



The Walker sisters, whose collective age totals 261 years, enjoy a short rest on the front porch. Their log-cabin home was built by their grandfather when Abe Lincoln was still practicing law in Illinois.

# Time Stood Still in the Smokies

By **JOHN MALONEY**

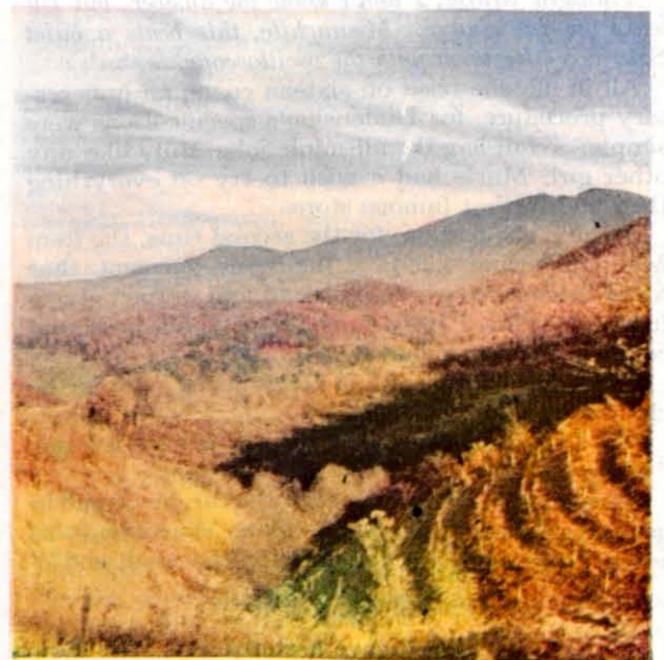
**I**F you are curious about how your great-great-grandfather lived—how he raised his family, grew his own food, produced his clothing and existed without benefit of supermarkets or mail-order catalogues, I'd like to take you back up Little Greenbriar Cove, in the heart of Tennessee's Great Smoky Mountains, to spend a leisurely autumn afternoon with the Walker sisters—Margaret Jane, seventy-five; Martha, sixty-eight; Louisa, sixty-two; and Hetty, fifty-six. There, surrounded by heavily forested peaks that in this range reach more than 6000 feet above the valley floors, you could look around you and say, with conviction, "Well, here I am back in the early nineteenth century, and it isn't so bad, after all."

The Walker sisters very definitely are out of this century, although when you taste some of their Dutch-oven-baked cornbread or sweet potatoes liberally smeared with butter they have just churned, you'll realize they are very much a part of this world. But they have kept any touch of these modern times away from their hearth, not through the slightest trace of eccentricity or any dislike for progress, but simply because, as women without

menfolk around, they have continued doing things in the ways and with the implements they know best how to use—which is to say, their father's and grandfather's methods and tools. The rocky mountainsides seem to respond to their touch. When I visited them, just as frost was putting the last splashes of color on high banks of forests that hem them in, their storerooms and cellars were full and they were settling down for winter with complete contentment.

This mountainous section of East Tennessee still is peopled by descendants of Daniel Boone and John Sevier and their contemporaries. The Walker sisters' grandfathers both were men of this independent, space-loving breed. Pushed out of Virginia by plowed land that left no room for game to multiply, they found the freedom they wanted in Tennessee's mountains. Wiley King, their maternal grandfather, found a little cove near where Fighting Creek and Little River join boulder-tossed waters. And here, while Abe Lincoln still was practicing law in Illinois, he built the house that is as solid today as it was when its yellow-poplar logs first were chinked with red mountain (Continued on Page 82)

**Deep in the mountains of East Tennessee, the Walker sisters are still living in the early 19th century . . . and finding it not so bad, either.**



On all sides the forested peaks of the Great Smokies rise 6000 feet or more above the valleys.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROBBINS



In this cabin, with nothing but the implements and methods of their forebears, the Walkers grind their meal, card their own wool and spin cloth for dresses and blankets.



Every thread that went into these colorful coverlets was spun by the sisters on their own old but still efficient wheel.



