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Hay John

The Pike County Ballads



Illustrated by

N. C. WYETH

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Illustrator's Preface

REEKING with the swaggering spirit and customs of the early river-settlements along the Mississippi, the Pike County Ballads succeed pre-eminently in contemporizing the reader with those remote days. Living fragments lifted bodily and placed beneath our very eyes!

We hear the creak of wagons over the prairie roads; the lurch and strain of the stage-coach in the dark, the crack of the whip, and men's voices.

We are made to know that the sun flames upon the broad bosom of the Mississippi, and that the white, wheezing river-boats are gleaming on its surface, ever trailing their long waving banners of wood-smoke.

We hear the din of a fight in "Taggart's Hall"; we can smell the rum and tobacco, and note the glint of a quickly moving "Derringer" or the broad flash of a Bowie knife. We sense infinitely of these things.

ILLUSTRATOR'S PREFACE

And I have endeavored here to add my mite to these already potent lines; to lift the curtain intermittently, to draw the veil aside, cautiously, and look upon the unsuspecting folk of Pike County.

N. C. WYETH.

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Jim Bludso



*He were n't no saint, — them engineers
Is all pretty much alike*



WALL, no! I can't tell whar he lives,
Becase he don't live, you see;
Leastways, he's got out of the habit
Of livin' like you and me.

Whar have you been for the last three year
That you have n't heard folks tell
How Jimmy Bludso passed in his checks
The night of the Prairie Belle?

He were n't no saint, — them engineers
Is all pretty much alike, —

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

One wife in Natchez-under-the-Hill
And another one here, in Pike;
A keerless man in his talk was Jim,
And an awkward hand in a row,
But he never flunked, and he never lied, —
I reckon he never knowed how.

And this was all the religion he had, —
To treat his engine well;
Never be passed on the river;
To mind the pilot's bell;
And if ever the Prairie Belle took fire, —
A thousand times he swore,
He'd hold her nozzle agin the bank
Till the last soul got ashore.

All boats has their day on the Mississip,
And her day come at last, —
The Movastar was a better boat,
But the Belle she *would n't* be passed.

JIM BLUDSO

And so she come tearin' along that night —

The oldest craft on the line —

With a nigger squat on her safety-valve,

And her furnace crammed, rosin and pine.

The fire bust out as she clared the bar,

And burnt a hole in the night,

And quick as a flash she turned, and made

For that willer-bank on the right.

There was runnin' and cursin', but Jim yelled out,

Over all the infernal roar,

“I'll hold her nozzle agin the bank

Till the last galoot's ashore.”

Through the hot, black breath of the burnin' boat

Jim Bludso's voice was heard,

And they all had trust in his cussedness,

And knowed he would keep his word.

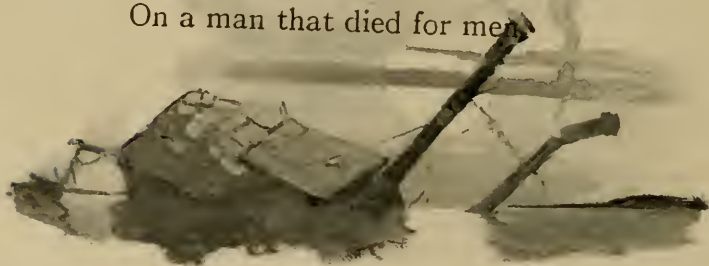
And, sure's you're born, they all got off

Afore the smokestacks fell, —

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

And Bludso's ghost went up alone
In the smoke of the Prairie Belle.

He were n't no saint, — but at jedgment
I'd run my chance with Jim,
'Longside of some pious gentlemen
That would n't shook hands with him.
He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing, —
And went for it thar and then;
And Christ ain't a going to be too hard
On a man that died for men.



Little
Breeches





*No four-year-old in the county
Could beat him for pretty and strong*



I DON'T go much on religion,
I never ain't had no show;
But I've got a middlin' tight grip, sir,
On the handful o' things I know.
I don't pan out on the prophets
And free-will, and that sort of thing, —
But I b'lieve in God and the angels,
Ever sence one night last spring.

