

1937

## Zeke Hammertight

Jesse Stuart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Stuart, Jesse. "Zeke Hammertight." *New Mexico Quarterly* 7, 3 (1937). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol7/iss3/4>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## Zeke Hammertight

By JESSE STUART

**D**O YOU believe there are sassafras sprouts on the Kentucky hills? Do you believe there are eternal rocks and tough-butted shaggy-branched white-oaks growing among Kentucky's eternal rocks? Do you believe there is the whisper of winds in the wild-rose bushes and the wild-gooseberry sprouts in these Kentucky hills where skies immeasurable float above like a flock of buzzards in the sky? Do you believe there is a hill-Kentucky with her boney acres where the lizards crawl on the burnt-black logs and the snails leave silvery traces on old moss-infested stumps? If you believe these things are here and that there are buzzards, lizards, black-snakes, copperheads and crows—then you can believe we have the Hammertights here—plentiful as the crows and the buzzards; all the time slipping through the woods with shot-guns across their shoulders, sly as the wind in the brush and curious as a hound-dog on a cold trail.

"I'll tell you what is the matter with this hill country," says Cousin Milt, "It's overrun with sassafras sprouts and the Hammertights. Every way you turn here you run into a Hammertight. They are thicker than sassafras sprouts. They are thicker than pawpaw sprouts and they are harder to get rid of than persimmon sprouts in a pasture where the cattle won't eat them. W'y they have been here, I guess, long as the rocks have been here. You know a Hammertight is tough as a hickory withe you burn and twist to tie up bundles of fodder." When a body walks down a path here he is liable to meet a Hammertight. He might be carrying a gun across his shoulder just by chance he sees a squirrel. "I'll tell you," says Cousin Milt, "if some kind of a plague don't come and sweep out the Hammertights this country is not going to have any squirrels, groundhogs, possums,

162 ]      *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

foxes, rabbits left to tell the tale. W'y I was out on the hill this morning and saw old Zeke Hammertight dig a old she-groundhog out of a hole and took off four suckling young groundhogs about the size of kittens—knocked the old she-groundhog in the head with a mattock handle. Put her in his sack. Guess he's cooked her in the pot by now with green beans and taters—guess he's et her by now. Shame the way the Hammertights and the sassafras sprouts have took to Kentucky. Can't get rid of 'em anymore than you can get rid of the rocks on the Kentucky hills—or the tough-butted white-oaks that grow like blackberry briars on the Kentucky claybanks."

Old Zeke Hammertight—you ought to see him. Six-feet four with a cupped-in face—a face bent-in like a half moon with a long chin and a handful of dead looking white beard, wind-scattered and falling over his shirt-unbuttoned hairy chest. White beard with the stain of bright amber—the color of red-oak leaf-stain—mixed with the white bridle-tassel of corn-silk. You ought to see his long dangling arms with the big blue veins running like little mountain streams of water on the winter flank of a mountain. You ought to see his steady blue eyes that the years cannot dim anymore than they can the eternal Kentucky rocks—wear a little, tear a little—just a little by the wind, the sun, the rain, the sleet and the snow. Freeze a little, thaw a little and fade a little as the years roll by. No wonder the Hammertights keep coming like the young sassafras sprouts on the Kentucky hills—the sassafras sprouts are rooted in the Kentucky earth and the cattle can't kill them; the winter can't kill them; the drouth can't kill them; and fire that burns over the earth and kills their bodies can't kill them. They come again in the spring; ten young sassafras sprouts for the old one that dies. That's the way of the Hammertights. The wars can't kill them; the drouths can't starve them out; the earth can be cruel to them or kind to them—the high hill earth—and people can fight them—but they keep on coming.

They grow like the timber here; and there is something in their blood that makes them tough as a hickory-withe or a tough-butted white oak. Cousin Milt says:

Old Zeke Hammertight  
The daddy o' 'em all,  
Fed 'em on groundhog  
Before they could crawl.

"Well," says Cousin Milt to me, "guess you've heard the latest. Old Zeke Hammertight's not nigh all there. He's losing his mind. Body's as good as it ever was— but he's got something wrong on the inside of his head." "It can't be," I says to Cousin Milt. "W'y it can be too. Guess I know what I saw with my own eyes this morning." "Saw what?" I says to Cousin Milt.

"You know where my garden is," Cousin Milt answers. "I was working there early this morning. Zeke comes up the road with that old shotgun across his shoulder that he always carries around where ever he goes. He comes up to the palings where I was cutting crabgrass out 'n the pole-beans. He says to me: 'Say, you know that young nephew of mine, Young Zeke Hammertight.' And I says: 'Which one of the Zeke Hammertights? I know a whole slew o' 'em.' And he says: 'Brother Zeke's Zeke.' And I says: 'W'y sure I know him.' Then he comes right up to the palings and he says: 'Come over here. I got something to tell you.' He laid his gun down there among the milkweeds—that old scarred-barrel columbia single-barrel he carries everyplace he goes. I was glad he laid it down. Didn't know what he might be up to. He says: 'W'y that young Zeke—my brother Zeke's Zeke has been trying to pizen my cattle.' And I says: 'You don't mean it.' He says: 'W'y it's the gospel truth.' He cupped his hands up beside his mouth and whispered it to me through his cupped hands and there wasn't anybody in a mile to hear. And he says: 'I met him awhile ago and told him he was trying to pizen my cattle. He got mad