Cutting wood for fuel, shearing sheep or even stretching and drying sheepskin is all in the day's work to the four Walkers.

Spinning time is a social time, and during the winter months as many as five wheels are kept going. Before the six-foot-wide fireplace Miss Margaret stands at the spinning wheel while Miss Martha cards the wool.



# TIME STOOD STILL IN THE SMOKIES

(Continued from Page 16)

clay. In its one large room, with a loft for the children, he reared his family.

John Walker, whose family also had migrated from Virginia and settled just across Cove Mountain in Wears Valley, married Wiley's youngest daughter, Margaret Jane, soon after her father's death, and moved in to become the man of the King family. In due time, the old cabin with its one room and loft was overflowing with eleven children. A second cabin already standing on King land was moved log by log and reassembled to form new cooking and eating quarters for this large brood. Today, although five of the eleven children are dead—they all lived past the half-century mark—and all but the four unmarried sisters have moved away from Little Greenbriar Cove, the home is exactly as it was when John Walker was carried across the mountain to join his wife in the family burying ground in the next valley. And so far as the four spinster sisters—who were five until Polly died in the spring of 1945—are concerned, it will remain that way. Why, they reason, should anyone want to worry about changes and improvements when the ground is so fertile, one of their two cows is always fresh, their spring flows freely, and heavy forests around them provide all the fuel they need? A sympathetic visitor can find no answer.

When their grandfather and father were living, people in this region grew their own sheep, carded their wool and spun their own cloth for dresses, suits, bedclothing and even saddle blankets for their mules. Thread for looms and knitting needles was twirled off wheels before the six-foot-wide fireplace in the Walker home then, and still is today. Martha showed me winter dresses she had made from their own wool while Margaret hummed away spinning thread that would go into warm stockings for themselves or socks for nephews still overseas. "Guess it ain't every soldier in Germany that can say his old-maid aunts raised his socks off'n a rocky mountainside for him," Hetty observed as she looked on. "I hear them Europe winters can be powerful cold, and we don't aim for any of our folks to have cold feet, no matter where they are."

As girls the sisters watched their father shear sheep and learned how to wash the wool with homemadelye soap in preparation for carding. Today they do it themselves, using the same clippers John Walker bought in Sevierville fifty years ago. They don't raise as many sheep as their father did, but keep only six or eight grown animals each year, selling lambs or occasionally butchering one for their own table. But any one of them can catch a buck or ewe, hogtie it and hoist it, bleating and kicking, to the rack where they do the shearing.

While they were describing the procedure we could hear the lead sheep's bell in the fields above the cabin. Photographer David Robbins asked them to catch one and shear it for a photograph. Margaret got feed, called, "Here, sheepie, sheepie, sheepie!" and got them almost within noosing range. Then they saw Robbins and bolted back up the mountain. No amount of calling would tempt them down again, nor would they follow a trail of grain we laid for them. "They won't come down again as long as there's anybody

around with pants on," Margaret said, and we found she was right. Sorry, no sheep pictures.

Blankets and coverlets the sisters weave on looms from their home-grown wool are museum pieces. The blankets, great snowy piles of them, used to good advantage during cold winters here, are soft and fluffy and light as you'd imagine a queen's blanket to be. Every thread in them was spun on the old but still efficient wheels their father built soon after he started rearing a family. The coverlets follow designs that were popular in Martha Washington's day, and all of them have names—Bonaparte's March, Double Bow Knot, Sea Shell, and Washington's Ring and Diamond.

At times during winter months as many as five wheels have been kept going in the great living room, getting the thread ready for more coverlets or blankets or winter garments. And spinning time is a much enjoyed social

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## VANISHING ACT

By Ethel Jacobson

Always underfoot,  
Child, child,  
Dogging every step,  
Driving mother wild.  
Omnipresent shadow,  
Crowding where I stand,  
Clutching at my apron,  
Clinging to my hand.

Till we go out shopping  
In the largest store.  
Suddenly you're simply  
Not there any more.  
High and low I seek you,  
Grimly tracking back,  
Asking every salesclerk  
From Toys to Bric-a-brac.

