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Dr. Charles A. Huguenin, adjunct professor of English at Pace College, deserves the title of contributing editor, so frequently are his articles on American folklore published in Pace. With this contribution, he departs from his exploration of history and myth related to the environs of Pace College in lower Manhattan to relate the exploits of Claudius Smith, gangster of Revolutionary times, whose headquarters were in a pair of caves near Tuxedo, New York, which he visited sometime ago in preparation for this article.

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THE COWBOYS OF THE RAMAPCS

Under the leadership of the notorious Claudius Smith, this gang of marauders operated in lower New York State during the Revolution

by Charles A. Huguenin

During the early part of the Revolutionary War, Westchester on the east side of the Hudson River and the southern part of Orange County (which then included modern Rockland County) on the western side comprised quasi-"Neutral Ground." This area, lying between the British Army, quartered in New York City, and Washington's Continentals, spread out along the Hudson River between Fort Montgomery and Newburgh, was infested with lawless bands of marauders, called "Cowboys" and "Skinners."

The Cowboys were largely refugees, belonging to the British side engaged in plundering nearby inhabitants of their cattle and valuables. The Skinners generally professed attachment to the American cause and lived chiefly within the Patriots' lines. More unprincipled than the Cowboys, they committed depredations indiscriminately upon friends and foes.

The inhabitants of the "Neutral Ground" endured much suffering during the war, for they were sure to be abused and plundered by one party or the other. If the inhabitant took the oath of fidelity to the American cause, the Cowboys were sure to plunder him; if he did not, the treacherous and rapacious Skinners would denounce him as a Tory, seize his property, and confiscate it in the name of the state. The execution of law was assumed by banditti, and partisans on both sides in the inter-continental struggle were reduced to common ruin.

Lines of cleavage between the two factions were not rigid. One day they would be engaged in a broil; the next day they would be in league with each other in plundering their own friends as well as their enemies. Both parties were enemies to any farmer or lonely traveler whose unprotected situation offered a prospect of booty.

On the east side of the Hudson River, the "Neutral Ground" extended for 30 miles, with Tarrytown the theater of stormy scenes between the supporters of the Crown and those of Congress. Dutchman Jacob Van Tassel converted his "Roost" into a veritable arsenal, with a garrison comprising his stout-hearted wife and his redoubtable sister, and a goose gun for ordnance. On Watermelon Hill, about a mile and a half southeast of Lake Mahopac, Cowboys built pens to shelter stolen horses until they could drive the animals in safety to New York City for use in the British Army.

On the west side of the Hudson River, plunder, outrage, inhuman barbarity, and even murder ran rife in the debatable "Neutral Ground" that covered an area more than 55 miles in extent. Joshua Hett Smith, who lived in Haverstraw, has left a contemporary account of the plight of its cowed inhabitants:

No one slept safely in his bed. Many families hid themselves at night in barns, wheat-ricks, corn-cribs, and stacks of hay; and on each returning day, blessed their good fortune that their houses had escaped the flames.

The composition of these predatory gangs of Cowboys was loose, including confirmed Tories, British deserters, runaway slaves, and Indians; their number was indeterminate; and their tastes in thievery were indiscriminating. Despite the name by which they were known, they did not confine their attentions to driving off the live stock from the farms of their unfortunate victims. Anything portable and marketable with the British in New York City fell within the scope of their acquisitive proclivity, and their booty comprised not only money and silver plate but also saddles and articles of clothing. An itemized list of articles stolen from a resident of Walkkill included shirts, jackets, sheets, pillow cases, and handkerchiefs, besides silver plate and money.

From every period of havoc in the onward march of civilization emerge names of individuals whom history has endowed with the responsibility of leadership. In this period tradition has settled upon Loyalist Claudius Smith as the leader of a gang of these Cowboys, has imbued him with daring and wickedness, and has assigned him a headquarters in Smith's Clove and lairs in the Ramapo Mountains.

Two caves, located about a mile east of the railroad station in Tuxedo, are known locally today as the "Claudius Smith Caves." They are not cavernous gaps in the earth's surface, but rather long, horizontal rock shelters at the foot of successive cliffs. The upper of this pair, allegedly the den of this notorious Cowboy, is some 8 to 10 feet high, 30 feet long, and 10 feet deep. In Revolutionary times his gang, it is said, improved upon Nature insofar as the camp site was concerned. At great labor the members rolled huge boulders before its entrance, protecting it from winds and storms. The boulders have long since fallen from their original positions, but they can be seen today scattered around the vicinity of the cave. The lower cave, which is longer and deeper but not so high, served as a rude stable to shelter the horses of the freebooters and the stolen live stock that they had garnered in their marauding expeditions through the Ramapos. Both caves, removed from each other by about 150 yards of rough terrain, were large enough to accommodate a considerable number of men, horses, and cattle. A spring that ran down the mountainside between the caves furnished a convenient source of water for both Cowboys and beasts. Most of the booty of Claudius Smith, it is alleged, consisted of horses and cattle, for which he found a ready market among the British in British-held New York City. He thereby earned among those he benefited the sobriquet "the Cowboy of the Ramapos."

