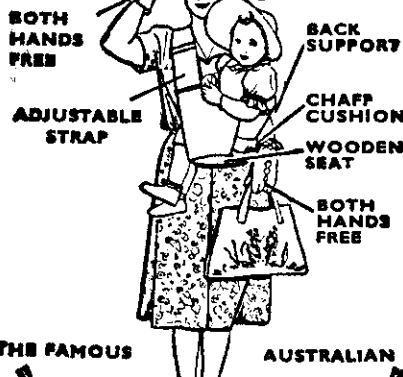


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3. STAINED TEETH
4. FLABBY GUMS
5. COATED TONGUE



# NURSING IN THE KENTUCKY HILLS

(Written for "The Listener" by B. RISTORI)

OUR ideas of other countries and their people are so often all wrong. Like many another New Zealander I had always imagined America to be a country of skyscrapers, film stars, gangsters, and gadgets. It was only when I went nursing in the Kentucky mountains that I discovered how incorrect my ideas had been. For here I found people living in much the same way as their ancestors had lived 100 years before.

The only means we had of visiting our patients was on horseback, for roads were non-existent. Trails were followed through thickly-wooded hills, swollen rivers were swum when necessity demanded, and when the thermometer was well down ice nails were put into the horse's shoes to enable him to negotiate the icy creek beds which went by such apt names as "Hell for Certain."

More than once I had my feet frozen into the stirrups, and on such occasions I always decided that I was not meant to be a pioneer. But at dawn or at sunset in the spring or the fall the colouring of the trees was so marvellous that I felt I ought to pay for the privilege of enjoying so much beauty and so much peace. And there was the added satisfaction of feeling that we were badly needed. For until Mrs. Breckinridge started her now world-famous "Frontier Nursing Service" the people in this part of the world lacked both doctors and nurses and many a young mother lost her life under the kindly though ignorant treatment of the local "Grannie."

OUR patients all dwelt in one-roomed log cabins scattered on the hill-sides or along creek beds. These cabins were sparsely furnished with home-made wooden table and upright chairs and a large bed gay with home-made patchwork quilts. Rarely was there a second bed, but this did not stop the mountaineer—who is hospitality personified—from inviting all strangers to "stop the night." More than once I had to accept. As the visitor I was allowed to choose the best position, but apart from the fact that by the time father, mother and five children had also got into bed we were rather overcrowded I always found my sleep disturbed by the cornshuck mattress, which seemed to be full of bumps in the wrong places.

A stove, a frying pan, a bucket of water with a communal gourd to drink from, and a gun on the wall completed the cabin's furniture. The last-named ornament would be a relic from the olden days when a gun was a necessity, both as a protection against enemies and as a means of getting food. Nowadays Red Indians are no more and feuds are out of date, so the only remaining human target is some inquisitive official seeking illicit "moonshine" stills. Opossums and squirrels are the only remaining wild animals to add variety to the average diet of corn bread, beans, potatoes, pumpkin, molasses, salt pork, and chicken.

ANOTHER preconceived notion which was shattered was one about the position of women in American society.

Far from being pampered darlings, the women in the mountains did most of the work both indoors and out. The men rode the mules while the women walked; and the men sat down to eat while the women stood behind them to wave the flies away from their faces.

One year I visited a house with a fine garden. A year later the wife was dead, the husband remarried, and the garden a wilderness. The reason for the state



"The only remaining human target is some inquisitive official seeking illicit 'moonshine' stills"

of the garden was given to me by the husband. He explained, "I married too late for my woman to get in a garden, but she aims to have a fine one next year." The fact that he might have done something about it never entered his head, any more than it did that of his woman sitting smoking alongside. She, like many another woman in the mountains, enjoyed her corn-cob pipe, but it took her some time to get used to the idea of the "brought-on women" (that was us) smoking cigarettes!

And it took the "brought-on women" time to get used to a world without roads, radios, motors, or shops. The first three have gradually crept into the hills, but the Kentucky woman is still largely dependent on mail-orders or her husband for any shopping she wants done. Of the two, the mail-order is more satisfactory, for men's taste cannot be relied upon where women's clothes are concerned.

I had a vivid personal experience of this. One Christmas Eve I was called out at midnight to a woman expecting a baby. After riding five miles through snow and ice, I did not feel my happiest on arrival, and the sight which met my eyes did nothing to raise my spirits. It might have been a scene taken from Dante: a log cabin dimly lit by a piece of rag in a medicine bottle of kerosene, and around a log fire women, children, and babies all dressed in black. The husband had recently taken some logs down the swollen river and had been commissioned to buy materials for his wife, his children by a former marriage, and his sister-in-law who was also his daughter-in-law. He had bought a bolt of black material, and what I saw was the result. Even for the "least 'un," who put in appearance at dawn, a little black frock was ready.