I come into town with some turnips,
And my little Gabe come along, —
No four-year-old in the county
Could beat him for pretty and strong,

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

Pearl and chipper and sassy,
Always ready to swear and fight, —
And I'd larnt him to chaw terbacker
Jest to keep his milk-teeth white.

The snow come down like a blanket
As I passed by Taggart's store;
I went in for a jug of molasses
And left the team at the door.
They scared at something and started, —
I heard one little squall,
And hell-to-split over the prairie
Went team, Little Breeches and all.

Hell-to-split over the prairie!
I was almost froze with skeer;
But we roused up some torches,
And sarched for 'em far and near.
At last we struck hosses and wagon,
Snowed under a soft white mound,



Upsot, dead beat, — but of little Gabe
No hide nor hair was found.

And here all hope soured on me,
Of my fellow-critter's aid, —
I jest flopped down on my marrow-bones,
Crotch-deep in the snow, and prayed.

.
By this, the torches was played out,
And me and Isrul Parr
Went off for some wood to a sheepfold
That he said was somewhar thar.

We found it at last, and a little shed
Where they shut up the lambs at night.

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

We looked in and seen them huddled thar,
So warm and sleepy and white;
And thar sot Little Breeches and chirped,
As peart as ever you see,
“I want a chaw of terbacker,
And that’s what’s the matter of me.”

How did he git thar? Angels.

He could never have walked in that storm.
They jest scooped down and toted him
To whar it was safe and warm.
And I think that saving a little child,
And fotching him to his own,
Is a derned sight better business
Than loafing around The Throne.



Banty Tim





*But he staggered up, and packed me off,
With a dozen stumbles and falls*



(REMARKS OF SERGEANT TILMON JOY TO THE
WHITE MAN'S COMMITTEE OF SPUNKY POINT,
ILLINOIS.)

I RECKON I git your drift, gents, —
You 'low the boy sha' n't stay;
This is a white man's country;
You're Dimocrats, you say;
And whereas, and seein', and wherefore,
The times bein' all out o' j'int,
The nigger has got to mosey
From the limits o' Spunky P'int!

Le's reason the thing a minute:

I'm an old-fashioned Dimocrat too,

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

Though I laid my politics out o' the way
 For to keep till the war was through.
But I come back here, allowin'
 To vote as I used to do,
Though it gravels me like the devil to train
 Along o' sich fools as you.

Now dog my cats ef I kin see,
 In all the light of the day,
What you've got to do with the question
 Ef Tim shill go or stay.
And funder than that I give notice,
 Ef one of you tetches the boy,
He kin check his trunks to a warmer clime
 Than he'll find in Illanoy.

Why, blame your hearts, jest hear me!
 You know that ungodly day
When our left struck Vicksburg Heights, how ripped
 And torn and tattered we lay.

BANTY TIM

When the rest retreated I stayed behind,
 Fur reasons sufficient to me, —
With a rib caved in, and a leg on a strike,
 I sprawled on that cursed glacee.

Lord! how the hot sun went for us,
 And br'iled and blistered and burned!
How the Rebel bullets whizzed round us
 When a cuss in his death-grip turned!
Till along toward dusk I seen a thing
 I could n't believe for a spell:
That nigger — that Tim — was a crawlin' to me
 Through that fire-proof, gilt-edged hell!

The Rebels seen him as quick as me,
 And the bullets buzzed like bees;
But he jumped for me, and shouldered me,
 Though a shot brought him once to his knees;
But he staggered up, and packed me off,
 With a dozen stumbles and falls,

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

Till safe in our lines he drapped us both,
His black hide riddled with balls.

So, my gentle gazelles, thar's my answer,
And here stays Banty Tim:

He trumped Death's ace for me that day,
And I'm not goin' back on him!

You may rezoloot till the cows come home,
But ef one of you tetches the boy,
He'll wrastle his hash to-night in hell,
Or my name's not Tilmon Joy!





