

The Descent From Lost Mountain

Down into the Valley and the Plains Among the Raging Cities They Must Go, These People Who Believed They Would Live Forever, With Jack, the Maniac, Leading They Will Enter Our Into a Strange World—Doubtful, Hostile, and Now a Little Uncertain About Eternal Life

By GUY FORDNEY

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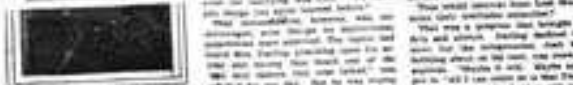
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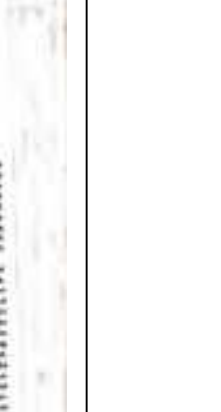
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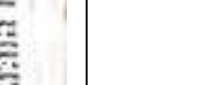
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They Must Go, These People Who Believed That They Would
Live Forever. With Joab, the Messiah, Leading They Will Falter
Out Into a Strange World - Doubtful, Hesitant, and Now a Little
Uncertain About Eternal Life.*

By GUY FORSHEY
St. Louis Post-Dispatch Staff

ANTLERS, Oklahoma – The shadows were growing short on the summit of Lost Mountain. The mists had lifted from Robertson Hollow half mile below, revealing here and there the tiny forms of men and horses busy with the work of plowing. It was springtime in Southeastern Oklahoma. On all sides the farmers were exhibiting signs of restlessness that farmers usually begin to exhibit when the first warm days of sunshine come to swell the buds and put a livelier sparkle in the brooks. Pushmataha County had arisen from its winter sleep and was at its labors – that is, all but Lost Mountain.

Lost Mountain was not at work. The smoke of late breakfast fires rose lazily from half a dozen of the squalid shanties that sprawl along the mountain's backbone. Ragged urchins were playing marbles in the street and frowsy heads appeared cautiously from the windows of the meetin' house to investigate the sound of an approaching automobile. Not often do automobiles thread their way up the wooded slope of this formidable ridge to the confines of Joab Morris' "eternal city," but even if the chug of the laboring motor did arouse curiosity, it did not arouse activity. The "Church of the First Born" was at its worship and would not be disturbed. From the dilapidated meetin' house at the head of the village there came the monotone chant of a woman's voice and the staccato tap tap tap of feet. A member of Joab Morris' quaint lock of hermits was testifying.

"I thank God, I thank God, I thank God," the voice kept repeating, half-hysterically. "I thank God for all things." It sounded like a Southern Negro camp meeting..... "I thank God I've been borned again and reiterated. I thank God I have passed the grave behind and can look back over my shoulder and say, "O grave, where is thy victim? O death, where is thy sting?" The speaker, a tall gaunt woman of about 80, passed the floor and swung her arms in wild gesticulation. A quaint picture she made, in faded gingham dress and spectacles perched upon her forehead. The spirit was talking and talking vehemently, and she was oblivious to her surroundings, to the approach of dinnertime, to the arrival of a motorcar and to the visitors who stole inside and took seats near the door. Somewhat less oblivious were her hearers, ranged around the room on benches. They stared inquisitively at the intruders, but offered no show of welcome or hostility, and never once did those tapping feet miss a count. There were bearded old men and ageing women, strapping young men and comely bobbed-haired girls children holding babies in their arms and other babies toddling about the floor. In his armchair throne, apart from the others, sat the venerable Joab Morris, the "Messiah of Lost Mountain." From a great

shock of beard and bristling hair, he looked on with solemn approval, and the “testifying” went on. Truly full of thanks and gratitude seemed that female orator.

“**I** thank God for eternal life,” the chant continued. “I thank God we come here to live on this mountain and found His spirit. Great trouble has come on us, but I know God wouldn’t let them drive us away from here if it wasn’t His will, so I reckon we got to be satisfied. We air goin’ away and I don’t know what’s goin to become of us when we git off o’ this mountain. We never come here to harm nobody and we hain’t never harmed nobody. Folks down there in the valley don’t like us cause we air goin’ to live forever and they air all gonna die, but we can’t hold that agin’em cause they hain’t never been taught the true word like we have. But they air gonna git their punishment. The Lord meant for us to live here on this mountain and they air gonna be visited with His wrath for drivin’ us away.”