and said he'd pour the hot lead to me. W'y I know he's trying to pizen my cattle. I saw him across the meadow last night—walk right through that little patch of white-oaks by the barn. Walked right up among my cattle and he had rat pizen spread on fried Irish taters and tried to give it to my milk cows. That's the kind of pizen you give to fox hounds. So I takes out after him. He gets away. I know he was there—I know the way he come and the way he left—down among the milkweeds and the sassafras sprouts by that little patch of sprouts. Yes—my own brother's boy trying to pizen my cattle.' W'y the man is crazy. He's dangerous, too. Too much inbreeding there—heads no bigger than drinking-gourds. Cousins a-marryin first cousins, and uncles marryin nieces, and nephews a-marrying aunts. W'y it's the awfulest mixup in that family of Hammertights you ever saw. You know that, Quinn."

And I says, "Yes, it's a terrible mixup. It's just sassafras sprouts mixing with sassafras sprouts though." "That's it," says Cousin Milt. "Ought to mix the sassafras sprouts with the pawpaw sprouts and that mixture with the persimmon sprouts. Then we would have one of the dad-durndest mixups you ever heard tell of. W'y old Zeke went on up the road from the garden this morning. Went up past my barn. I heard a shot blast out 'n my barn like a bolt of thunder—I turned and saw old Zeke in the road kicking and cussing—hollering he was shot in the heart. I saw young Zeke running right around the pint over there back of my barn with his gun on his shoulder—just a flying off the earth. Old Zeke down in the road a kicking and hollering he was shot in the heart. I left my work in the garden. I run to him fast as I could get there. I didn't see any blood. He says: 'Look at my heart, Milt.' I tore his shirt open and looked and I couldn't see a mark. And I says: 'W'y Zeke, you ain't shot in no heart.' And he says: 'Look at both panels o' my ribs.' So I took his shirt off and unbuttoned his undershirt. Wasn't a mark there. And

I says: 'You ain't shot there, Zeke.' And he started cussing and hollering and crying and says: 'Look at my legs then. I'm shot some place.' So I pulled his overalls down and looked at his legs. "Not a mark there," I says to Zeke. Well, he jumped up and never took time to put his overall gallises over his shoulders. He run right out'n his overalls—just in that old heavy long underwear he wears of a summertime. Took time to put that old shotgun across his shoulder—just in his underwear, hat, and shoes, and he took around that hill the way young Zeke went—just a hollering and a cussing and crying. He made better time than any mule could a made that I got on this place. Big and tall as he is and in that white underwear w'y he skeered every horse to death on the road. Had 'em a raring up and breaking out wagon tongues and express shafts. I never saw a old man run like he run around that hill. It's just been a hour or two since he run around there."

"We'd better go over the hill and cut 'em off next to the Post Office and see what has happened," I says to Cousin Milt. "Might go over there and kill one another or kill somebody." "No such good luck," says Cousin Milt, "as for a Hammertight to kill a Hammertight. One sassafras sprout won't kill another. It might draw some stuff from the ground that the other sprout wanted where they are so thick on a bank—but even at that, one sprout can't starve out another sassafras sprout. That's the way of the Hammertights. Look how he missed old Zeke back there. Missed him with that old cock-eyed rifle he carries around here across his shoulder."

Cousin Milt Zorns is big at the middle and little on each end. He is like a calf that was weaned too soon and gluttoned on grass. Just wobbles as he walks and when he talks he wiggles his ears like a rabbit wiggles its ears. Cousin Milt never cared much about me. Only he gets good when the Hammertights give him trouble. Uses me then for a cousin. He needs my help. We walk up the path by

the barn—Cousin Milt is in front and he says: "Whee! God, it's hot as a roasted tater out here under these trees—no air a stirring and this uphill pull." Cousin Milt walks in front, swinging his arms. He has his thirty-two in his hip-pocket. "May not be able," says Cousin Milt, fingering it, "to kill a man with this the first crack—but I know I can stop him." We walk right on up the hill—right up the cow-path under the trees whose leaves hang down like wilted pepper-pods.

"Young Zeke and old Zeke went around the horse-shoe road," I says to Cousin Milt, "and when we walk across this backbone ridge here and drop down the other side we'll just about be at the other cork of the horse shoe where the Post Office is. The other side of the horse shoe runs right along up beside Sandy River. They're right over there now."

We walk up the hill. The buzzards sail in circles over the ridge—over the wilted leaves and the lean cattle. They sail in circles over us. They swoop and swerve in the high, hot air—over the lean cattle and over us. They can't get Cousin Milt and me. We'll feed 'em the hot lead until they'll be buzzard meat for the ants. It is easy walking down hill—easy for me. Cousin Milt says: "My knees rattle like the wheels of our old buggy. And it ain't had no axle grease on it for years." We walk down the hill—under the trees and the buzzards and the hot wind and the mare-tailed sky.