An inland promontory, offering one of the most spectacular views to be found in the Ramapos, lies in the mountains only a short distance from the pair of caves. Today's sightseer may appreciate the strategic value of such a location to Claudius Smith and his followers. The main road in Revolutionary times wound for 16 miles through the valley below. Traffic along this highway could be detained at pistol point and looted within a short distance of the lairs. The robbers could find security in their customary hide-out, in the shaded glens, or in some fault in which the region abounds.

The wild, Tory-infested "Clove," which was chiefly the Ramapo Valley, extended northward to Smith's Clove (now Monroe), named after Claudius Smith's father. "This district was celebrated for the attachment of the inhabitants in general to the British interest," wrote Joshua Hett Smith. "Almost all communications between Canada and New York passed through this place, there being a regular connection of the King's friends, where they could take their stages during the whole war, in the greatest safety." "Through this clove, by way of Ramapo," maintained Historian Benson J. Lossing, "was the best route for an army from New Windsor (near Newburgh) into the upper part of New Jersey." Over it moved George Washington's army northward from Middlebrook, New Jersey, to encamp

in July 1777 eleven miles above the Ramapo Pass. The region was so overrun with Cowboys and other Tories that Washington could not get reliable accounts of British General Howe's proposed operations.

The following incident will give some indication of the serious ways in which the Cowboys interfered with Washington's conduct of his campaign against the British. While the Colonial troops were encamped at Montgomery, John McLean was selected to carry a message to Newburgh, where Washington was stationed. In a lonely place where Stony Brook crossed the Shawangunk Road, a number of men leaped from ambush, seized him, gagged him, robbed him of his dispatch, and tied him to a tree. There they left him. Night came on, and with it an ominous and bone-chilling coldness. McLean wriggled throughout the night within his bonds to maintain circulation in his numb body. He prayed fervently that some chance passerby would espy him in that deserted spot and save him from death by freezing. Not until morning did a lone traveler come upon the helpless captive. Through frost-bitten lids McLean watched the man approach, stare, and finally rush to release him from his gags and bonds. McLean suspected that the men who had attacked him were members of the gang of Claudius Smith. It is not improbable. Claudius Smith's interest in the property of others did not exclude dispatches carried on the persons of victims he waylaid. Mrs. Ashman's grandfather, who lived near Blooming Grove, was captured by the Cowboys and was threatened with a dunking in a deep well unless he delivered over the important papers he carried.

Although the active and influential Whigs of the county were the especial objects of Smith's hatred and vengeance, his pro-British sympathies prompted him at least on one occasion to make an attempt to acquire property belonging to the Continental Army. He and a trusted follower named John Brown broke into an enclosure near the American lines and proceeded to drive off a number of oxen. Before the pair could reach a retreat with the plodding quadruped booty, the two were apprehended and jailed in Kingston. The following record is historical testimony of Smith's first failure:

Council of Safety, July 18, 1777.

Ordered that Sheriff Dumont cause to be removed from the jail in Kingston to the jail in Orange County, Claudius Smith and John Brown charged with stealing oxen belonging to the continent.

After the transfer had been effected, one of Claudius Smith's cronies carried the news of his confinement to scattered contingents of his band in their different places of rendezvous. A number of his followers converged upon Goshen and seized the sheriff, who had custody of their leader. They placed a rope around his neck with a threat that was not lost upon the law officer. The sheriff discreetly surrendered Smith and Brown to their comrades, who left Goshen in triumph with plunder that made the rescue of their leader a remunerative venture.

Only a very few of the marauding exploits of Claudius Smith and his band have been preserved. One of them deals with a beautiful mare, owned by Colonel Jesse Woodhull. Woodhull was a brother-in-law of Fletcher Matthews, one of Claudius Smith's trusted followers, and a second cousin of Austin Smith, another member of Smith's Cowboys. After Smith's acquisitive admiration became known to the colonel, the owner apprehensively transferred the mare from his barn to his cellar, which served as her stall for a number of weeks. In broad daylight Claudius Smith surreptitiously slipped into the colonel's house while the family was upstairs at tea, led forth the horse, leaped upon her back, and proceeded to drive her off. The first intimation that the inmates of the house had of the theft was a yell of defiance from the Cowboy as he was riding off on his stolen prize. A gentleman guest sprang up from the table, seized a gun, and leveled it at the outlaw through the window. As he was about to squeeze the trigger on the receding target, still within range, Woodhull intervened. Knocking the poised rifle aside, the colonel cautioned, "If you shoot and miss him, he will kill me."

