

# Blue Grass and Green Hills

*Jesse Stuart*

[Ed. note: The following was condensed from an article by the late Jessie Stuart published in the August, 1955 issue of *TRACKS*. Mr. Stuart, a native of Greenup, was the author of several novels, including *The Thread That Runs So True*, and *Taps for Private Tussie*.]

After we telephoned the Chesapeake & Ohio ticket office in Ashland, Naomi and I decided to buy a railroad ticket to Louisville. The agent had told me that the railroad's family travel plan would provide reduced fare for a man and his wife. It cost us only \$18.48 for a round-trip ticket to Louisville. We bought a coach ticket and boarded Train 21, a section of the George Washington, at Ashland.

One can travel anywhere in America and in any country in Europe and not find a place like the East Kentucky hill country. Our long train curved in and out. The men who surveyed this line followed the path of least resistance. Often we looked out to watch the engine and then back at the last car. This was my country, where the hills were not high enough to be called mountains and too high to be called hills. Rock cliffs were everywhere along the track. From my window, I looked forward to see if the engine would miss that cliff and the next one.

I have never heard this country called by any name. But, if I were naming it, I would call it the Cliff Country. If this area were in England, train loads of tourists would be seeing it throughout the year. We passed the post offices of Leon and Aden in this Cliff County, where freshets poured over the high ledges and where mountain laurel, rhododendron and tall fir trees grew. These were the hills of home and an exceedingly beautiful country. In many places we saw small houses on hill tops. Brave, industrious people had tried to build winding roads up among the cliffs to these houses.

Then the train stopped at Grahn. Near Grahn I saw a white cottage close beside the railroad tracks, and behind it was a cliff where water spilled over, perhaps thirty feet. Near the spilling water were towering firs. This land has the best fireclay in the United States. Not much has been said about East Kentucky's fireclay and refractories, but the best bricks and tiles in the United States are made here. Carter County is the center of this industry. The hills around Grahn were typical of East Kentucky hills. The white oaks grew everywhere. This tree is known to several areas of America, but it is the most typical of all our East Kentucky trees.

More vignettes of the Lexington Subdivision. In the early years, C&O A-9 #64 pauses with the forerunner of the George Washington at the wood depot in Frankfort, Kentucky, May, 1896. Original glass plate negative by H. A. Gretter, now property of the Kentucky Archives.



Now, the high walls of cliffs took on a different color. They were firm foundation walls for these oak-covered, enduring slopes. Our train bent like an oxbow around a cliff wall and we were in Olive Hill, where the high school sat like a beacon of learning upon a slope above this city. It was a magnificent view from the train.

After our train left Olive Hill, we noticed changes in the landscape. The hills were lower. There were a few narrow, green meadows. I caught a glimpse of a house near Enterprise, which would have made a prize picture. It was typical of the architecture of a by-gone period. It consisted of two log pens, made of broad logs, with a hallway between them. In Greenup County there used to be many houses like this one and we lived in two of them in my growing-up years.

Our train curved in and out around cliff walls, along little streams and through a valley that was broader than any we had yet traversed. And we looked to our right where we saw many neat homes at the foot of the pine covered hills. This was beautiful country.

Number 21 came to a halt in the college town of Morehead, one of East Kentucky's prettiest inland towns. The white trimmed brick buildings of Morehead State College were set against an evergreen background of pine with the college stadium nestled nearby.

When our train left Morehead, we left behind the typical East Kentucky hill country. Now, Kentucky's topography was changing into something very different. We were in transitional territory, a combination of East Kentucky's hills and the bluegrass country that we would soon be entering.

Now we sped into the village of Olympia, which was surrounded by green pastures. We rode across these pastures which were well-stocked with cattle. The hills here were much lower. And now we reached Preston where, perhaps, the bluegrass country officially begins. West of Preston were the green hills and white cottages so much prettier than the countryside in Hertfordshire, England, in spring. The rolling, grassy hills, clean cottages, fine barns, sheep, cattle, and horses made one of the prettiest scenes in America.

Here was a note I jotted down as I looked out my window: "White faced cattle, sheep and lambs running and playing games on the green hills' slopes. Hills as green as the waters in the ocean. Few trees on the low hills. Prosperous looking barns. Palatial homes as compared to the smaller ones in my Cliff Country." And I had just put this note on paper when we reached Mount Sterling.