"I see them," says Cousin Milt, "w'y look yander. They're not fighting. Coming up the road. Look yander. Each on o' 'em's got a sack o' meal on his shoulder." And I look around the edge of the brush by the path. There they come—coming up the path toward us—talking. Old Zeke is talking with the point of his shotgun that he is carrying in his left hand. He is holding a sack of meal, or a sack of flour on his shoulder with his right hand. Young Zeke is carrying a sack of meal or flour on his right shoulder, holding it with his right hand and trying to talk with his left

hand where he holds the long-barreled rifle. "Are we going to meet them?" I says to Cousin Milt. And he says: "Hell yes. Why not? The crazy damned Hammertights and the sassafras sprouts are taking this country. They are taking Kentucky."

The wind lap-laps the poplar leaves about our heads. It is a lazy wind. The sun is hot and the lizards are sleepy on the rocks. They lift their heads when a green fly passes over and swallow the green flies like a toad frog catching yellow-jackets. The ground sparrows twitter in the seeding crabgrass. The voices of the men are lazy as the wind. We can understand their words now just about the same as we can understand words of the wind. They are coming up the path from the Post Office.

"I didn't say it was you Young Zeke," says old Zeke, "trying to pizen my milk cows. I didn't say it at all. You just thought I said it. I know, you wouldn't pizen my stock." "W'y you did say it," says young Zeke. "You told Milt Zorns I was trying to pizen your milk cows. You've told it every place and got people afraid of me. No wonder we can't marry women in other families. We have to marry one of our kind—we have to marry a Hammertight. No wonder our heads are getting to be simpling heads. Our hands are getting small. We are losing our minds. No wonder. We are all going to seed like these straw hats go to seed. Get big at the bottom and little at the top. W'y we have to marry one of our kind. We are Hammertights. You go around and put out all this talk about me—your brother's boy—about me pizenning your stock." "W'y," says old Zeke, "I'll tell you who is pizenning my stock. I'll tell you who is right after my milk cows. Oh, I know he is the one. He's not a Hammertight. I'll tell you Young Zeke who he is. Hold over here and I will tell you." And they stop over the hill—down below us in the middle of the path. Old Zeke drops his shotgun—lets it drop on the ground by the wild ferns and the crabgrass. Above them on the rugged slope is the croaking rain crow. Above them



168] *The* NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

are the eternal Kentucky rocks, the tough-butted oaks, the saw-briars, the greenbriars and the blackberry briars. Above them in the air the buzzards are watching, and the crows are watching—the lizard is watching too, and Cousin Milt and I are watching. We are all out on the hill together. The lazy wind is listening as old Zeke cups his left hand and puts it up beside his mouth so as to keep his words from getting away when he whispers his secret loud enough for all the hills to hear. He says: “W’y young Zeke, I never said you was trying to pizen my stock. I never said it at all. I can tell you who it was though. I know, for I seen them going right across that little bottom—right up through the milkweeds to my milk cows. Oh, I know who it was. I know who it was. And I am going to get him. I am going to get him at the pint of this gun.”

Cousin Milt nudges me in the ribs. He whispers: “Wonder who it was this time trying to kill the old fool’s cattle? Going around here and putting that out every day. Somebody that don’t know he’s crazy as a bed-bug might believe him. Listen—let’s see if we can hear what he says.” And we listen as he cups his hand a little closer—draws in his big fingers and makes them tight as a rail pen so the words can’t get out. They stand there in the path and the hills listen—the rocks listen and the lizards. And the wind slips through the green wilted leaves and listens. “Oh, it’s the Zornses that’s pizenning everybody’s cattle. Just going over the country and killing them in heaps. Shooting them between the eyes when the pizen won’t take. Shooting them! Going right over the country and giving them rat pizen on fried taters. It’s the God Almighty’s truth, Young Zeke. It is that Milt Zorns the leader of it all. Didn’t I see him cross that little bottom of mine—come right up through the milkweeds—he had on a white apron and he had it filled with fried taters. Had them soaked in rat pizen. He went right up where my cows was. And he says: ‘Swooke Gypsy. Swooke Star.’ And they come up to him—licked out their tongues and he

polluted their tongues with rat pizen on them old taters and they spit it out. I hollered at him and of all tearing out of there—you never seen the like in your life.. God, he took off that pasture like a racer snake and I told him that I'd see him in the courthouse for trying to pizen my milk cows."

