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Photo by Laura Hunt Angel

Creamy, toasty Welsh Rarebit is perfect for brunch or an afternoon snack.

The tale of three rivers

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

Great-Grandmaw Mollie Matthews Hunt could carry a bucket of water on her head all the way from my grandmother's house to her own, without using her hands. At a distance of over a hundred yards, it was pretty impressive. She told my father that it was on account of her large, round German head. I never met Grandmaw Mollie, who died in 1928, but Daddy had told the story so many times that by the time I reached my early teens, I pictured her as a giant bobble head doll.

Eventually, I decided to delve into some of the family's history and find out just who those German ancestors were. After a couple of years of detective work, I discovered that Grandmaw Mollie was not German at all, but mostly Welsh. She simply had a big noggin.

Another of Grandmaw Mollie's yarns was that one of her ancestors had been a wealthy business man who was known to make frequent trips to the farm of one Joseph Hanks of Richmond County, Virginia. During these trips, he became well acquainted with Joseph's daughter, Lucy. In the decades following, it was hinted that he could have been the father of Nancy Hanks — the mother of Abraham Lincoln.

Then there was the story of how the family had once been separated by a river during a raft accident. I was surprised to find that there is a good deal of evidence to back this one up.

RIVER PEOPLE

Long ago, Grandmaw Mollie's family settled in the Virginia Colony. The first of her ancestors to reach America were a trio of brothers. On the run from British authorities, they sailed all the way from Wales into the Chesapeake Bay. When they reached land, they decided to head further south, but numerous tidal rivers that had carved their way inland from the Chesapeake blocked their way. The largest were the Potomac, the Rappahannock

and the James, but there were lots of smaller ones, too, making the journey nearly as perilous as crossing the ocean had been.

Unable to sail their vessel up these rivers, the brothers' only option was to build a raft to transport them and their supplies. However, during one of the crossings a storm blew in and the raft began to break up. The brothers survived, but while scrambling to reach the shore, one found himself on the opposite side of the river with no way to get back across.

The brothers had no choice but to make the best of the situation. They would go their separate ways, hoping to reunite someday, but unsure of when that might be. Knowing that they might not ever see one another again, they at

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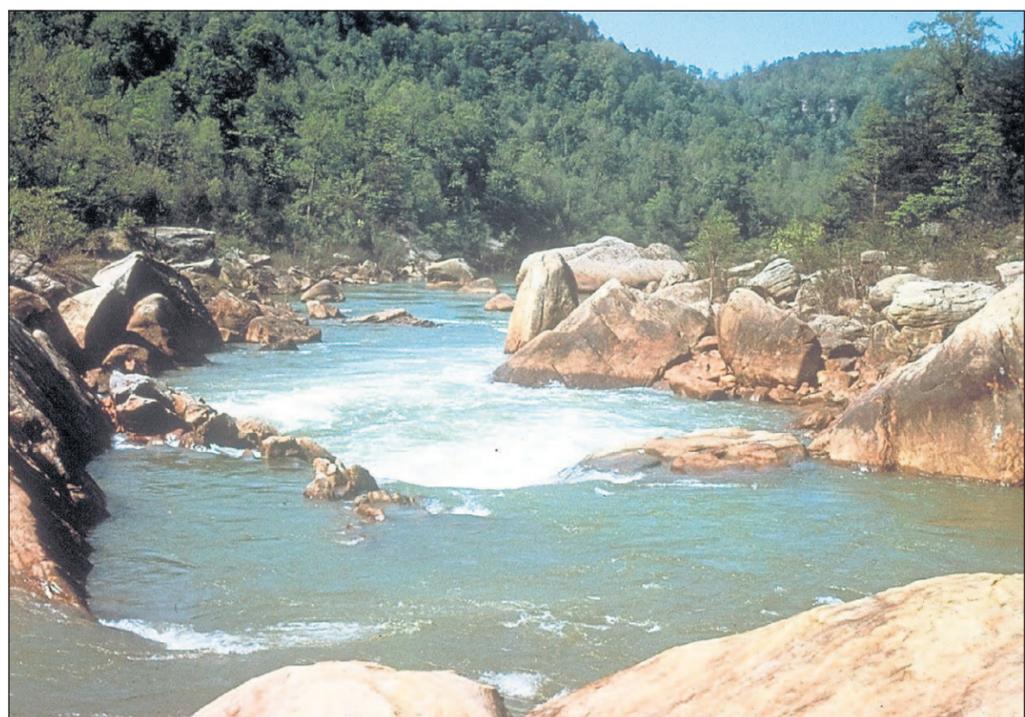
least wanted their descendents to be able to identify one another when their paths finally crossed. But in addition to the waterway separating them, there was another difficulty. It had to do with the peculiarities of Welsh surnames.

AN **INGENIOUS PLAN** Back in Old World Wales, it was customary for a man's children to take his first name, not his last, as their surname. For example, a man named Thomas Evans would give his children the last name of Thomas, not Evans. To this day many Welsh surnames still sound like first names. Even the name, Jones a colloquialism of the name, John.

What this meant for the brothers was that many people with the same surname could be living in close proximity but not be at all related. Likewise, the children of the brothers would end up with completely different surnames. They worried that in time, their family would have taken on so many different surnames that they would be unrecognizable to each other.

Calling back and forth across the river, the brothers decided that they would keep their present last names instead of changing them with each generation. However, that still left an awful lot of families with the same name. It was decided that the brother to the

north would change his name slightly to make it easier for his brothers to identify him someday. He would spell his name as Matthews, but keep the pronunciation as Mathis, the brothers' original surname. Then they parted, hopeful that they would one day be able to find another again.



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The Cumberland River stretches nearly 700 miles throughout much of southern Kentucky and into northern Tennessee.

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The brothers on the south side of the river ended up settling in North Carolina. The brother left behind — Grandmaw Mollie's ancestor — settled on the Virginia side. In time, the story of the river separation and the peculiar spelling of their names was passed along to each of the brothers' descendents.

THE SECOND RIVER

Grandmaw Mollie's family worked their way up to the Kanawha River, where they lived for many years. The area became a central point for business, farming and trade, and the Matthews family became well known as ingenious craftsmen. Just before the Revolutionary War, Mollie's grandfather, a man named Righteous Lott Matthews was born.

Righteous Lott's older brother, Thomas, became a renowned clock maker. In 1830 Thomas' son, also named Thomas but nicknamed Sutton, was appointed as a gentlemen justice of Kanawha County. At the time, steam power was becoming the energy of choice, but many — including Sutton himself — were not convinced that it was reliable, so he devised a plan to help fire up the debate.

Sutton called for a race



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A stack of fruit-laced Welsh cakes are shown for sale at a shop in Swansea, Wales.

down the Kanawha River steamboat, placing a \$500 bet on the canoe. Interest in the event grew, and by the day of the race somewhere between \$5,000-\$8,000 passed had hands. Of course, the steamboat won and Sutton lost the bet, but there were no hard feelings. He named one of his descendents Coleman Matthews, after N. B. Coleman who captured the steamboat.

THE FINAL CROSSING

Around the time that the river race occurred, word arrived about the family of a man named Josiah Mathis who had recently resettled in Kentucky from Perquimans County, North Carolina. Josiah's family were looking for their relatives, a group of Mathis' who spelled their name as Matthews.