New Yorker
Sept 17-1938

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE JACKSON WHITES

ALMOST everyone who has been much upon the sidewalks of mid-Manhattan in the daytime has come upon at some time a collarless and probably hatless old man with wonderfully long gray hair and a profuse patriarchal beard, his skin a ruddy chestnut, of a darker color than the sun ever burns a Caucasian. At first sight such old men may be mistaken for panhandlers or theomaniacs strayed up from the Battery, but this assumption overlooks their color, the challenge in their blue eyes, their long outdoor stride. Their clothes are frayed and much patched, but worn with an air of setting the styles to rights. The fact is they are self-respecting mountaineers of ancient lineage who probably will return before nightfall to their highland homes, where they and their kind are known as Jackson Whites.

Maxwell Anderson, in his play "High Tor," had his heroine refer to them. Discussing with her lover their chances of getting married, she said, "We can't live in your cabin, and have no money, like the Jackson Whites over at Suffern." She pointed toward High Tor's flank, beyond which the Ramapo Mountains cross the boundary line between New York and New Jersey. A half-hour's motoring from the George Washington Bridge brings one to this range of high, boulder-strewn hills. There are still many deer in them, and beavers, muskrats, foxes, weasels, rattlesnakes, copperheads, and wild dogs, yet from Nordkop, Torne, and Catamount Mountains, and from the Hoevenkopf above Suffern, the home of the Jackson Whites, Manhattan skyscrapers are in sight any clear day, like silver pegs on the horizon.

THE Jackson Whites are largely not white. They are a medley resulting from the jumbling of three races, the white, the Negro, and the American Indian. From the time the Ramapos were the defence of the Continental Army against the British forces in New York City, the forebears of these people held the chain of hills against alien invaders. The common ancestry and interests of the whole clan, rather than the narrower divisions of the family, have been their spiritual support. Almost every Jackson White spends a day in New York every few years, and these visits may have helped to give them a kind of highland urbanity. Quiet, earnest, and honest, they have asked only what their forefathers had originally: their land and their freedom on it. In the twentieth century they cannot have this as they did in the eighteenth, naturally. Through their mountains march Boy Scouts and hikers with knapsacks, blazing the trees to mark the way for more. The Jackson Whites wave to them silently from their woodlots and gardens. They do not resist progress, but they do not give it a hand up either. The tide of summer bungalows creeps up their watercourses. Thus beset, the Jackson Whites have of recent decades been yielding and coming down to find work in the factories of the Ramapo Valley and shelter in its railroad tenements.

They usually emerge through the Hollow at Hillburn, a one-factory village with Victorian villas surrounding a bowl of a pond. Hillburn suffered a painful surgery in 1930, when Route 17 pushed its way northward. Having liquidated most of George Washington's trenches at Fort Sidman, Route 17 did not scruple to cleave one part of the village from another. The little valley known as the Hollow is now cut off from the village by a humming river of motor vehicles. The descending Jackson White may pause here only long enough to get courage to cross Route 17, or he may linger forever and end on relief. The most noticeable residents of the Hollow are sportily dressed mulattoes and kerchiefed Negro girls. It is in the background one sees the Jacks, as they are called locally. They are tawny-skinned instead of chocolate, or have burnished cheeks which denote predominant white blood. Their features are aquiline and sharp, they are lean and tall, and they stand as stiff as clothes-horses, watching the frolics of the volatile Negroes. On Sundays a few of them attend services in Brook Chapel, which is Presbyterian, and listen to sermons by the Reverend Mr. Robinson, a young colored graduate of the Auburn Theological Seminary and a better-educated preacher than the Jacks ever had themselves. That the once proud Jackson Whites are willing to listen to a non-mountaineer minister is evidence, even to themselves, of their coming absorption into the colored race. After the World War the government estimated the Jackson White population at two thousand, but today it is doubtful if the recognizable types, in whom Indian, German, English, or Dutch blood predominates, would number five hundred, and of these perhaps only a third, represented by two-score families, live as their forefathers lived. At the time of the Civil War there were certainly five thousand, perhaps ten thousand, of these people living off the land in the Ramapos.