Cousin Milt pulls out his thirty-two. He steadies his quivering hands by putting the pistol across a stump. He takes aim. He wants to be sure and get old Zeke. "The old lying crazy son-of-a-bitch," says Cousin Milt, "I'll make him think I pizened his cattle. I'll give him a surer dose of rat-pizen. I'll give him a dose he can't carry—a dose of hot lead." And Cousin Milt holds the pistol steady. "Pow." The smoke puffs up before our eyes. The lazy wind will not take the smoke out so we can see. "Did I get him?" says Cousin Milt. "You sure didn't," I says, "by all the cussing I hear. Just listen to that, won't you." And of all the cussing any man ever heard, we heard it. The smoke thins and we see them running—old Zeke with his sack of meal or flour—and a white stream pouring from it. "Put a hole through the sack," says Cousin Milt. "Never got him." And young Zeke is running with a sack on his shoulder and a rifle in his hand. They are running and cussing. Cousin Milt holds the pistol up and aims: "Pow." They just run faster. Cousin Milt takes aim again: "Pow." And a stream of meal or flour pours out of the sack on young Zeke's shoulder. "We can track them," says Cousin Milt. "We can track them by the flour and meal. I'm sorry I didn't kill that old crazy devil. When a man goes crazy he ain't any more for the hills. Ain't no use to send him to the asylum. Just work him to death down there to get his mind off worry. Just as well kill him here and give him to the ants, crows and buzzards. W'y a crazy man is dangerous. Sheriff Watkins has been told and told about this man Zeke Hammertight and he's afraid to arrest him. He's afraid of him. We don't want a sheriff like Watkins anymore. He's going to get us all killed by Zeke Hammertight. The man going around here crazy as a bed-bug.

Come on and I'll get him. He'll not charge another Zorns of pizenning his cattle."

We take over the hill—down the path—across the rocks, the stumps, the fallen trees—Cousin Milt in front with the pistol in his hand. The sweat is pouring off him like clear warm water—Cousin Milt's middle is too big for him to do much running, and he is too small on both ends. Maybe the lizard is watching us, maybe the rocks that have seen men kill before and men go crazy. Rocks that have seen stories they've no tongues to tell.

"Here's the meal," says Cousin Milt, "might a knowed awhile ago a Hammertight never buys flour. He don't know what good biscuits taste like. Have cornbread for dinner, breakfast, and supper. Come on now—we got a hot track and I'll bet you it'll take us to Greenbriar. There's where they went. Went to get the sheriff." So we run the meal track—a white streak over the dusty road. Rocks looking down on us from the high hill whence we came—down in the pleasant valley now where the post office is—down where the waters of the Little Sandy moan. "A warm track we got," I say. "Yes, a damn hot track," says Cousin Milt. We run down the road. "Better watch one of them old Indian tricks old Zeke might pull," I says to Cousin Milt. "He's not going to hide in the brush and bush-whack nobody," says Cousin Milt. "He's too afraid now. He's going after the sheriff . . ." Cousin Milt has his pistol in his hand. People pass us on horseback, in buggy, express, jolt-wagon, and old T-models. They don't pay much attention though—only at the stream of meal poured along the road. It is bread from the high hills spilt along the valley—bread from the high hill earth, for the Hammertights live among the hills and they raise their own corn and have it ground at the mill by the post office.

"Here's the end of the meal," I says to Cousin Milt. And it does end by the falls of Little Sandy—the place where the wagons ford the river only when we have had a big rain. "No meal up the other side," says Cousin Milt, "guess the

meal all run out on 'em. And they've just throwed their meal sacks in the river. Either this or they caught a ride into Greenbriar."

We wade the river, the muddy water not up to our knees. Now we walk on the main road that leads us to Greenbriar. They will beat us to Sheriff Watkins. But anybody knows a Hammertight here. Anybody can tell you old Zeke is crazy as a bed-bug and our word will go further with the law. "Who ever heard of a crazy Zorns?" says Cousin Milt. "W'y if I go crazy I hope somebody gets me. I don't want to be crazy. Somebody get me out here and work me for ten cents a day like a lot of crazy people that are hired out. W'y old Zeke would be better off dead." And we take down the dusty road beneath the sun. Our clothes are wet with sweat. Walking over the hills in the July hot sun is work where you have a lot to carry like Cousin Milt.

"They've just been here," says Sheriff Watkins, "just been here. Yes—two of the Hammertight boys. Old Zeke and young Zeke. Young Zeke said you scalped his shoulder with a ball—showed me the mark. You just cut a trench in the skin and his meal sack with the same ball. Getting mighty close. And you broke one of old Zeke's slats—bullet just grazed his side and broke a slat for him. He said you shot through his sack of meal too and tried to kill him. Said he left his gun out on the Runyan Hill." "W'y," says Cousin Milt, "he's crazy as a bed-bug and putting out all over the country that I'm pizening his cattle. I can just tell you the whole story, Sheriff." And Cousin Milt tells Sheriff Watkins the whole story. Sheriff Watkins just sits here and he says: "Huh and u-huh. That's right." His jaws are fat and rosy as a pink morning-glory in the sun. He is bigger in the middle than Cousin Milt. He has little stubby hands and fingers like a groundmole's fingers. He bites off his fingernails. He has a blue eye that has a twinkle in it—and he has a row of gold teeth. "And that's the way it was?" says Sheriff Watkins. And Cousin Milt says: "That's exactly the way it was. I thought Sheriff if I got to come in here and explain it to you w'y you'd understand."