Base Repayment

The theft of his favorite mare was base repayment for the colonel's befriending members of Claudius Smith's own gang. Loyalties among friends during the Revolution, however, were repeatedly abrogated, and even loyalties among family members were suspended. "All friendly intercourse was at an end," observed historian Joshua Hett Smith, in a district where "literally, brother was against brother, and father against son, frequently imbruing their hands in each other's blood." At the same time that an intercontinental war was being waged with England, a civil war disturbed every home. One of Claudius's own brothers, David, was a patriot in the Second Regiment of the Orange County Militia; whereas another brother, Julius, had gone to New Brunswick to fight on the side of the Crown. Claudius himself had four sons, three of whom had adopted the politics of their Tory father and rode with him on many of his nefarious exploits. Samuel, the eldest of his sons, had flouted Tory politics and had cast his lot with the patriots in Colonel William Allison's Fourth Regiment of Orange County Militia.

Whether Claudius Smith ever committed murder in cold blood will always remain a moot question, but on the morning of October 7, 1778, Major Nathaniel Strong was "lying Dead," according to the testimony of thirteen citizens of Orange County, with two projectiles lodged in his face, another in his neck, and a fourth in his chest. According to their deposition, "a company of armed men one of them supposed to be Claudius Smith" had broken into Major Strong's house between one and two o'clock in the morning, and "three men fired at him." The deceased major's wife swore in a deposition that when the party of marauders had attacked the house, "she heard her husband say it was Claudius Smith." The Cowboy was never tried for murder, but tradition has accorded him credit with capabilities of murder. Charles E. Stickney, author of the HISTORY OF THE MINISINK REGION, contended that Claudius Smith kept inhabitants of Orange County from sleeping peacefully in their beds for fear of "getting their throats cut before morning."

Because the slaying of Major Strong was foisted -- justly or unjustly -- upon Claudius Smith, the events of the night of October 6, 1778, take on paramount importance in my abbreviated biography. It was a night rich in prospective designs. If it were a typical one, Smith must have led an exceedingly active nocturnal existence. The gang's first stratagem involved the looting of the house of Captain Woodhull in Oxford and the capture of its owner "Ded or a Live." The object of the larceny was a set of silver. When Claudius with four of his party, some of whom were his sons, sought admittance to the home about twelve o'clock at night, the captain was absent on duty in Clarkstown. After his wife had refused to unfasten the latch, the gang proceeded to break down the door. Mrs. Woodhull divined their identity and their intent. While the desperadoes were still busy at the resistant door, she hastily gathered valuable articles together and hid them in her child's cradle. On top of them she deposited the child. The rogues finally burst into the room and conducted a search of the house. Mrs. Woodhull, meanwhile, pretended to be very busy beside the cradle, trying to quiet little Fanny. The artifice succeeded. The frustrated felons finally left the house with several valuable articles, but short by a wide margin of the spoils they had anticipated in garnering. Before galloping away, the desperadoes espied in a meadow near the house the hobbled horse belonging to Luther Conklin, a relative of the Woodhulls who was also absent from the house of his host at the time of the depredation. The acquisition of the horse by the band was an elementary procedure.

From Oxford the felons rode to Blooming Grove to pay a call in their inimitable lawless fashion on Major Nathaniel Strong. The purpose of this second project was also murder. Instead of frowning, Fortune this time smiled upon the perpetrators. The major was within, but because the gang did not reach the house until about one o'clock, the prospective victim was asleep in an inner room. The customary method of gaining admittance by breaking down the door aroused the major, who promptly armed himself with a pair of pistols and a musket. After the desperadoes had demolished the outer door, they rushed into the first room and proceeded to break through one of the panels of the door to the inner room. Consternation overspread their faces when they saw through the smashed panel that their intended victim was armed to the teeth. The predicament called for the exercise of either courage or guile. The situation evoked no courage; what guile it did evoke would not have redounded to the credit of a mentally retarded child. Taking shelter behind the walls of the room, the assailants promised the major quarter if he should surrender his arms. The trusting major set his musket against the wall. As he approached the door to open it, the outlaws shot at him through the shattered panel. Their balls could not possibly have missed at such a range. If Claudius Smith earned his reputation for courage, shrewdness, and marksmanship through such conduct, then tradition has been munificent in its conferment of honors. The major sank to the floor and expired without uttering a word. Appropriating two bridles and a saddle, the gang cantered off to its old haunts.