SAMUEL DE FREES, whose picture hangs in Brook Chapel, was the last preacher of the mountain stock. The blood of the Tuscarora tribe ran high in him and he called himself an Indian man of God. Besides preaching, he operated, single-handed, a gold mine. The gold mine paid less in ore than hope and has been devoured by Route 17. Tuscarora blood has always been the most precious attribute of the Jackson Whites, and at the time of the draft it was as Indians—Tuscaroras—that all the males wrote themselves down. Next to being an Indian, the greatest point of distinction for a Jackson White is to be an albino. Whether albinos are numerous in the Ramapos because of persistent inbreeding or because of a lack of copper sulphate, a salt thought to protect pigmentation, is something that science hasn't settled as yet. Whatever the reason, the Ramapos have several entire families with white hair and eyebrows, colorless, scalded-looking skin, and pink eyes that flinch in the sunlight. The rocky, wooded highland extending south from Horse Stable and Breakneck Mountains, past Skysail Hollow, past Grandpa and Grandma, across the Valley of Dry Bones, over Torne Mountain and to the Hoevenkopf, Sky Notch, and Hornet Hill, has the highest percentage of albinism in the United States.

In Jackson White legends, the queen of the albinos will always be Nellie Mann. She was the great-granddaughter of a Hessian deserter from the British army and in the late nineteen-hundreds travelled with the Barnum & Bailey sideshow, billed as a wild girl captured in the Australian bush. Eventually Nellie, who was as proud of her ancestry as a D.A.R., repented the misrepresentation and insisted upon being announced as "a beautiful American albino from our own Ramapo Mountains." The change was ruinous to her career and after a flurry of litigation

with the circus, she retired a well-to-do but embittered patrician. Another albino member of the clan, White Charlie de Groot, had been expected to succeed Nellie Mann with the sideshow. He had almost incredible equipment: roly-poly good nature, red eyes, hair that was not only white but as kinky as cotton batting, and a head held off centre by a muscular fault so that it sat permanently sidewise. As soon as Nellie's experience with Barnum & Bailey had been fully explained to White Charlie, however, he announced that he would stay in the Ramapos, and he remained there all his life, certain that the loss was the world's, not his. The great tradition of Nellie Mann and White Charlie de Groot persists still. In one of a row of plain white houses above the Hollow live now the Theodore Van Dunks, who have three albino children. Ethnologists come to the Hollow from this and other countries to study the young Van Dunks. Their parents are flattered at science's interest, but no Van Dunk has ever considered approaching a sideshow, and none will, probably.

THE way of independence in the mountains today is hard, perhaps impossible. The Jackson Whites are gradually losing their land and becoming sharecroppers. As such, they do not seem able to exist on their stony hills. The decay of the old de Frees family, which has branches all over the Ramapos, is more or less typical. They are descended from a Dutchman who spelled his name de Vries. For over a century and a half they owned a plot of two hundred acres in a high valley. Rockland County residents of fifty or more remember Aunt Abbie de Frees, who, when they were young, had matriarchal authority. During picnics she would appear in the woods, gnarled and bent, a clay pipe in her mouth, and render the gathering speechless with talk of saturnalia, Armageddon, and hellfire, and then, relenting, brew a sweet tea from herbs she would gather on the spot. Few ever drank this brew, and those who did not had good reason for their reluctance. Not only did Aunt Abbie look and act like a witch; she was a witch. She frequently turned herself into a black cat. Everyone knew it and many had seen her on mountain trails in this impersonation, her tail waving high. At Halloween she was never to be found in her kitchen or her hen yard, and her broom of alder twigs was always gone, too. She was out riding the upper air, over Brook Chapel, probably, and the Ramapo-Ajax plant of the American Brake Shoe & Foundry Co. Abbie had two sons, and one of them, Will, still lives on the lowermost shoulder of the Hoevenkopf, just above Route 17. When he was a boy the family land ran well back into the mountains, and he and his father and his brother would haul hard maple timber down to Suffern and sell it to the Erie Railroad, which paid twelve dollars a cord for it and burned it in the locomotives that ran to the Jersey waterfront opposite Manhattan. Then a strange thing happened; the Erie started to burn coal. Aunt Abbie could remember further back, though, than the prosperous days that followed the coming of the Erie, to a time when the Jacks scarcely saw a dollar in cash in a year, when they made their own axe handles, molded their own candles, ground their own corn, spun and knitted their own clothes, shot and fished, kept their own pigs, hens, and goats, and handed down their few tools from one generation to another, but she couldn't get the family restored to this basis. Factories sprang up along Ramapo Pass, offering cash in exchange for six days of labor by time clock. She saw many of her relatives become apathetic toward their homesteads. The industrial revolution has now gone so far that most of the mountaineers are jobseekers, buy at chain stores, and demand the upkeep of an automobile in their relief allowance on the ground that they may have to go anywhere from Newark to West Point to find work.