"But he'll kill me if I undertake to arrest him by myself," says Sheriff Watkins. "Too many of them Hammertights. You can't tell what they'll do. Might bunch on me and kill me. Just because I'm a sheriff they'll think that is a big thing to do. Don't like to take any chances on that Hammertight bunch."

"W'y we'll help you, Sheriff. We'll help you clean out the whole Hammertight bunch," says Cousin Milt. "I'll tell you it is dangerous to live among the Hammertights. I wouldn't have one of my blood to marry among them for nothing in this wide world. All losing their minds and going crazy. Just because they marry their kinfolks. Don't the Bible say that you shall not marry the second cousin? W'y they marry their first cousins, their uncles and aunts—W'y it's a sight the way they carry on. They are just taking Kentucky, too. Just the Hammertights and the sassafras sprouts. You know, Sheriff—before you come to this office you used to be a farm boy. You know you couldn't whop the sassafras sprouts out."

"Good God Almighty no," says Sheriff Watkins. "Them sassafras sprouts. I go up in smoke when I think about the way I used to fight them. Pap fit them before he died. W'y they took our farm. Got a start on us and we couldn't whop 'em out."

"That's what I am trying to tell you, Sheriff," says Cousin Milt, "the sassafras sprouts and the Hammertights are taking Kentucky. Old Zeke, the daddy o' 'em all is crazy. We got to get him in jail. Get him to the asylum. Or get rid of him one."

You would a laughed to have seen Sheriff Watkins when he came out to Cousin Milt's house. Here he was sitting up there on a sorrel-horse with a blazed face and a nice tied-up tail—sitting there big and fat in the middle as he was, his starn-end just filling one of these cow-boy saddles and his short legs restin' in the stirrups, a big Winchester in his right hand resting across the saddle-horn, two blood hounds that bood-bood all the time, raring to go,

chained to the pommel of the saddle with a bright, strong chain. "Well," says Sheriff Watkins, "I've come, Milt, to take back the bacon. If he runs I've got the dogs that'll put him up a sapling quick as a hound-dog will tree a squirrel. I've just thought it over—damn fool crazy as he is—w'y he's dangerous to the people here in the hills."

"I've told you that," says Cousin Milt, "all the time. I've told you that the man was dangerous."

"Well," says Sheriff Watkins, his blue eyes twinkling under his brassy eyebrows and above his pink morning-glory cheeks, "I'll tell you the truth, Milt. Come a little closer so I won't have to speak too loud." "What about them bloodhounds," says Cousin Milt. "I believe they are after man meat." And the bloodhounds snap and growl and rare against the chain. "Be still, Queen. Be quiet, Lope." And Sheriff Watkins jerks on the chain. The hounds keep quiet now. "They won't bite you," says Sheriff Watkins. "They are just like old quiet rabbit hounds. They want to take a track and jump their meat. They'll never bother you. These are smart dogs. They just about know who is innocent and who is guilty. Just come over here, I want to tell you something." And Sheriff Watkins whispers to Cousin Milt so the trees will hear and the rocks will hear and the lizards. He cups his hand by the side of his mouth and he whispers to the world: "W'y Milt—I bought that Hammertight vote. I bought it from old Zeke. You know what old Zeke does they all do. It was what elected me. I give forty dollars for all their votes. I have just hated to come out here and chase old Zeke like he was a rabbit. But I have to. He's a dangerous man. A sheriff can't take any chances on a man dangerous as he is and a man crazy as a bed-bug. W'y he won't have sense enough anymore to sell the family vote. So it doesn't matter much. I've got to run him down like a rabbit or get him."

"Just exactly what you'll have to do, Sheriff," says Cousin Milt. "We've just got to go Hammertight hunting. Got my gun all greased up here and I brought along a couple

of the Raymond boys here. He's been going around and saying that old man Raymond has been pizenning his cattle too. So, we just intend to clean up these hills and make them a decent place to live. Got to get rid of the Hammertights and the sassafras sprouts."

"We got to watch in this hunt," says Sheriff Watkins, sitting high on the sorrel horse, "and keep ourselves in the clear. Let the dogs strike up a cold trail. Do you know where old Zeke has been in the past three days or the past three hours till we can give these dogs the scent? They'll fetch him around like a rabbit. Can't help it if he is crazy."

"Yes," says Cousin Milt, "let's go down to his own milk-gap. There's where he hangs out of a morning. Just about ten after nine now. They've just milked their cows a little while ago. I believe the dogs can get a fresh track."

"W'y they tell me," says Sheriff Watkins, "that old Zeke lost his mind on cattle and horses. You know when a man loses his mind it is always on some one thing. A woman come in to my office only last night and said she saw old Zeke out there by a patch of bushes trying to ride a horse and there wasn't any horse there. Said he'd get up like he was getting on a stump so he could jump on the horse's back. Then he would act like he was a hold of the bridle reins. He would heave on the reins and holler: 'Get up there hossy. Get up Cob. Whoa back—Cob, pet! Whoa back boy! Good old Cob.' Just a cutting all kinds of crazy didoes right there and there wasn't a sign of a horse. She said it was right laughable to see him riding the wind."