I vault up escalators,  
Driven more than wild;  
Always half my shopping  
Is shopping for a child.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

time here, just as it was in your great-grandfather's home.

The Walker sisters' living room, which is their bedroom as well, is unique even in this region of mountain homes, for nothing in it has been changed since the days nearly a century ago when Wiley King first began rearing his family. Four generous three-quarter beds, sturdy and standing high off the floor, occupy the corners, another sits against the back wall. All five of them, as well as a trundle bed under one of them, were built of mountain bellwood by John Walker almost eighty years ago. While they were telling me how their father made them with his own hands—and an antique collector would go into ecstasies over any one of them—Louisa giggled. "Some city man asked how in the world anybody could squeeze into that little bed, and it so tight under the other one," she said. "He looked plumb foolish when I told him we pulled it out when nieces or nephews come to spend the night with us."

Old family groups, staid and prim as your grandfather's wedding pictures, hang about the room and show the four sisters with their parents and long-dead brothers and sisters, taken by wandering photographers who made their way through the mountains. Around the

eaves of the room, slats nailed to rafters hold shoeboxes and baskets filled with treasured letters, faded old family records and personal belongings or scraps of gay-colored materials sent them from time to time to be put into "friendship" quilts pieced together from dresses or shirts friends have worn. Nothing goes to waste in these mountains.

Visitors to this old log cabin spend a good portion of their time around the big fireplace in the kitchen, where life in any frontier home was centered. There's a warm, homey smell about the room; beans slowly simmering in a pot hung over the blaze from hickory logs, or bread baking on the hearth, or the good earthy smell of turnip greens or wild mustard simmering over the log fire.

While I was visiting them in this kitchen Martha was putting up wine-colored apple jelly and jars of amber-colored apple butter. Rafters overhead were hung with drying red peppers, onions, seed corn, sacks of dried fruit and beans and vegetable and flower seeds. When we sat down to eat, a wide "fly sweep" made of thin strips of newspaper fastened to a stick above the table was kept gently swishing to keep flies away.

I noticed a "store-bought" gadget in the corner of the kitchen. "That's our grist mill," Martha explained. "We can't carry corn to the water mill down on Little River, so we have to grind our own meal." Then she explained that an old mule I had seen in the barn lot had lost his good teeth and couldn't chew his corn properly, but the little hand mill could be adjusted to crack the grains without grinding them fine as meal, thus "chewing" the old mule's cereal for him here in the kitchen. "In his old age that mule has got so bull-headed he won't let us girls work him," Margaret explained. "When we want land plowed or logs dragged down from the mountain for firewood, one of our relatives has to come and work him for us. A Tennessee mule has got to be handled special, and none of us can cuss!"

Long-necked, gangling black chickens locally known as "Indian games," descendants of the fowls domesticated by the Cherokee Indians, were running around the yard. I asked why they did not keep types bred to yield bigger drumsticks. "None but them games could scratch a living out of these rocky mountainsides," Margaret explained.

Wiley King and John Walker by necessity were blacksmiths, cobblers, furniture makers and amateur doctors as well as farmers and hunters. They built their own wagons and the sleds used to haul wood out of the forests, made their plows and harrows, made or mended the family shoes, built every article of furniture used in the home, including looms and spinning wheels for their women. They also made their cane mills and pea shellers, raised and cured the tobacco they smoked in corn-cob pipes, and knew all the simple remedies that could be compounded from wild mountain plants or garden-grown herbs. For the past twenty years antique dealers have made many useless trips back to Little Greenbriar, trying to persuade the sisters to part with these everyday tools or the furniture, looms or spinning wheels they still use. But they shake their heads. "What would we do without them?" Martha said. "We'd have the money, but what would we work with?"

Soon after daybreak, Margaret and Martha, although the two oldest of the

(Continued on Page 84)

sisters, are outside in summer's dew or winter's frost or snow, milking, feeding the mule, sheep, chickens and pigs. Hetty, who had a "spell of rheumatiz" last winter and can't get around so well, gets breakfast, sweeps the house with her homemade broomcorn sweeper, and makes beds. Louisa cuts wood or gets ready for work in the fields, where she is joined by Margaret and Martha. And if fuel is low, the three sisters think nothing of cutting down a tree and dragging it off the mountain to be chopped into proper lengths in the yard.