Pa de Frees, his two sons, and many other Jacks substituted stone quarrying for the timber business for a while, since New York then needed curbstones and sewer blocks of granite in large quantities, but Vermont and Massachusetts pushed them out. Aunt Abbie being a sorceress, there was never any question of Pa de Frees controlling affairs, and it was she who willed the property when she transferred her spirit to an even freer sphere. Showing less than a witch's sagacity, she left complete control of the whole two hundred acres to Sam, the elder but less practical-minded son. Sam presently agreed to sell the holdings at auction. Will could have stopped the sale if he'd had $250, but he couldn't find anyone to lend it to him and the property went to a Suffern merchant for $1,150. Will tried to buy back a part of the land where his favorite pond lay, so that if in need he could catch a string of fish for his kitchen, but he found the price per acre had quadrupled. He asked Louis Suffern, a descendant of the man for whom the town was named, to give him a job. The Sufferns have always been kind to the Jackson Whites, even providing them with their only non-Negro graveyard, and Louis engaged Sam to take care of his furnace and mow his lawn, and that is what he does today.

Of the small factories that settled around the foot of the Ramapos, only one plant ever slipped into the Hollow itself. This was an establishment which trained the hands of the mountaineers to the process of making screws. Screws were then threaded as they are today, but they had blunt ends; each screw, in the final touch of processing, was sheared off square. It was necessary to make a hole with a gimlet before forcing one into wood. One day a Jack operating the shearing machine made a slip and, instead of cutting off the end of the screw, twisted it. He examined it and found a strange misfit in his hand; the screw went to a sharp point and was threaded to the tip. The Jackson White tried the screw on the wood of his workbench and found he could start it by hand. The first modern wood screw had been invented. It never profited the Jackson Whites, of course, and while they are greatly interested in the details of their legend as it deals with the land, they now cannot tell you the name of their only inventor.

FOR upward of a hundred years, the Jackson Whites, in the fastness of their hills, were thought of as shiftless, illiterate mountaineers, unbelievers in soap and marriage, and this repute practically shut them out of the records of the genteel. It is harder to find out something that happened in the Ramapo Mountains two generations ago than what happened in the Fiji Islands at the same period. Certain events of a hundred and fifty years ago, however, have mellowed and cleared with time and are now as definite as when they occurred, if they did



occur. It is definite that the name of the mountaineers derives from one Captain Jackson, a Colonial trader who signed a contract with the British Expeditionary Force to supply women camp followers for the troops occupying New York City. This document specified that for £7,000 he should deliver 3,500 female subjects of the Crown within a certain reasonable time. It was assumed that the Captain would recruit his women from the large English cities, and this he did, but one of twenty transports on which they started for these shores foundered and fifty women were lost. Mindful of the time limit in his agreement, the Captain had fifty colored women hurriedly brought up from the West Indies. As there had been no mention of color in the contract, and they were undeniably subjects of the Crown, they were accepted by His Majesty's command with no more than a grumble. The redcoats and the citizenry made a distinction, however, and the harlots became known respectively as the Jackson Whites and the Jackson Blacks. They all lived in a stockade in Lispenard's Meadows, now a part of Greenwich Village.

The terms of peace provided for the evacuation of the British forces but said nothing about Captain Jackson's ladies. What became of the Blacks is not known. About a hundred and fifty of the Jackson Whites emigrated northward to Hoosick Falls and the identity of their descendants faded out in a hundred years. The greater part of the rest crossed the Hudson and straggled northward toward what they had been told was already a haven for refugees, the Ramapos. It was a strange lot they found there. There were German mercenaries who had deserted during the war, British sympathizers gone to cover, Dutch adventurers, Tory guerrillas like the followers of Claudius, the Cowboy of the Ramapos, who was hanged by the Colonials. All had been unable to go down into the Ramapo Valley because it was held by the British and unable to occupy the ridges because they were held by Continental scouts guarding the Cannonball Trail, an important line of communication. Indians were there, also, and they too were refugees. They were Tuscaroras who, after the breakup of their tribe by the British in North Carolina, had started north over the Cumberland Trail for the Long House of the Iroquois at Onondaga. They had stopped in the Ramapos and in later years were joined by many tribesmen who came north and somehow never left.