We follow Sheriff Watkins toward Zeke's milk-gap. It is right up by the edge of the river and a hill. Sheriff Watkins leads the way, Cousin Milt walks behind him with his rifle and I walk behind Cousin Milt. The Raymond boys are behind me with a couple of little twenty-twos that wouldn't stop a blue-jay, let alone a big man like Zeke Hammertight. Old Queen and Lope boo-boo and charge against the chain. "They're a raring to go," says Sheriff Watkins. "Turn 'em loose right here boys. I believe they'll get the old Pup's

track. He ain't gone from this milk-gap more than thirty minutes. I can still smell him. Don't be afraid, Milt. They won't hurt you. Just unsnap the chain. They are after fresh Hammertight meat."

Boo-boo — boo-boo — ough-ough-ough — boo-boo. Around the milk-gap they circle—sniffing the Hammertight scent. I just wonder how they can trail that scent when there are piles of smelly droppings from the cattle—little black heaps among the rag-weeds and the sand-briars at the milk-gap. I wonder how they know what we want—why they chase man and don't go out in the weed fields and jump a rabbit. They have hit a track—boo-boo—boo-boo—ough ough, ough—and around the hill. "They have him. They've got his scent," says Sheriff Watkins, "got him a going sure as God made little apples. Now boys you fellows have all rabbit hunted. You know just what it is. You know how to watch for the rabbit. Just place yourself so you won't shoot one another. You know a rabbit always comes back where you jump it from. Or, it goes to its den. Now old Zeke might go to his den. He might circle back here. And you know what to do when you see a rabbit coming, don't you?"

"Boy, listen to them hounds, won't you," says Cousin Milt, "just pliam-blank like rabbit hounds. Ain't they bringing that old boy through the bushes. Going right to the house. Come on, Sheriff, up there at the top of the hill if we want to get a shot. They're making for the Hammertight house. Hurry up, Sheriff." And we take up the hill, Sheriff Watkins up there on a horse's back, his starn-end covering one of them little cow-boy saddles, his belly going up and down as the horse lopez through the wind, over the grassy hill, the wind blowing fresh over the saw-briars on the pasture hill. And lord, the chase is on, the boo-boo and the ough-ough of the blood-hounds—the bellering of the pasture bull and the moo of the cows—the cracking of our feet against the earth as we follow the chase.

"Take care," says Sheriff Watkins, "yander he goes. Yander he goes. There goes the rabbit we want." Sheriff



176] *The NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY*

---

Watkins brings his horse to a quick stop. His fore-feet skive up the earth. Sheriff Watkins takes a quivering aim. "Pow." And the blue-smoke spits from the long tongue of his Winchester. The man keeps running. It is old Zeke all right—gun in his hand—running for the barn. "Pow." The smoke is in little clouds in the bright air. Zeke dives in at a hole in the side of the barn. "Pow." "Pow." "Pow." And our bullets splinter the planks on the barn. "Got in a hole on us," says Sheriff Watkins. "The old rabbit is in his hole. Got him in his hole." Sheriff rides and we run toward the barn. The bloodhounds go up the hill—it looks like the tips of their four feet are tied together under them—the way they are running up the hill.

"Youp—youp—youp," and the bloodhound falls back from the hole where it is trying to get in after Zeke. "Hit my dog with his gun-barrel," says Sheriff Watkins—"Boo-boo—boooooo." And the other bloodhound tumbles in a half dozen fits over the hill. "God, he's hurt my dogs. Come here, Lope. Come here, Queeny girl. I guess we'd better fire that barn and bring him out of there. W'y he's dangerous. He's a dangerous criminal."

"What did you say, Sheriff?" says Cousin Milt.

"I says," says Sheriff Watkins, "that he is a dangerous criminal. That the best way to get a rabbit from a brushpile is to set fire to it. Let's fire the barn."

"What about the livestock?" says Cousin Milt. "You don't want to burn a lot of innocent cows and mules and maybe little pigs with a crazy man!"

"Right," says Sheriff Watkins, "right you are."

Whinnnnnnnnnn.

"Bullet through my horse's ear from that barn," says Sheriff Watkins. "Look how it tore it open. Put the shots to the side of the barn. Maybe one will go through a poplar plank and get that old polecat between the eyes. "Pow." "Pow." "Pow." "Pow." And the blue smoke swirls on the fresh morning wind. "Got him in a hole," says Sheriff Watkins.

"He's down in behind the manger," says Cousin Milt, "two-plank deep. That's why the bullets can't reach him."

Whinnnnnnnn. Right above our heads. Whinnnnnnnn. Just a little closer. The bloodhounds come to us. One with a broken nose. One with a broken jaw. When they started through the hole in the barn into the manger after old Zeke he raps their noses with his gun-barrel. The bloodhounds are breathing through their mouths. They wallow on the grass and whine.

