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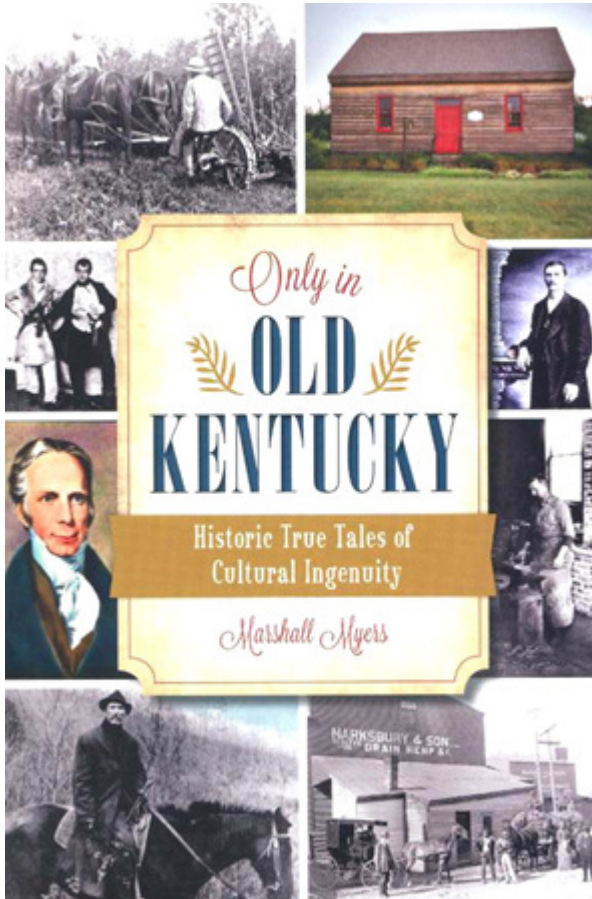
PARK CITY

DAILY NEWS

'Old Kentucky' a real page turner

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"Only in Old Kentucky: Historic True Tales of Cultural Ingenuity" by Marshall Myers. Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014, 144 pages, \$19.99.



"Kentucky's culture and history are unique," Marshall Myers explains near the beginning of *"Only in Old Kentucky: Historic True Tales of Cultural Ingenuity,"* his new collection of stories dealing with the Commonwealth's rich and colorful legacy. "Few states rival it for its sheer variety of forms and its settlers' ability to so rapidly and cleverly adapt to the environmental and social conditions when they passed through Cumberland Gap to behold what many of its residents even today call paradise."

To say this book is wide-ranging in its scope is an understatement. Myers embarks on his adventure by describing the earliest days in what would eventually become the state of Kentucky and then weaves his way through the development of the region in an entertaining and innately thought-provoking way. His prose is both seductive as well as addictive, although the stories he tells often seem disconnected at first glance. But the further down the rabbit hole the reader descends, the more apparent the common thread tying everything together becomes. The narrative seems to meander aimlessly from one episode to the next until it

slowly starts to dawn on the reader that there is indeed a method to the madness. More is going on here than initially meets the eye.

Myers has degrees from Lindsey Wilson College, Kentucky Wesleyan College, and Eastern Kentucky University; his doctorate is from the University of Louisville. Most of his academic career was spent at Eastern Kentucky University, where he served as coordinator of composition. He was an editor for "Back Home in Kentucky" for several years and is currently president of the Madison County Civil War Roundtable. A prolific author, Myers has over 250 publications; his previous books include "Great Civil War Stories of Kentucky" and "Neither Blue nor Gray." "Only in Old Kentucky" consists of an Introduction and sixteen easily-digested chapters covering a wide variety of stories that most in the region will find absolutely mesmerizing. Moreover, the book is lavishly illustrated with a plethora of vintage photographs, historical documents, and other graphics that serve to bring the author's prose to life in a meaningful and interesting way.

“When Rowan County Was at War with Itself,” the fifth chapter, is classic Kentucky history. Most readers have probably heard of the infamous feud between the Hatfields and McCoys; apparently the Rowan County War was even bloodier: “Lawlessness was so tightly woven into the very fiber of the county and so out of control that legislators in Frankfort actually considered dissolving the county and sending its parts back to Fleming and Morgan Counties, its original owners. At the feud’s height, Morehead, the county seat, went from a population of about 700 in 1885 to only 296 a mere two years later.” Myers then goes into considerable detail to educate the reader on what the instigating disagreement was all about, how the conflict became so violent, and why to this day when someone mentions a “feud” we don’t immediately think of the Martins and the Tollivers as opposed to the Hatfields and the McCoys.

Another of my favorite chapters was “The Days the Earth Rumbled and Roared: The New Madrid Earthquakes,” in which Myers describe the series of earthquakes that occurred near Fulton County, Kentucky during late 1811 and early 1812. As a biology major at the University of Tennessee at Martin during the 1970s, I had occasion to visit Reelfoot Lake several times during the completion of various course requirements. On a personal level, it was somewhat interesting to read about the events surrounding the formation of the enigmatic lake and the effect they had on the local communities.

“The quake affected Kentucky in some surprising ways,” Myers observes. “The most obvious way was the formation of the relatively shallow Reelfoot Lake, a twenty-seven-thousand-acre crescent-shaped body of water some fourteen miles long and up to four miles wide that stretches from Fulton County in far southwestern Kentucky into northwestern Tennessee. Besides some of the best crappie fishing in the area, the lake is famous for its natural beauty and the profusion of unique plant and animal life.”

So far so good – but then it gets interesting: “But the lake area has not always been as peaceful as the present surroundings suggest. In the early 1900s, the West Tennessee Land Company quietly acquired more and more of the land around the lake. The new landowners then set about to drain portions of Reelfoot Lake and convert the land to growing cotton, denying local residents access to the same land they had fished and hunted for generations. In retaliation, the local residents organized a group of masked men called the Night Riders to defend what they perceived as their rights to the area.”

Full disclosure: This is one of those books I was asked to review based on my critiques of similar volumes in the past. Although I am originally from Tennessee, I have spent nearly two-thirds of my life as a Kentucky resident and I’ll have to admit that my interest in local history has grown considerably as the decades have continued to come and go. I began reading this book out of a sense of responsibility, but what began as an obligation quickly became a labor of love. By the time I got to the third chapter, “To Teach and to Learn: Settlement Schools in Eastern Kentucky,” I was hooked. Myers is a natural storyteller who approaches his subject matter with such a contagious enthusiasm that it is difficult to put the book aside once you begin reading it.

If you are interested in learning more about Kentucky’s past, this is one book you’ll definitely want to add to your personal collection. “Only in Old Kentucky” is a real page turner; I recommend it highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*