had been born. She was hauled over roads so bad that it took four mules to draw the wagon. Bed springs and feather beds served as shock absorbers, and a careful driver

eased the wagon over rocks and out of mud holes. For three months she visited her children, and grandchildren, and told stories and sang songs to her great-grandchildren. Old neighbors came to talk over old times.

One reward of this trip was the visit in the home of one of her daughters. The home was ten miles from the railroad, on a road which runs up the creek and over which most of the traffic is horseback. Yet once there, she enjoyed electric lights, hot and cold water in the kitchen and bath room, good music, and many of the other conveniences and enjoyments which money and culture bring.

In January 1925, a fall resulted in a broken hip which never healed. This was a source of constant suffering; yet in spite of it all her spirit remained serene. Friends who called went away feeling happier, for she never inflicted her suffering on others. And friends did call daily. Such an array of friends she had, for she knew no distinction between rich and poor, ignorant and educated, white or black. She had friends in all walks of life. In her suffering and in her friendships, hers was the spirit of Jesus.

Her children and grandchildren made regular pilgrimages to visit her. They also must have seen in her the very incarnation of the spirit of love.

On December 19, 1927, her pioneering spirit went out into the Great Beyond. Though her family and her friends felt the loss of her companionship they could smile through their tears with the realization that she graduated from the school of experience well qualified for the life into which she entered.

Even if her successes were not of the kind that are published to the world, she must be accounted victorious. In youth or in age, the heaviest burdens could not crush her spirit – the loss of parents or the death of children, deprivation and want or the daily grind of a large mountain household. Twelve times she went over the torturous way to the Great Pass of Life and brought back a precious little bundle of humanity. Denied formal schooling herself, she saw seven children and seven grandchildren become teachers, two of them doing graduate work in a university. She worked out her economic problems whether they involved solving the hieroglyphic puzzle of a coverlet pattern, learning the professional secret of the linen weaver, or winning all the first prizes in an occupation self-taught. She dared leave the accustomed and attempt the new when past the half-century mark of life, or make a homesteading venture at sixty-three. She would not yield to the pain of crying nerves or to the deadness of paralysis, to the isolation of the mountains or the distractions of the town. Hers was the spirit of the overcomer.

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I am the Great Great Grandson of Isabelle, through Great Grandmother Ruth Ann Ambrose Wilson.

William R. Turner