

LEGEND OF HAIRY JOHN VONEIDA IS STORY OF WOULD-BE PATRIOT

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"Travelers through the picturesque Narrows between Hartleton, Union county, and Motz Bank now Woodward, Centre county, are struck by the romantic name of Hairy John's State Park, sometimes called "Voneida Park," says Henry W. Shoemaker, president of the Pennsylvania Folklore Society, State Museum, Harrisburg.

"Close to the mammoth spring can be seen the remains of the foundations of a simple log cabin once the abode of Hairy John Voneida, a picturesque hermit who lived for many years in the locality which bears his name. Born at Jacobsburg, Centre county, now Madisonburg, he early became an expert marksman, and won every shooting match in Brush Valley with his seemingly uncanny skill.

"Married to a beautiful dark belle of Sugar Valley, he moved to Clinton county about the time of the outbreak of the war with Mexico In 1846. Despite his lovely bride's opposition he felt he should enlist, but the recruiting officer at Lock Haven laughed at him, and rejected him as a midget and too small for service. As he was hustled out of the office he shouted, 'I can shoot better than anybody and Napoleon Bonaparte was shorter than I am.' But he was crudely driven away without a hearing.

"At the end of his trainp back to Logansville (now Loganton) he called to his young mate through the door that he was home. thinking the news would please her. This would be some compensation for his unceremonious rejection. But no answer came, and after a search of the house he found her hanging on a meat hook In the cellar, her beautiful body stiff in death. He notified the village authorities, and the constable placed him under arrest.

" 'No woman could hang herself from a meat hook,' he said, and this was confirmed by the Coroner at Lock Haven. Yet the coroner's Jury rendered an open verdict and he was freed. He returned to Logansville where at the town pump he dramatically announced that he was innocent, that he loved his young wife and that he would not touch a hair on her head, that he was leaving Sugar Valley because of the suspicion levelled at him, and would remain away until he was completely vindicated; further more, he would not cut his hair or beard until that full vindication came. He said he would retain his home in Logansville, as he expected to come back, and live among his old friends in respect and harmony.

"Carrying his long Lehman rifle he started for the southern valleys. At nightfall he came to the flowing spring in the Centre-Union county narrows where he remained for the next 40 years of his life, as vindication never came. Fifteen years later came another war, the War of Secession, and this time John Voneida again went to Bellefonte to enlist. A recruiting officer with a hard face came into the room in the court house in which the volunteers were seated.

"He tapped every other boy on the shoulder, to go into his private sanctum for examination but he only glared at Voneida, 'Begone yee pint sized feist,' he growled. 'I can shoot better than anyone in this court house,' retorted Hairy John. 'Begone, before I take the boot to you, you are too small to fight.' Meanwhile the other boys had gone to the inner room and the sergeant slammed the door in Voneida's face.

"Dazed and humiliated, Voneida staggered out into the sunshine and walked home. At the end of the war he thought he saw a chance of service, a man resembling John Wilkes Booth, assassin of Abraham Lincoln, was lurking around the Stitzer Tavern, at the Union county mouth of the narrows, and despite his short stature he batted him down, arrested him and induced the landlord to lock him in the butcher house. Soon a troop of the Cameran Guards of cavalry arrived, but "Booth" had a satisfactory alibi and all Hairy John got was a lecture from the Captain and then again tramped homeward, much discomforted.

"About this time a preacher's niece, Twila Montray, pitying him, offered to keep house for Voneida, and she straightened out the 'shabang' and made it neat and habitable. Being a good cook she helped travellers through the narrows, with ginigerbread, molasses and hot coffee, and built up a nice business among the packers, drovers and lumbermen who frequented the narrows.

"One day came the news that the returning Centre county soldiers were to march to Bellefonte, through the narrows to be mustered out and Hairy John and Twila served the tired, footsore boys with gingerbread, cakes, and coffee. "They would not let me fight,' Voneida said, 'but I am paying them in some small way for saving our glorious Union.'

"Occasionally Hairy John went to Woodward for salt and molasses, and the children, terrified at his uncouth appearance would run and hide under the porches. Mrs. B. H. Focht, widow of former Congressman Ben Focht, of Lewisburg, recalls that when as a child she drove in a sleigh through the narrows with her parents, she would hide under the buffalo robes when they neared Hairy John's place. Yet he was a kindly old man, and would have harmed no one, and was on his way to be forgotten, when Gifford Pinchot, after laying out the Joyce Kilmer State Forest Monument in 1920, drank some of the good water at Hairy Johns Spring, began asking questions and wound up by naming the site the Hairy John Park. Some tried to modify it by calling it Voneida Park, but the forester said, 'Let the name stand, whiskers and all.' And it pretty much has done so.

"Despite his widespread reputation, John Vonelda, unvindicated and bearded, rests probably in an unmarked grave, and a close search of Central Pennsylvania newspapers fails to list his death which occurred about 1890, though his fame as a great marksman, woodsman and host will linger pretty nearly as long as Pennsylvania history and folk lore endure."