The murder of Major Strong evoked a storm of protest. An account of this "fresh instance of the villainy of Claudius Smith and his Comrades," along with a plea for the capture of the gang, was dispatched to Governor Clinton. The governor acknowledged the request with a proclamation, offering a reward of \$1,200 for the apprehension of Claudius Smith and \$600 for that of his sons, Richard and James.

Luck Runs Out

With a price on his head, Claudius Smith fled from his old haunts in the Clove with British-held New York City his immediate destination. His object now was to find some clime that offered security from molestation by the law and longevity for his misguided life. Probably under the impression that the eastern reaches of Long Island would be more advantageous because of their remoteness, he moved thence to take up lodgings with a widow near Smithtown. His luck was running out fast. Fate accorded him fewer than two weeks of freedom.

After the British had taken possession of Long Island, a number of Whigs had moved with their families across Long Island Sound into the more congenial atmosphere of Connecticut. Among these was Major Jesse Brush, a wealthy anti-Tory farmer, who left his property in the care of tenants. The major made occasional, clandestine visits to Long Island to look after his concerns personally. On one of these visits he accidentally learned about Claudius Smith's residence in the neighborhood of Smithtown.

Returning to Connecticut, he imparted his discovery to an acquaintance, Mr. Titus, also a native Long Islander and a man possessed of unusual enterprise and resolution. Titus agreed to join Major Brush in a daring plan to capture the outlaw for the attractive bounty.

They engaged three other men to assist them, armed themselves with muskets and pistols, and prepared a whale boat to transport them to Long Island.

One November night, under cover of darkness, they crossed Long Island Sound. Reaching the Long Island shore about eleven o'clock, they guided the boat that bore them into a small bay north of Smithtown. Leaving one of their number in charge of the boat, they proceeded southward across the island to the retreat of the Cowboy -- a distance of nearly a mile. When they reached the house, they entered without knocking for fear of alarming their intended captive. The outlaw's landlady was seated by the fire.

Major Brush, who was acquainted with the widow, asked her if Claudius Smith were in the house.

She replied, "He is in bed. I will go and call him."

Instantly Major Brush retorted, "No. Tell me where he lodges."

"Upstairs in the bedroom," replied the puzzled widow.

The major warned the landlady to be quiet. He promptly took a candle, and leaving one of his companions below, he with the other two crept cautiously up the stairs. As soon as the three intruders entered the room and seized the recumbent outlaw, Smith awoke with a start and made violent resistance in a futile attempt to withdraw his pistols, concealed under his pillow. His captors lost no time in binding his arms with a cord. They then marched him, bound and covered with their firearms, to the whaling boat. Without incident the posse with its captive recrossed Long Island Sound and the next morning landed on the Connecticut shore. The captors placed Smith in irons and a guard over him.

Major Brush forthwith sent word to Governor Clinton in Poughkeepsie that he had Claudius Smith in his custody. Clinton authorized him to conduct the Cowboy through the southern part of Connecticut to Fishkill Landing and to turn him over to a party of guards, including Colonel Isaac Nicoll, Sheriff of Orange County. On the twentieth of the current month, the accounts of Governor Clinton show an entry for 480 pounds, charged to "Cash paid Major Jesse Brush for apprehending & securing the Body of Claudius Smith."

Claudius Smith was apparently led, not directly to Fishkill Landing, but to Poughkeepsie after his capture. It may have been some time before he was eventually turned over to Sheriff Nicoll because his trial at Goshen was not held until two months later. Upon his arrival in Goshen, the outlaw was cast into jail, ironed hand and foot, and chained to a ring in the floor. A strong, round-the-clock guard was posted at the "Grief Hole" that opened into his cell. The guard was under orders to shoot the Cowboy if an attack on the prison to effect his liberation were likely to succeed. Sheriff Nicoll's precautions are easily understandable. The prisoner had escaped from the Goshen jail more than a year before under circumstances that in retrospect, made the sheriff's blood run cold.