Spring and early summer is berry-picking time. Then all four of the sisters, wearing sunbonnets and high shoes under their ankle-length skirts, climb to the "balds"—natural open clearings on top of surrounding mountains—to pick buckets of wild gooseberries or huckleberries and, later in the summer, blackberries that grow in wild profusion up little valleys and along spring-fed streams as well as on mountain heights. When berry-picking time is past, there are still other winter foods to be put up—beans, peas, corn, tomatoes, beets and sauerkraut to be packed down in stone jars and stored in the springhouse. The pinch of rationing was not felt up Little Greenbriar Cove.

The sisters' vegetable garden, with rows of flowers between more utilitarian plantings, is exactly as you've read your great-great-grandfather's was. There is a spot for sage, mint, horehound, horse-radish and parsley; pieplant grows in succulent profusion, sweet Concord grapes drape over the fences. There are the same kind of herbs and medicinal plants used by Davy Crockett's wife to doctor the old Indian fighter, although most folks have forgotten how to use them. Then, in the fall, when frost has put the proper sweetness to them, the turnips are dug up and stored in great mounds of earth for use all winter.

Here and there over the fields you see piles of weather-smoothed rocks

which the sisters, and their father and grandfather before them, gathered and piled to make hoeing and plowing a little easier. Looking at the mounds and noticing how many are still under your feet as you walk across the fields, it's easy to understand an age-old mountain superstition: The devil plants these rocks, a new batch every year, to tempt mortal souls. Some fields here, like those in New England, are inclosed by rock fences, one manner of utilizing the stones to advantage, but the Walker place mainly is fenced by rails their father cut decades ago. The sisters' only objection to rail fences is that they need constant patching to keep their cows and the mule in.

The real glory of this mountain cabin is the profusion of flowers that bloom around it from late January, when first wild varieties begin peeping up through the snow, until fall, when frost nips chrysanthemums, late marigolds and cosmos. Through the summer more than thirty varieties of roses, many of them brought there by the sisters' mother or grandmother half a century or more ago, climb in tangled confusion over fences and fill every vacant corner. And in this old-maids' garden one cannot overlook the red and white bachelor buttons growing everywhere. "We keep hopin'," Louisa giggles, and stern Margaret shakes her head in disapproval at such levity.

The Walker sisters were not always as isolated as they are today, for until ten years ago three of their brothers and a married sister lived within one mile of them in the same cove, on strips of land their father had given each of them when they married and started families of their own. In those days, when the sisters were ill or wanted help, they had only to step outside their door and give a blast or two on their father's old hunting horn and help would be there within a few minutes. But almost without warning all that was changed.

The people of Tennessee and North Carolina, seeing what lumber compa-

nies had done to most tracts of virgin timber in this country, got Cal Coolidge to back them in establishing the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Conservation-minded citizens of both states raised money to buy still-forested tracts of land, including peaks of this highest eastern range. John D. Rockefeller and other private owners gave land or money to purchase timberlands. Then the state of Tennessee, after trying to buy out all small landowners and failing in many instances, started condemnation proceedings. Most mountain farmers eventually bowed to the inevitable, accepted the fair prices offered them and moved to more fertile regions. But the Walker sisters, bewildered and alone, were frightened by the prospect of facing life in a strange community. The Park Service, realizing their fear, bought the farm, but gave them life rights to the property, along with permission to cut wood off what had been their own land to keep them warm during winter. Now park rangers have assumed a sort of guardianship over the four lone women, and a trail leading to their cabin is kept open during all but the snowiest weather.

