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In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

NATURAL CURIOSITIES AND MURDER MYSTERY

The records of the County Court show that in September, 1846, Sheriff Charles Blanton collected \$15.00 tax from a show called Natural Curiosities.

I am reasonably sure this is the same show which exhibited within a few hundred feet of what is now Zion church, four miles west of Shelby, more than a century ago, whose owners and their families were brutally murdered and presumably robbed of their money, and their bodies hidden under the old covered bridge over Broad River, two miles west of Shelby (at the old Jim Elliott place) a mile south of the present bridge on Highway 74.

There are numerous stories about these show people. It is probable that during the winter they lived in a house in the Zion community and travelled over the county in their show wagon and gave shows, using wax figures. One man told me: "They took their wagons and went away from Zion and then came back and camped near the river bridge".

However, all agree that a party of show-folks came into Zion community in the 1840's with at least three fine wagons, two of which were Conestoga-style wagons, each drawn by two handsome horses with brilliant colored bridle trimmings, prancing arrogantly along the dusty road, and seemed to share the

pride that marked the faces of the handsome men and the pretty, hoop-skirted women who rode behind them. The speech of the strangers indicated they came from a state many miles north of North Carolina.

These covered wagons with great canvas on hoops spread high over them, were frequently used as sleeping quarters by the travellers, and were constructed as solid and water-tight as a boat, so that in travelling they could be forded across streams, the horses often swimming.

The third wagon was the show-wagon. It had a long, wide back, some-what like a buggy. This back part of the wagon served as a stage for the show. On this stage were life-sized wax figures of many famous persons, including Lord Nelson, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Major Putnam at the time he was taken by the Indians and tied to a stake and burned. The Indians looked quite natural, too. There were probably wax figures of Little Red Ridinghood, of Little Bo Peep and a sheep, and Cinderella.

Since the life-size figures were made of wax and looked like living persons, they were called "Natural Curiosities." Of course, now-a-days, one sees these wax figures in museums and at county fairs, and many other places, but more than a century ago they afforded great entertainment in a backwoods section such as this area

was then. As part of the show, in connection with these figures, the narrator told of the exploits of each of the famous persons when he was alive; other members of the show-group sang songs probably to the accompaniment of a melodeon. Those folks who had extra silver money were glad to spend it to see what was then unusual entertainment, and the show prospered.

SHOW-PEOPLE DISAPPEAR

There were less than 10,000 persons in the county in 1847, so of course there was not much travelling across the river, however, one morning those who did pass that way saw the show-folks' horses, with the fancy harness, standing hitched to the wagons by the side of the bridge, but none of the men, women, or children were anywhere near. There was much speculation as to what had become of the strangers, and why they had left their horses standing hitched. Many persons feared that evil had befallen them, but there was no evidence, and nothing was done about their disappearance.

The horses finally broke away from the wagons, which eventually rotted by the riverside. As the tattered curtains of the show-wagon flapped in the rain and wind, passers-by could see behind these curtains the wax figures standing, bravely, as though waiting for the show to begin.

One summer's day, many

LIFE

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years later, when the river had been far out of its banks because of heavy rains, Dr. W. J. T. Miller was approaching the bridge on his way home to his farm below Sharon, when he saw an unusual object glistening on a sand bar. Upon closer examination he saw it was a human skull. man skeletons, men, women, and children, which had evidently been washed from under the bridge by the high waters.

The consensus of opinion among those Clevelanders who saw these skeletons was that they were what was left of the missing show-folks. It was then recalled that after the sudden disappearance of the show people, certain persons in the community suddenly became unexpectedly prosperous.

COVERED BRIDGES

Of all the engineering structures a century ago, the covered bridge, spanning small rivers and streams probably had the most romantic associations. Serene and peaceful, and often vine-covered, it was a familiar and frequently most welcome landmark along the roads and cartways of this state as late as sixty years ago, for here the traveller and his team could find temporary shelter from the storm.

These were strongly constructed. The heavy boards at the sides, and the oak beams which supported the sturdy roof, were put to-

gether with ash and hickory pegs. The 16-foot bridge required by law was too narrow to permit two teams to pass.