The
Mystery
of **G**ilgal



*I ax yer parding, Mister Phinn—
Jest drap that whisky-skin*



The MYSTERY *of* GILGAL

THE darkest, strangest mystery
I ever read, or heern, or see,
Is 'long of a drink at Taggart's Hall, —
Tom Taggart's of Gilgal.

I've heern the tale a thousand ways,
But never could git through the maze
That hangs around that queer day's doin's;
But I'll tell the yarn to youans.

Tom Taggart stood behind his bar,
The time was fall, the skies was fa'r,
The neighbors round the counter drewed,
And ca'mly dranked and jawed.



At last come Colonel Blood of Pike,
And old Jedge Phinn, permiscus-like,
And each, as he meandered in,
 Remarked, "A whisky-skin."

Tom mixed the beverage full and fa'r,
And slammed it, smoking, on the bar.
Some says three fingers, some says two, —
 I'll leave the choice to you.

Phinn to the drink put forth his hand;
Blood drewed his knife, with accent bland,
"I ax yer parding, Mister Phinn —
 Jest drap that whisky-skin."



No man high-toneder could be found
Than old Jedge Phinn the country round.
Says he, "Young man, the tribe of Phinns
Knows their own whisky-skins!"

He went for his 'leven-inch bowie-knife: —
"I tries to foller a Christian life;
But I'll drap a slice of liver or two,
My bloomin' shrub, with you."

They carved in a way that all admired,
Tell Blood drew iron at last, and fired.
It took Seth Bludso 'twixt the eyes,
Which caused him great surprise.

THE MYSTERY OF GILGAL

Then coats went off, and all went in;
Shots and bad language swelled the din;
The short, sharp bark of Derringers,
Like bull-pups, cheered the furse.

They piled the stiffs outside the door;
They made, I reckon, a cord or more.
Girls went that winter, as a rule,
Alone to spellin'-school.

I've sarched in vain, from Dan to Beer-
Sheba, to make this mystery clear;
But I end with *hit* as I did begin, —
“WHO GOT THE WHISKY-SKIN?”



Golyer





*Over hill and holler and ford and creek
Jest like the hosses had wings, we tore*



EF the way a man lights out of this world
Helps fix his heft for the other sp'ere,
I reckon my old friend Golyer's Ben
Will lay over lots of likelier men
For one thing he done down here.

You did n't know Ben? He driv a stage
On the line they called the Old Sou'-west;
He wa'n't the best man that ever you seen,
And he wa'n't so ungodly pizen mean, —
No better nor worse than the rest.



He was hard on women and rough on his friends;
And he did n't have many, I'll let you know;
He hated a dog and disgusted a cat,
But he'd run off his legs for a motherless brat,
And I guess there's many jess so.

I've seed my sheer of the run of things,
I've hoofed it a many and many a miled,
But I never seed nothing that could or can
Jest git all the good from the heart of a man
Like the hands of a little child.

Well! this young one I started to tell you about, —
His folks was all dead, I was fetchin' him
through, —



He was just at the age that's loudest for boys,
And he blowed such a horn with his sarchin' small
voice,

We called him "the Little Boy Blue."

He ketched a sight of Ben on the box,
And you bet he bawled and kicked and howled,
For to git 'long of Ben, and ride thar too;
I tried to tell him it would n't do,
When suddenly Golyer growled,

"What's the use of making the young one cry?
Say, what's the use of being a fool?
Sling the little one up here whar he can see,
He won't git the snuffles a-ridin' with me, —
The night ain't any too cool."

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

The child hushed cryin' the minute he spoke;
 "Come up here, Major! don't let him slip."
And jest as nice as a woman could do,
He wropped his blanket around them two,
 And was off in the crack of a whip.

We rattled along an hour or so,
 Till we heerd a yell on the still night air.
Did you ever hear an Apache yell?
Well, ye need n't want to, *this* side of hell;
 There's nothing more devilish there.

Caught in the shower of lead and flint
 We felt the old stage stagger and plunge;
Then we heerd the voice and the whip of Ben,
As he gethered his critters up again,
 And tore away with a lunge.