On Wednesday, January 13, 1779, Claudius Smith was taken forth for trial in the Court House in Goshen. Three indictments -- all for theft -- were lodged against him for burglaries in the houses of John Earle, Ebenezer Woodhull, and William Bell. It is alleged that he conducted himself with admirable firmness during the course of the trial. When the verdict of guilty was rendered and the sentence of execution by hanging was read, he was asked if he had anything to say in his defense. "No," he allegedly retorted. "If God Almighty can't change your hearts, I cannot." This allegation,

however, does not appear in the minutes of his trial, filed under PLP no. 1773 in the Hall of Records across City Hall Park from Pace College.

On January 22, 1779, nine days after his trial, Claudius Smith marched with firm step toward the improvised gallows, comprising a cart over which a noose ominously dangled from a tree. Crowds flocked to witness the execution of a man whose name had long terrorized their county and whose mere threat had prevented Colonel Jesse Woodhull from sleeping in his own house for months.

No Sign of Rescue

Dressed in a suit of rich broadcloth adorned with silver buttons, the Cowboy presented a noble appearance as he strode with a manly air toward the place in the western corner of the park, designated for his quietus. His eyes were fixed intently upon Slate Hill, east of Goshen, to ascertain some signs about a cave near its crest of an attempted rescue on the part of his comrades in crime, particularly his two sons. If, throughout the term of his incarceration, he had entertained a hope of deliverance, he was disappointed. To his anxious eyes as they lingered hopefully on the distant prospect, none was manifest. He bowed to several whom he knew in the crowd and evinced no outward sign of emotion.

Among the many legends about this Cowboy was his mother's early detection of criminal tendencies that lurked within his soul, even in his youth. "Claudius," she allegedly predicted, "you will die like a trooper's horse, with your shoes on." To prove his mother a false prophetess, he now calmly unbuckled and kicked off his boots. The cart was withdrawn from under him, and he was swung into eternity -- ostensibly a reprehensible felon. If the American Revolution had failed and we were still colonists under the jurisdiction of the Crown, Claudius Smith would have died a martyr, and descendants like Mrs. Meta Smith Bush of Monroe could point with pride to their noble heritage and to their status as officers in the Claudius Smith Chapter of the Daughters of the Empire.

After Claudius Smith was hanged in the jail yard on ground that today comprises the Presbyterian Church Park, he memorialized with his death many objects connected with it. An old Balm of Gilead tree, that remained standing until about 1920 when decay made its removal imperative, was known thereafter as the "Hangman's Tree." A fifty-seven-pound iron weight that may still serve as a doorstep to the men's rostrum of the Goshen Court House was once attached to one end of the noose in early Goshen hangings, one of which might have been that of Claudius Smith's. The scaffold was allegedly still lying about 1920 in the attic of the Goshen Court House. The first park bandstand was erected in 1855 over the very spot that Smith's feet first touched as he dropped to the ground from the scaffold. Smith's skull was subsequently bricked in at the keystone over the Goshen Court House door, where a rough, circular spot in the masonry just over the present court house betrays its location.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, tradition in the town of Monroe was rife with stories of caches filled with buried treasure. During the Revolution, according to legend, the Cowboys had stolen at different times and among other things a large number of American muskets, pewter plates from governmental wagons, and a silver stand, the last from a British officer. At the time that the plates were stolen, the gang was pursued, and one of the band was shot. His bones, exposed to the winds and snows of winter and the heat and rains of summer, lay bleaching for years, wanting a friendly hand to bury them beneath the sod of the Clove or the rocks of the mountains.

The muskets and plates, according to tradition, were hidden in the mountains, and the silver stand was submerged in the mud of a spring in the vicinity.

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, a group of descendants of the refugee Cowboys arrived in Monroe from Canada with the locations of the caches in writing. These treasure hunters included grandsons of Claudius Smith. They remained in Monroe several days and searched diligently all the localities specified in the instructions of their fathers. They found nothing except the muskets, the stocks of which has been gnawed by mountain mice.

About 1823, two sons of Edward Roblin, a Cowboy involved in the theft of the pewter plates, journeyed from Canada to Monroe, also with paternal instructions about the location of the caches. They remained several days and made a thorough search of the localities designated, but for all their pains, they found nothing.

Soon after their return to Canada, the native who passed the story of these futile searches on to the recording historian of Orange County went with others to re-explore the same localities in the mountains. They fished in the spring and spent several days looking among the rocks and in the glens. Finding nothing, they finally gave up. In all probability, the caches had been emptied of loot by members of the gang who remained within the country or by their friends. Legends, unlike outlaws, however, are blessed with longevity, and as recently as 1951, the editors of the New York Walk Book undoubtedly induced more forays in the healthful but unremunerative exercise of digging with this intriguing sentence:

Some of Smith's loot was never recovered and is said to be still awaiting an exploring pick in the recesses of these hills.