With a final burst of rhetoric and a call for hands on the question of whether anybody had aught against her, the speaker sat down and yielded the floor to another member of the colony and the testifying proceeded. Thanks went up from the top of that great hill until it seemed outwardly that only gratitude ever found a place in the minds of its primitive inhabitants. But somehow the testifying lacked the riagmissing..... the hermits were simply turning the other cheek and trying to hide from themselves behind a routine babble of scriptural and ceremonial phrases. Only when there was mention of departure from the mountain did it seem that expressions were of dejection and alarm.

Truly, the religious colony of Lost Mountain has reason for dejection and alarm. Troubles have been few since Joab Morris and his followers retired from civilization to the backwoods 12 years ago, but now real trouble is upon them, for paradise – the only paradise that has a place in their religion is lost.

BY MARCH 25 they must abdicate Lost Mountain or reckon with the authorities of Pushmataha County. And they are preparing to abdicate, to scatter and to seek eternal life elsewhere, each for himself. Lost Mountain, the sacred ground, which was to give them life everlasting upon the earth, has been found, alas, to have an earthly owner who objects to their presence. So, without belief in a hereafter, without hope of life beyond the grave, they are faced with the calamity of removal from the land that to them means protection from death and oblivion. Hardly is it surprising then, that services these days are solemn and long drawn out and testifying a bit hysterical. Joab Morris and his followers are facing the great unknown and time is growing short. Already they can hear the spades beating down upon their graves.

Tragic though it is to them, the compulsory withdrawal from the great pine covered mountain ridge is an outgrowth of circumstances of their own choosing. It was internal dissension that brought the law down upon the Church of the First Born. Until three months ago, the residents of Antlers, 14 miles away, had scarcely even heard of the strange recluse band that dwelt in the clouds of Lost Mountain and spent anywhere from four to eight hours daily in religious devotion. They seldom visited the towns or mingled with the outsiders because their religion forbade it, and the townspeople never visited them because in the first place they weren’t welcome and besides it was too hard to travel to the crest of that high ridge which stands aloof between two lesser ridges of the Kiamichi chain of mountains. About the only time that Joab Morris’ flock received even passing comment was when at intervals, a member would be arrested and locked up for petty thievery. Eking out a meager existence by hunting and trapping or working as day laborers occasionally at Kosoma, a lumbering hamlet two miles from the mountain’s base, the colonists had few dealings with the outside world and few persons in the outside world except the Sheriff and neighboring farmers who missed goats and chickens and potatoes occasionally ever had any dealings with them.

(picture of Joab Morris)

JOAB MORRIS, the Messiah of Lost Mountain—the leader of the flock---progenitor of the idea of eternal life on earth.

As for the land they had squatted on, nobody cared particularly about that. It wasn't good for anything but a hermit's retreat anyway. Somebody in Ohio bought the mountain many years ago without having paid it a visit first and then upon hearing what it was like, never had the courage to visit it afterwards. For all ordinary intents and purposes it was free land when Joab Morris and his tribe drove their covered wagons up the slope and set up their camp back in 1914.

But it was illegal occupation of the mountain that aroused Pushmataha County to hostile action. That was only resorted to as a possible legal instrument. The fundamental complain was that Joab Morris' uncouth and unwashed flock of hermits, with flexible principles concerning ownership of property, constituted an undesirable element to the community and ought to be got rid of. Then as a straw to break the camels back came the recent church fight, locally referred to as "the night that Charley Estes got beat up."

It was only a family disturbance among relatives and friends, but it had a devastating effect. In the first place, it sent Estes to the hospital to recover from the bruises administered by six of Joab' stalwart henchmen. That, in turn, caused Estes to complain to the county authorities and Lost Mountain thereupon became the scene of an official investigation, which resulted in the arrest of the six floggers on charges of rioting. The charges themselves weren't so serious, but the publicity given the colony as a result of the encounter was serious. It caused a rehashing of all previous complaints and the voicing of an insistent demand that the colonists be ousted.