The passengers laughed. "Old Ben's all right,
 He's druv five year and never was struck."



“Now if *I*’d been thar, as sure as you live,
They’d ‘a’ plugged me with holes as thick as
a sieve;

It’s the reg’lar Golyer luck.”

Over hill and holler and ford and creek
Jest like the hosses had wings, we tore;
We got to Looney’s, and Ben come in
And laid down the baby and axed for his
gin,
And dropped in a heap on the floor.

Said he, “When they fired, I kivered the
kid, —

Although I ain’t pretty, I’m middlin’ broad;

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

And look! he ain't fazed by arrow nor ball, —
Thank God! my own carcass stopped them all."
Then we seen his eye glaze, and his lower jaw
fall, —

And he carried his thanks to God.



The Pledge
at

Spunky Point





*The Deacon and Parson Skeeters
In the tail of a game of Draw*



A TALE OF EARNEST EFFORT AND HUMAN
PERFIDY

I T'S all very well for preachin',
But preachin' and practice don't gee:
I've give the thing a fair trial,
And you can't ring it in on me.
So toddle along with your pledge, Squire,
Ef that's what you want me to sign;
Betwixt me and you, I've been thar,
And I'll not take any in mine.

A year ago last Fo'th July
A lot of the boys was here.

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

We all got corned and signed the pledge
For to drink no more that year.
There was Tilmon Joy and Sheriff McPhail
And me and Abner Fry,
And Shelby's boy Leviticus
And the Golyers, Luke and Cy.

And we anteed up a hundred
In the hands of Deacon Kedge
For to be divided the follerin' Fo'th
'Mongst the boys that kep' the pledge.
And we knowed each other so well, Squire,
You may take my scalp for a fool,
Ef every man when he signed his name
Didn't feel cock-sure of the pool.

Fur a while it all went lovely;
We put up a job next day
Fur to make Joy b'lieve his wife was dead,
And he went home middlin' gay;



Then Abner Fry he killed a man,
And afore he was hung McPhail
Jest bilked the widder outen her sheer
By getting him slewed in jail.

But Chris'mas scooped the Sheriff,
The egg-nogs gethered him in;
And Shelby's boy Leviticus
Was, New Year's, tight as sin;
And along in March the Golyers
Got so drunk that a fresh-biled owl
Would 'a' looked, 'long-side o' them two young men,
Like a sober temperance fowl.

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

Four months alone I walked the chalk,
I thought my heart would break;
And all them boys a-slappin' my back
And axin', "What'll you take?"
I never slep' without dreamin' dreams
Of Burbin, Peach, or Rye,
But I chawed at my niggerhead and swore
I'd rake that pool or die.

At last — the Fo'th — I thumped myself
Through chores and breakfast soon,
'Then scooted down to Taggarts' store —
For the pledge was off at noon;
And all the boys was gethered thar,
And each man hilt his glass —
Watchin' me and the clock quite solemn-like
Fur to see the last minute pass.

The clock struck twelve! I raised the jug
And took one lovin' pull —

THE PLEDGE AT SPUNKY POINT

I was holler clar from skull to boots,
It seemed I could n't git full.
But I was roused by a fiendish laugh
That might have raised the dead —
Them ornary sneaks had sot the clock
A half an hour ahead!

“All right!” I squawked. “You've got me,
Jest order your drinks agin,
And we'll paddle up to the Deacon's
And scoop the ante in.”
But when we got to Kedge's,
What a sight was that we saw!
The Deacon and Parson Skeeters
In the tail of a game of Draw.

They had shook 'em the heft of the mornin',
The Parson's luck was fa'r,
And he raked, the minute we got thar,
The last of our pool on a pa'r.

THE PIKE COUNTY BALLADS

So toddle along with your pledge, Squire,
I 'low it's all very fine,
But ez fur myself, I thank ye,
I'll not take any in mine.



The End



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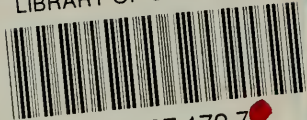
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