Sometimes in winter deep snows isolate them for weeks at a time. They don't worry particularly, for with wood in the shed, their mule, sheep and chickens snug in their log barn, they shovel paths to the springhouse, barn and woodshed, and set their spinning wheels going while winds sweep down off the mountains and smoke from their big backlog sends up the only sign of habitation for miles around. There are red and white ears of home-grown popcorn to be popped, and sometimes they get out their old square-note songbooks and sing the old-fashioned "singin' convention" tunes their parents and grandparents sang in this same valley. The only discordant note that might jar their day would be an outburst of frightened cackling or bleating of sheep from the barn. Then Margaret or Martha reaches for the old twelve-gauge shotgun hanging over the door and starts running.

"This park may be savin' a lot of trees and rhododendron and laurel for city folks to look at, but it sure is lettin' them bear and foxes and hawks git mighty pesky," Martha says. Bears sometimes come down off the mountain and grub up a few crops, but they have not yet become a real problem around the cabin. But foxes and hawks are constantly getting away with the chickens, and since no hunting is allowed within the 462,000 acres of the park, both of these "varmints," as well as wildcats and smaller animals of prey, including eagles, are fast multiplying. But with their guns and Wimpy, their collie dog, to give alarms, the sisters actually fear nothing back in these deserted hills except forest fires. This is a constant worry for everyone, including park rangers, especially during summer months when thousands of tourists drive through the reservation, throwing cigarettes into dry grass or leaves and failing to extinguish campfires.

This is the only region in the Southeast where native pheasants were not hunted to extinction years ago, although before the park was established both pheasants and wild turkeys were becoming rare. Domesticated Walker turkeys formerly were belled to distinguish them from wild cousins, but even this did not always keep them from being shot by sporting neighbors. As a final resort they raised yellow and white types, and no hunter could use the old alibi I've heard in more level

territory: "They looked wild enough to me!"

Louisa, with fun-loving brown eyes and a perpetual smile, hears poetry in the wind and sees it in every moss-covered rock or wild flower. Mountain people in many other valleys here know her poems and recite them at school or church, and some of them, despite the fact her construction and spelling may follow rules she personally invented, have a quaint and mystic appeal. When the park forced them to sell their land, she recorded the sisters' emotions and sorrow in rhyme:

*But now the park commissioners,  
Comes all dressed in clothes so gay,  
Saying this old mountain home of  
yours  
We must now take away.*

Some of her poems have been set to plaintive mountain music, but this was without Louisa's approval. She doesn't hold at all with anything but sacred music.

Before the park necessitated removal of other cove families, community life centered around church services conducted in a seventy-year-old school building constructed of poplar logs two feet wide by their father, uncle, two Primitive Baptist preachers and another neighbor or two. The Walker children all went to school here within a mile of their home, but a term that lasted more than two months each year was rare. Years later, a clapboard church, complete with belfry, was erected near by. When the preacher felt like having prayers, a preaching or just a song gathering, he would come across the mountain from his home on Fightin' Creek, ring the bell and wait for his congregation to assemble.

When the park was established, the more modern church was torn down and its bell, which by that time had lost its tongue, was carried away. But the log school, still as sturdy as when it was built, was left untouched in its lonely surroundings of oak and poplar trees. A Walker burying plot adjoins the building, and over one infant's grave I noticed the inscription: "Budded on earth to bloom in heaven." None of the sisters would accompany Photographer Robbins and me to see the old building. "Brings back too many sad memories," one of them said, and the others nodded agreement.

I asked the sisters to tell me of parties they attended or held here in their home as girls, but they shook their heads. "Pa never held with parties and such frivolities," Margaret said, "and so we never went to many." They had attended a few "apple peelin's" and a "corn huskin'" or two, but even these gatherings were frowned upon by their parents. A summer visitor who once came to their cabin asked them if they believed heaven would condone dancing, and their opinion was freely given. "You can risk it if you want to," one of them said, "but don't do it here."

John Walker also had unalterable ideas about how his daughters should receive callers.

"Pa always went to bed when dark come," Martha told me. "Then we had to quit courtin' and come to bed too."

J. P. Shelton, their only living brother-in-law, who owns a home in near-by Wears Cove, has his ideas about why five of the Walker sisters never married. "Reckon I'm about the only man that had courage to bust into that family," he says, "or else the rest of them gals got discouraged when they couldn't git me and jus' quit."

THE END