"I'm going to give a party I read about in 'Harper's Bazaar.'"

Among the Jackson Whites, the Negro strain goes back at least as far as the Dutch names that most of the mountaineers bear. While the Van Dunks, the most intermarried family in the group, are partly descended from a patroon family of that name, the first Van Dunk in the mountains was probably a Negro slave who had been liberated by New Jersey's emancipation laws of 1804. Today these Van Dunks are light in color and have more albinos than any other family. The single Jackson White who called himself a "pure-blooded American"—that is, a Tuscarora—Long-Haired Bill Mann, died last winter. There was an apparent fallacy in his claim, for he had also assumed—at least at times—

that he had inherited his family name from a Hessian soldier. His face would have done for the side of a Buffalo nickel, whatever his descent. He always wore his black hair down to his shoulders, and when death took him at eighty-eight there wasn't a gray strand in it. The mother of Paddy Dennison brought the first known Irish blood among the Jackson Whites. Paddy, whose cabin still stands on the top ridge of the Hoevenkopf, grew up to be a witty dipsomaniac with kinky hair. Until his death in the middle nineties, he remained not only a bachelor but, it is thought, a celibate—an unusual thing in the mountains. An Italian strain was provided by Joe and Jim Castiglione, who married Delilah Sniffin and Libby de Frees respectively, and begat Carnera-like sons. The family grew rapidly. Lately, apparently, the blood of the fathers has become dominant over that of the mountain mothers, and the Castigliones have been drifting into the factory tenements of Paterson and Passaic.

One of the most interesting Ramapo families is that of George Powell, who married Emma Williams about twenty years ago. Since then they have had thirteen children, all boys. The peculiar record of the Piggerys is perhaps as notable. The uncompromising name Piggery was as common as any in the mountains a generation or so ago, but today, through stubbornly begetting only female children, the Piggerys have entirely bred out their name. The last Piggery was Bill, who spent a lifetime helplessly watching his cabin fill up with dusky daughters. All the Bill Piggery girls married happily, and while their name has vanished, their sons have the Indian features of their Piggery grandfather. Ed de Frees, for example, who had a Piggery mother, is succinctly described in the Hollow as "all Indian and all Piggery."

Up behind Ladentown are the old Pitts family, whose chief heirloom is a paper proving to their satisfaction their descent from William Pitt. It may have been one of the Pitts who was heard recently singing along a Ramapo trail an English ballad, which has been found to be more than five hundred years old:

If life was a thing that money could buy,
The rich would live and the poor would die.

When one considers that the Pineys, the Colonial people of central New Jersey, have been discovered to be singing Renaissance ballads, the theory that this couplet has been sung in the Ramapos from generation to generation since the Revolution is tenable, especially as in the Ramapos several Elizabethan usages are still heard. The plural "n" is well known; for example, "housen" for "houses." "I'm feist," meaning "I'm scared" or "I'm reluctant," is fairly common. Until quite recently "English shilling" was accepted cant for a quarter, and "York shilling" for twelve and a half cents.



"My friend is dying to know you."

WHEN Long-Haired Bill Mann died last winter, only two patriarchs of the Jackson Whites remained —Uncle Will de Frees, who was given the job by Louis Suffern, and old Simon Mann, who lived alone high in a ravine behind Ho-Ho-Kus and was known as the Hermit of the Ramapos, which, indeed, he was. This spring, conjecture in the valley turned to old Simon and whether he would come down as usual, when the snow melted, for his supplies. If he didn't, someone would have to go up and see about him. On March 20th he appeared, loaded his purchases at the store into an old potato sack, heaved it on his back, and started out of Ho-Ho-Kus on Route 2, on which state troopers later found him run down, his tobacco, flour, corn meal, and fish hooks scattered over his body.

So today the only patriarch left is Uncle Will. He is tall, slim, and beardless, a handsome old man at seventy-seven. His eyes are young and alert. He knows his mountain medicine thoroughly and is the Jackson Whites' only surviving doctor.

WHETHER Uncle Will stops bleeding from an open wound by bringing down a fresh spider's web from the rafters and applying it to the injury, I have never asked him. But a few Sundays ago I went around to his home to inquire about his health and talk with him. I found him hoeing in his garden and I noticed one weed he had placed aside. I asked him what it was. "Plantain," he said, straightening up easily. "Not troubled with boils, are ye?" I said no. "Well," he said, in a thin, rather high voice, shaking out the plantain