



Slender Is The Thread: Tales from a Country Law Office

Harry M. Caudill

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In a supplement to his *The American Language*, H.L. Mencken encapsulated the early history of Kentucky: "What is now Kentucky was the first region beyond the mountains to be settled. Pioneers began to invade it before the Revolution, and by 1782 it had more than 30,000 population. It was originally a part of Virginia, and the effort to organize it as an independent state took a great deal of politicking."

Kentuckian and lawyer Harry M. Caudill grew up in the coal fields of Letcher County. His book *Slender is the Thread* reflects the history of a state whose citizens had to labor for their sustenance. Caudill's chapters reflect the mighty story of poor European immigrants struggling on primitive land and in wild mountains to survive, reproduce, and find sustenance for themselves and their households. Their frontier experience attuned the people to weak governments, self-help, quick wrath, and long memories, and revealed the influences that gave the state and its people their reputation for contented ignorance, colorful individualism, crankiness, self-reliance, contempt for court decisions, deadliness with gun and knife, and quirky and corrupt politics.

Spun from the experiences of his law office, Caudill was one of the great storytellers with a keen eye for the unexpected detail and ear for the unique turn of phrase. He denounced scoundrels, praised courage and justice wherever he found it, and celebrated the frailty of the human condition. Time goes on and stories of Kentucky and its people accumulate, and Caudill's stories help shape the thoughts and inspire the actions of the Kentuckians of tomorrow.

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