(picture)

THE MESSIAH calls the faithful with his fox-horn, trumpet.

Under the circumstances there was nothing for Joab to do but agree to get out, but it is a drastic step. Whatever may be his convictions as to eternal life in a physical body, it is hard to see that the "Messiah" of Lost Mountain has but few more years upon the earth, whether he lives on the sacred mountain or off of it. To express it in his own words, he is "nigh unto the mighty" and so feeble he can scarcely hobble about with the aid of a cane. For him to lead his band into new lands and start all over again would be unthinkable. It couldn't be done, so it appears that banishment dooms the Church of the First Born to a speedy dissolution.

(picture)

Lost Mountain. An odd Main Street

It was from Kingfisher County, Oklahoma, that the "prophet" led his band to the Kiamichi Mountains 12 years ago, as the result of what he says was a vision which appeared to him three times. "Go to the fastnesses of the Kiamichis," the spirit had counseled him. "There will be found a hollowed mountain which is the Lord's footstool. Live thereon, keeping contracts with God, and life eternal upon the earth will be yours." The vision was so plain, says Joab, that no doubt was left in his mind about which particular mountain of a long and rugged chain was the sacred peak. He knew it was Lost Mountain from the

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Start, before he had even seen it and came straight to its base, prepared to enter upon an everlasting existence in the flesh. For a while they had camped on the Kiamichi River, at the foot of the slope, and then they moved to the summit and built a house of worship. Cabins had arisen in a long row along the mountain ridge and the colony had taken up its career as a unit on a sort of communistic basis.

There were about eight families in that original group, including two married daughters and a married son of the “Messiah”. Most of these have stayed and several other families have been added in recent years through marriages of the younger generation. Long bearded Joab remains the supreme dictator because his communion with the spirit was a little closer, and the others occupied grades of greater or less importance according to their ability to receive vision and interpret the “unknown tongues” which are likely to speak from that mountain top without any warning at all. Jim Darling, bewhiskered son-in-law of the patriarch and known hereabouts as “the little Jesus” in deference to Joab, has risen high in the Church of the First Born as a result of his skill with unknown tongues. Why he not only can interpret them right off, but can speak them himself. In fact, he admits himself that he and his wife, “are about the best talkers that ever talked, I reckon.”

“You ought to hear me preach for an hour,” said Darling to the writer shortly after the testifying was over. “Id learn you things you never learned before.”

That demonstration, however, was not encouraged, even though its instructional possibilities were admitted. The visitor had heard Mrs. Darling preaching upon his arrival and having thus heard one of the “two best talkers that ever talked, was satisfied for one day. But he was hoping one of those unknown tongues would get going and ventured to express that hope. What were these strange tongues anyway? Some foreign language?

“**N**aw, they ain’t French or English or Dutch, declared the little Jesus, “They ain’t a language that’s spoken on earth. They are the voice of the spirit. I can speak them because the spirit is in me. That’s one of the things that makes our religion different from others. We believe that we ain’t gonna die because our bodies are God’s temples. He lives in them, so he ain’t gonna destroy his own temples, is he? There ain’t no such things as angels with wings. That’s all a damn lie. The other churches believe that when a man dies he goes to heaven, and keeps on living. That’s crazy. When they bury a man in the ground, how is he gonna keep on living? I don’t care nothin’ about that kind of heaven. What if there was a heaven and all these Catholics and Protestants and Jews went there. They’d be fightin’ just like they do now and they’d have a hell of a time of it. Naw, I don’t want to die and take a chance on going to heaven. I want to stay right here on earth and if I keep my contract with God I’ll do that. It’s natural to want to live, ain’t it? A rabbit will run for his life. Why shouldn’t a man want to live forever? Methuselah lived for 900 years, didn’t he?”

The writer looked in vain for a sign of something in the existence of these people that might make eternal life in the body desirable. If there was anything besides the exhilarating air of that mountaintop and the marvelous view of pine covered hills to make life even sufferable, it was not apparent. There were no books except a few tattered Bibles, and few members of the colony could read anyway. The children weren’t even sent to school until the resent court case came up. There were no shows within reach and Darling declared the flock of Joab Morris, wouldn’t go to shows if they were available. Joab had never been even to a picture show and neither had he. He couldn’t even go to town nowadays without seeing a lot of women half dressed and he was ashamed to look at them.