"Tie them to the chain," says Sheriff Watkins to one of the Raymond boys—shooting around with a little twenty-two—worth about as much as a good sandrock to throw in this hunting game. Raymond snaps the chain. Sheriff Watkins rides back across the field. "Say," says Sheriff Watkins, "come away from that barn. We are all going to get killed. If we could just fire that barn. If we could just smoke him out of the hole like you do a rabbit or a possum." Sheriff Watkins rides out across the field. His belly goes up and down like a leaf in the wind. The Raymond boys are behind the horse. Cousin Milt and I are behind the horse. We are breathing hard. Cousin Milt looks back. He says: "Look yander won't ye around that barn." And we stop and look back. If you could only see the Hammertights around that barn. More than a acre of sassafras sprouts on a Kentucky yellow-clay bank. A whole army of Hammertights armed with goose-neck hoes, briar-scythes, double-bitted axes, broad-axes, apple-butter stirs, clubs, four-year-old clubs, and two-year-old clubs—rocks—sand rocks and flint rocks—just a whole army of them swarming around the barn. I tell you the Hammertights and the sassafras sprout are going to get Kentucky in the end.

"Say," says Sheriff Watkins, "this fighting is getting right for me. Just the kind of fighting I like to fool with. I'll conduct this battle like the Father of Our Country, George Washington, when he crossed the Delaware. I'll do it like Teddy did when he charged up the hill of San Juan. We'll call this the battle of the bresh. We'll go right

up there among them Hammertights and send 'em back to the bresh. We'll send them back to the sassafras sprouts. I'll stay right here and shoot once in a while and Milt Zorns you go to Greenbriar and by this order of Sheriff Watkins you deputize ever man between the years of sixteen and sixty-five able to take bead on a rifle and bring him out here. Also, see Jim Caudill and have him to gear up his mules and bring that big crate out here they hauled that big boar hog with them long tushes to All Corn in. We're going to need that crate. It held a wild boar and it will hold a crazy man."

"All right, Sheriff," says Cousin Milt. And he runs down the path, past the willows toward the ford. Sheriff Watkins holds up his Winchester and shoots. He rides out across the field in front of the Hammertights. He rides fast through the purple iron weeds. He shows them he is still here and acts like he is just a little afraid to make the attack. He is like the father of our country. He has the Hammertights fooled. When he gets re-enforcements he will charge the hill like Teddy Roosevelt. Sheriff Watkins is a fighter. He might have pink morning-glory cheeks and a belly that goes up and down like the wind, but our sheriff is a fighter. "We can hold out a few minutes longer," says Sheriff, "I am just praying that Milt hurries with new men. We need them right now to charge that hill." And Sheriff Watkins rides around and the horse prances in front of the army of Hammertights gathered around the barn where old Zeke is. "I tell you," says Sheriff Watkins, "when the Hammertights want to gather in their men and women to take up arms, they tell me they ring a big dinnerbell down there at old Zeke's place. Something strange it don't take 'em all day to get ready."

"Whooppee! Whooppee!" they holler. It is our men—if you could only see. The road is filled with them—shot guns across their shoulders, twenty-two rifles, a few with clubs—all the guns in Greenbriar have been mustered out to fight the Hammertights. "I tell you," says one of the Raymond boys, "we ought not only to run 'em to the bresh

but we ought to leave 'em there. W'y long as we leave a Hammertight in these hills for seed we won't be able to find a wild walnut, a butternut, a hazelnut, nor a chestnut. They even take all the wild blackberries, the raspberries, the dewberries—they find all the wild honey in the woods and keep the groundhogs killed out till you can't get a mess. I'm telling you this country will be better off without a Hammertight left—Sheriff—of course, you can do as you please about it."

"Do you think," says Sheriff Watkins, "that Teddy Roosevelt would have killed the innocent women and children? Do you think the father of our country would have killed the innocent women and children? Well, do you think Sheriff Watkins is going to do it? If you do you are badly mistaken. Listen to me, fellow citizens and soldiers for the state. Don't you harm a woman or a child. Get ready for the charge. Make it a charge now!"

"Sheriff, what if a woman comes at you with a club? Must I let her brain me? You know the Hammertight women are tough as the men. Hunt with them. Shoot with them. Ride with them. They are fighters."

"Make them disperse the clubs," says Sheriff Watkins, "make them disperse the clubs!"

We have an army big as the Hammertights. We are better armed. We are getting ready for the charge. The Hammertights can see us. They shake their hoes, pitchforks, and rakes, and axes at us. They shake their fists. But that does not matter. We are going after them. We are in lines that crook like red worms crawling on the ground in April just before a good time to fish. All of our men are armed better than the Hammertights. You know a double-barrel shotgun shooting number three shots with black-powder is better than fifteen clubs, five pitchforks, and ten garden hoes—five briar scythes and a half dozen double-bitted axes.

"Boys, when I blow between my fingers that is the signal to charge the hill," says Sheriff Watkins. "Jim Cau-

dill, you be right behind with the mules and the wagon!" We are all waiting for the charge. The poor crying bloodhounds are with us. Maybe they are waiting for the charge. They sniff with their broken noses. They are waiting for the charge.

"Lord," says Isaac Sneed, "I didn't know Sheriff Watkins was getting me in a battle big as the Battle o' Bunker Hill."