"What a country!" I said to Naomi. I started taking notes again. There was so much to see. I was jubilant. Naomi warned me that I came to relax and here I was getting enthusiastic about this Kentucky country.

My mind flashed back to Berwick-on-Tweed, a city in a most beautiful green country in northern England where the high waves of the North Sea batter England's coastline. And now we entered Winchester, a Kentucky bluegrass city which reminded me of Berwick-on-Tweed except there isn't a body of water near.

I cannot pass Winchester, even by train, that I do not remember its Main Street at night, when the giant clusters of street lights are aglow. I've seen it from the train and from automobile. And I remember the times Naomi and I have driven from different directions to get here in time to eat at the Old South Inn. From here to Lexington, the land along the C&O tracks and as far as the eye could see was like a well-kept park!

We slowed for Lexington and the bell on the engine was ringing. From my window I looked up the entire length of Main Street and watched the traffic lights change colors. I had never noticed before the railroad tracks were so close within the city.

Lexington has been called "the Athens of the South," because Transylvania, the oldest college West of the Alleghenies, is here. Lexington is also the home of the University of Kentucky. We left Lexington reluctantly and moved west over this bluegrass country.

We zoomed into Midway, a little bluegrass town where I had spoken once long ago. If I were to choose one spot of the entire bluegrass area and say, "This is it," I would choose the scene directly north of Midway. This scene was a masterpiece of nature. A writer could not get all of it

Author Stuart probably would have recognized this scene at the C&O station and freight house in Lexington, Kentucky in the 1950s. Note the RF&P Pullman and the woman carrying the musical instrument case. C&O Official Photo; CSFR 10468.6 BN.





This undated photo shows the C&O ticket agent at work at the Lexington, Kentucky station. C&O Official Photo; CSPR 10510.4 BN.

from a train window. But there was a great home on the rolling slope not too far from Midway and the C&O Railway. And there was a great area of green, rolling hills, hundreds, maybe more than 1,000 sheep, cattle, horses, and scattered trees! What a scene! What beautiful country there was in Woodford County.

After we left Midway, we sped again into transitional territory. We were now on a winding track and we went through a very deep cut. This was rugged terrain for this part of Kentucky. High upon the slopes were green patches of bluegrass. We were among the limestone hills and rugged land where bluegrass grows naturally.

Then, suddenly I looked to my left and there was the Kentucky River. Number 21 slowed to a stop behind a signal. While our train rested behind the signal, I got up and walked about for exercise. I looked to my left at the Capitol Building. The white dome and spire were silhouetted against a dark hill to the west. And then I looked straight ahead and I saw the dome and spire of the old capitol and a tall spire of an unidentified building.

This was an old Kentucky town which had been filled with political intrigues for more than 150 years. It had a faint resemblance to small towns I'd seen in Switzerland, due to its being beside water and its having rough terrain towering up on all sides. This was the reason I thought spires would be becoming to Frankfort.

From Frankfort, we followed the river a short distance. We rode through a valley of scenic beauty. The high palisades looked down on the winding river. And the

train hugged close to the south palisades with the river to the north. The long arms of the willows reached out and toyed with the stiff, silvered breezes.

Our train moved over the last lap of its journey, a country that was not akin to the transitory land, bluegrass, or hills. This was Ohio River Valley land, similar to the Midwestern country to the north. But this countryside lasted only momentarily. There were more houses. The big farms were reduced to acreages. They diminished even more in size, and there were more villages, clean, white, attractive, and apparently very new.

Then the train slowed to a slow pace. I looked out over the ever increasing numbers of houses. The places didn't have acreages now. They were lots. Then I looked toward the west at the setting sun. We were about to come to the end of our journey. We were in Anchorage, a little suburban town.

Now, our train, modern and up-to-date for ease, comfort, relaxation, and safety, brought us to a halt. We had been six hours and ten minutes crossing Kentucky, a land of poetry in the early spring. We had reached the metropolitan city of Kentucky. Some call Louisville a Northern city, others call it Southern.

The porter had taken our luggage off. The conductor wiped the hand rails so the ladies wouldn't soil their white gloves. I stuffed two pages of notes, written on both sides of the paper, into my pocket, and we left the train. Another unforgettable journey had ended.