Were there any amusements aside from hunting? No, none except religious services Daily at 9:10 a.m. (nine o’clock and ten minutes, as Darling insisted upon having it) a hunting horn sounded and the colony assembled in the meeting house. Prophet Joab led them in prayer and then each member got up and preached or testified to his heart’s content. Then at 7:15 in the evening the trumpet blew a second time and the services were gone through with all over again, their length depending on the

amount of testifying to be done. Sometimes they lasted three or four hours at a stretch when the members had been talking with the spirit and had a lot to say.

Did they have no games, parties or dances? Oh yes; they did have dances. Every evening after the testifying was over the congregation would sing hymns and couples designated by the elders would march about the room keeping time to the music. Three couples were allowed on the floor at a time, but there was no hugging in these dances, the visitor was reminded. Joab wouldn't stand for that and he wouldn't let young couples run around together without being married either. When the younger members wanted to "keep company" they had to get the church's approval and then go away to town, get a license and go through a legal ceremony. After all, though their religion wasn't so strict. They could smoke and chew and drink if they wanted to and it was obvious that swearing wasn't prohibited. It did look as if bathing might have been taboo, but that question was allowed to pass. It may be that water has been scarce in the settlement. It is sometimes, when the cisterns go dry, as they nearly always do in summer, the colonists have to carry it up the mountain from the Kiamichi River. And that is only one of many hardships involved in Joab Morris' program of life eternal.

Considering all of the disadvantages of life in such a retreat, why did they want to live forever? Didn't they think they would ever get tired of it?

Well, they might not have much fun when they got old, but life, such as it was, was better than being buried in the ground wasn't it? Darling wanted to know. Their transcendent horror seemed to be the grave and the fall clode upon a wooden box. It haunted him.

Then would removal from Lost Mountain mean their inevitable extinction?

That was a question that brought shudders and silence. Darling declined to answer, the octogenarian, Joab Morris hobbling about on is cane, was more philosophical, "Maybe it will. Maybe not," he put it. "All I can count on is that I'm going to live as long as the Lord is with me. He has been with us on this mountain so far. We never had any sickness to speak of up here and when we did have, we cured it by prayer and laying on of hands. We don't bother with doctors. Only one man died up here and he died because he wouldn't do what Christ wanted him to do. He said that before he would obey God's commands he would die and go to hell. Well, he died and was buried in the ground. That was hell, wasn't it?"

This unfortunate one who preferred hell to life in the colony was Abe Barnhart, the visitor learned, and more was to be heard about this death from Charley Estes when Estes was sought out in the village of Kosoma, where he works at loading lumber. Estes, who married Barnhart's widow thereby becoming Joab's son-in-law, hasn't lived on the mountain since he was beaten up and he doesn't hesitate to say what he thinks about his father-in-law and all the other prophets. He declares resentfully that they "laid for him" and tried to kill him because he wouldn't obey Joab Morris' church rules and wouldn't let his wife and her two grown daughters go to services every day. As for Barnhart's taking off, he hints strongly that it wasn't entirely due to the Lord's wrath.

“BARNHART had a lot of money that he brought here with him from Kingfisher County,” Estes explained. “Old man Joab wanted and told him that the Lord had demanded it; that Barnhart would die if he didn't give it to the church, or in other words, to Joab. Well, Barnhart said he would die first, and he did. He went to bed one night in good health and was taken suddenly sick in the night. The next morning he was dead.”

Around Antlers it is said, the prosecuting authorities are keeping this case in mind with a view to possible investigation if the other charges fail to oust the bearded fanatics; but present indications are that a resurrection will not be necessary. Joab Morris and his band are preparing for withdrawal. They have had enough of dealing with the law and are loading up the wagons. To Atoka County, west of Pushmataha, they will turn their steps in quest of jobs as farmhands, and it is likely that March 25 will find them on their way. The cabins and the church house will stand deserted. Lost Mountain will be abandoned to the wild things of the forest. Paradise and their hope of everlasting life will be left behind.