"Wheeeee—tsooooo—looooo—dooooo."

We charge up the hill—Sheriff Watkins in the lead—the bloodhounds at his heels. It looks like all their feet are tied together—their ears are spread to the wind. The hill is black with men. We start up the hill hollering—one right after the other—screaming—no wonder the crow flying over changes its course. No wonder the bloodhounds bark and Sheriff Watkin's horse snickers. We are charging up the hill—grass under, sprouts under—our feet—up, up, up, up the hill and the screams—the screams of the men—whooppee! Whooppee! Whooooooooooooooooooppppppeeeeeeeeeeee. We are right after the Hammertights.

"Don't shoot yet, boys," says Sheriff Watkins, way up in the lead, his belly going up and down with the wind. His fat little hand holding the bridle rein and his fat little hand holding a Winchester. The boo-boo of the hounds and the ough-ough-ough. Right up the hill toward the barn. Wagon coming right behind us with a crate on it and the mules loping in the harness and the mules cutting up in the harness scared to death. Boy what a time going up the hill!

Hammertights start to run—right out through the sprouts. Just went east, west, and crooked. Never saw as many Hammertights in one congregation in my life. Just jumped out 'n the sassafras sprouts like cottontails. Girls flew out 'n the ragweeds like grasshoppers on a hot day. Took to the woods like wild quails. Rakes flew ever such way. Threw them right and left. Garden hoes a flying through the sassafras sprouts. Broad-axes and double-bitted axes, briar-scythes and clubs agoing ever such a way.

Never saw anything like it in my life. And the Hammertights on the run—right back to the bushes like rabbits. It suits them there. They are used to the brush and they like the brush.

"Come on to the barn, boys," says Sheriff Watkins, "come right on to the barn. Got him here in the hole—rabbit in the hole. Bring that wagon right on, Jim Caudill." And the wagon rolls over the rough pasture earth—the mules have their tongues out—snorting and the foam is flying from their thick gummy mule lips. "Get in there, Milt Zorns—you and the Raymond boys, and drag that rabbit from the hole. Get you a pole and twist in the seat of his pants and twist him out like you'd twist out a rabbit. If you can't twist him out—get a bee-smoker and some rags and smoke him out. That'll fetch him. It'll fetch out any varmint—even a polecat."

Cousin Milt jumps in the hole right after Zeke and the bloodhounds right after Cousin Milt. You ought to have seen them working around the hole, just like dogs hot after a polecat. Men rushed on up the hill and waited around to see old Zeke. Some of our men watch the sassafras sprouts to keep the Hammertights scared out. "Not a man killed so far," says Sheriff Watkins, "be careful Milt and bring old Zeke out alive. We got to take him to Greenbriar in that hog crate. Make people think we all been hunting and got a bear." Of all the fussing back under that manger and the hollering and cussing—just like a young hound dog going back in a hole and getting a ground hog. Just a spitting and biting and fighting—hounds backed out of the hole first and here come Cousin Milt with old Zeke's leg. Old Zeke with dirt in his whiskers and his long white hair—cussing and spitting and saying to Milt: "You did pizen my milkcows. You know you did. I saw you coming right up across that little bottom out'n that milkweed patch. Oh, you did pizen my milkcows." And four of our men grab old Zeke and put him in the crate. We twist the old gun from his hand—the old Zeke—the daddy of 'em all, in a crate and we start to town.

The wagon goes in front with Sheriff Watkins riding beside the wagon and all the men in Greenbriar between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five right behind the wagon with guns on their back. Old Zeke just clawed at the planks on the crate and hollered and cussed. He'd say: "Let me go back to the woods. You did pizen my cows. You know you did. Let me go back to the hills. I'll show you where a den of ground-hogs is. I'll show you where you can find the good wild raspberries. I'll show you where you can find the walnuts and the butternuts if you'll let me out'n this chicken coop. Where you taking me—going to kill me and hang me up on a gambling pen like a butchered hog? You going to butcher me for meat?"

"He's not safe among civilized people," says Sheriff Watkins. "He'll know where he is when he wakes up in the asylum. He's lucky to get there. All this expense on the county taking him over there. W'y he's not anymore good. He ought to be left out there among the sassafras sprouts. Out there for the crows and the buzzards. Making us fight the Battle o' Bunker Hill over again to get him." You ought to see us going to Greenbriar. Like a big bunch of men been to the hills and caught a bear. Just that away—a long line of men behind the wagon and Sheriff Watkins up front—just riding as big with the bloodhounds with broken noses strapped to the saddle.

Maybe the hills know we got old Zeke Hammertight. Maybe the eternal rocks of Kentucky know it and the lizard knows about it. The sassafras sprouts know that we got him. Like the buzzard, the crow, the lizard, and the snake, old Zeke would love to get out of that hog-crate and run wild over his Kentucky hills again—run wild forever over the hills that have produced him and his generations thick as the hair on a dog's back, thick as the sassafras sprouts on a Kentucky poor-clay bank and under the Kentucky wind, and sun, and moon and stars.