FLOOD DURING DROUGHT

Such a bridge as the one described above, once spanned Broad river two miles west of Shelby, and was washed away by flood waters one August day in the 1860's, when there hadn't been a drop of rain in this area for weeks, and crops were drying up because of the drought.

Mrs. Plato Hamrick tells me that on this day, so many years ago, Misses Lou, Ross, and Lize Webb had been visiting their brother, Dave C. Webb, in Shelby. The clouds overhead were lowering, but the rain did not fall, and the Webb ladies decided to return to their home in the Beaver Dam section.

When they reached Broad river, the muddy waters were so high they did not dare drive a team over the bridge, so they walked across. Then stood for a few minutes, in the road, where the dust was almost shoe-mouth deep, and watched the river and the bridge. Soon they saw the bridge break loose from its foundations, and float down the stream.

The waters of Broad river had reached flood stage in the Sunshine and Hollis areas of Rutherford county, where there had been heavy cloudbursts, and had swept angrily along until they reached the old covered bridge which—as I said above—was torn from its foundations and washed down

the river into Alex Wray's field.

So far as I know, this covered bridge was the only one in Cleveland county. Bass Suttle tells me he went across a covered bridge in Burke county, and across one in Catawba county, near Maiden.

LOW BRIDGE AND IRON BRIDGE

John Tucker, Esq., built a number of bridges in the county in the earlier days. I think he built the "low bridge" that replaced the covered one that washed away. This low bridge was constructed somewhat like a dam. If rising waters covered the bridge, the weight of the same waters then held it down.

Cleveland County's first iron bridge over Broad River was erected about 1881. At that time this was a pauper county, and there were about as many people living in the entire county as now reside in Shelby. J. Y. Hamrick, of Boiling Springs, was the county's (Democratic) representative to the General Assembly at Raleigh. That term he succeeded in inducing the State of North Carolina to appropriate money to build an iron bridge for us.

UNUSUAL WILLS AND FUNERAL PLANS

In looking through the records in the office of the Clerk of the Court of this county, one finds some unusual Wills.

The Will of Clarence E. Sain, a Shelby citizen who died recently, was filed on May 4, 1951, and required that his executor should have his body cremated (in Atlanta) and

his ashes scattered over the graves of his mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Amos Sain, in Laurel Hill cemetery in Lincoln county. There was a bequest of \$100 to Laurel Hill church.

Another bequest was for more than \$8,000 to the "Theosophy Society of Los Angeles, whose objects are to form the nucleus of Universal brotherhood and humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color . . . (and) . . . the investigation of the unexplained laws of nature, and the psychical power latent in man."

(Incidentally, Theosophy teaches that the Ego both precedes and survives the physical body: hence re-incarnation.)

Below, I give a portion of a Will, recorded in Book A of Wills. To me this is a most interesting document.

WILL OF HUGH KERR

"I, Hugh Kerr, being in bad health in body, but of sound and perfect mind and memory, blessed be God, do this day (September 23, 1856), make and publish this my last will and testament. . . . Principally, and first of all, I give and recommend my soul to almighty God who gave it. And as to my body, I recommend it to mother Earth to be enclosed in a pine coffin neither colored nor covered with cloth. And my body to be enveloped in a plain cotton sheet.

"My blessed Lord was wrapped in a cloth. He had no shroud. I hope my blessed Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, has a shroud

prepared for me, not doubting but at the general resurrection I shall receive the same body again.

"I want no head-stone, for I believe it to be idolatrous pride. I want no funeral sermon, for I believe it to be an invention of sub-Christah Rome.

"As touching what little wordly estate wherewith it had pleased God to bless me with in this life. . . . I have niether money nor property sufficient to pay my personal debts.

"I give and bequeath to my beloved daughter, Polly Morgan, One Dollar

"I give and bequeath to my beloved wife, Melisha Kerr, all my beds" then followed the enumeration of the meager items of household and kitchen furniture, all of which he gave to his wife.

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The proof the parkin Ray E. H. . . . Whenever parking meter d a favor goes in He the penn work ctit