



History of Corporal Fess Whitaker: Life in the Kentucky Mountains, Mexico, and Texas (1918)

Fess Whitaker

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FESS WHITAKER (1870-1927) was a colorful Letcher county, Kentucky, politician who became almost a legendary folk figure serving in the military and working as coal miner and railroad man prior to his running for the office of Letcher County Jailer. After winning the election on a Republican ticket, he spent his victory night in the county jail on a charge of public drunkenness, thereby becoming Letcher County's first and only "jailed jailer". His 1918 campaign autobiography, "History of Corporal Fess Whitaker" begins with the modest notion that "among the people of Letcher County no other man has so remarkable history as Fess Whitaker." He was elected judge of Letcher County during the 1920s, and Whitaker had plans of running for a U.S. Congressional seat.

Whitaker writes:

"In the winning of friends he stands first; in the upbuilding of the county his influence has been strongly exerted; as a soldier on the battlefield he stands firm. While the moonshiners and ku-klux were provoking the country in my early boyhood as though led by an inscrutable hand were finding their way over the mountains and preparing to establish themselves as the outguard of civilization that they might become the possessors of all the sons of Letcher County, the good mountain mothers, almost unaided, not only stood like a wall of fire to forbid such conduct of the men, but made good their footing, which soon afterward made their loving Christian homes a pleasure.

"The strong characteristics of the men and women who, with unexampled courage, endurance and patriotic devotion achieved so much with so little means and in the face of obstacles so great, could but impress themselves upon the people of Letcher County. From the first mothers they have escaped that sign of Athenian decadence, the restless desire to be ever hearing and telling some new thing to show what good people Letcher County has.

"This book claims to be but an epitome of the History of Fess Whitaker; but it will be found to contain a general account, to which interest he has taken by an uneducated man, special and particular incidents, etc. The adult or educated mind will read far more between the lines than is found in the book. The author trusts that he has imparted to the short stories something of that spirit which should be impressed upon the people whose minds and character are still in the formative state - an admiration of their own country and a pride in its past, the surest guarantees that in the future her fair fame will be enhanced, her honor maintained and her progress in all right lines be steadily and nobly promoted."

Originally published in 1918; reformatted for the Kindle; may contain an occasional imperfection; original spellings have been kept in place.

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