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Apr 13, 1952

## LIFE

# In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

### TROUBLE IN THE 1870's

When the Ku Klux Klan was organized in Cleveland county soon after the close of the War Between the States, it was in no wise like the lawless organization now operating in certain sections in North and South Carolina. But it did deteriorate, and persons wearing the Klan disguise used Klan's methods to satisfy personal grudges and the organization did get out of control of the men who conceived it.

Today we have laws for protection of individuals and for the punishment of law-breakers. In those horrible and awful Reconstruction days, from about 1866 to 1875 when the civil government of the commonwealth had almost ceased to function except on behalf of such persons as were favored by — or were members of — the disreputable secret societies, namely the Union League and the Red Strings composed of Negroes scalawags, carpetbaggers, and a few misguided Republicans, our so-called courts became obscene farces, and the good men of the county — as a matter of self preservation — found it necessary to take some phases of the administering of punishment into their own hands.

For self protection, the best men of the county banded themselves together as Ku Klux Klan, disguised themselves and their horses with white robes and masks, and since the courts would not punish law-breakers who were members of the above mentioned Union League and Red Strings, they (the KKK) did. Fear of punishment by the Klan had a deterring effect on would-be evil doers.

As Capt. Plato Durham testified before the Congressional Committee in Washington:

"Its (the Klan's) original purposes and practises were righteous, and it was effective against an intolerable and otherwise remediless condition."

However, with so large an organization—there were three dens in the county with more than 800 members,, it deteriorated and individuals used the Klan disguise to wreak personal vengeance on persons they did not like. The three incidents hereinafter mentioned are evidences of that deterioration.

### NEGRO KILLED KLANSMAN

The following story is quoted from Robert Lee Durham's biography of his father, Capt. Plato Durham:

"My Mother told me that the most violent burst of anger she ever saw her husband, Capt. Durham, exhibit, was when he came home from a distant visit and head of a raid which some Ku Klux had made on a Negro not far from Shelby. In this raid the Ku Klux persuaded Capt. Durham's youngest brother, John, to go along with them. John was not then 15 years of age.

"When the Kluckers got to the Negro's cabin in the bright moonlight John Durham and a young fellow named Bush Putnam recklessly rushed up to the door of the cabin, like a couple of bull terriers. The Negro flung open the door and brought his axe down, cutting edge first, on Putnam's head; then jumped back into the cabin and slammed the door. The axe might just as well have killed John Durham as the other youth.

Capt Durham's wife said the Captain's anger was not only because the older men had brought death to Putnam and such a bare escape to John, but because (as he said) the Negro was in no need of correction. His only offense was that he was prospering as a freed man, working dilligently for himself.

"Of course this death of Bush Putnam put an end to the attack on the cabin; and the question in this unexpected howdy-do was what to do with Putnam's body. It was carried back into the town of Shelly and concealed in Dr.

Tom Williams' house which used to stand where Central Methodist Church now is. Klansmen from all over were called in a secret meeting in Shelby to decide what should be done with the dead youth's body, and what should be told his people. Putnam was buried secretly, and word put out that he had gone to some Western state."

In discussing this tragedy with Will E. McArthur, his recollection was that the body was taken to the home of Putnam's parents, left on the porch with a note which said "Brought home by friends in bad condition. Killed in a Klan raid by a Negro."

I am not sure why the Klansmen saw fit to make a raid on this Negro's home. Pat McBrayer tells me that it had to do with some action on the part of the Negro's half-witted son, who had a gun in his possession.

### A DRAMATIC MEETING

The Negro, Ned McBrayer who killed the Putnam boy knew that unless he got away very quickly, he would fare ill at the hands of some of the Klu Klux at a later day. He went to his former master, Col. Elisha McBrayer, for help. Col. McBrayer, recognizing the justness of the Negro's cause, gave him a horse and money, and told him to get just as far away from Shelby as the horse and money would take him.

Pat McBrayer, Col. Elisha McBrayer's grandson says that nothing more was heard from the Negro. Nobody knew where he had gone, until about thirty years ago when Lander F. McBrayer (who lives on North LaFayette St.) was in the little town of Bakersville in the mountains of Western North Carolina. He was walking along the street there and saw an old Negro man sitting on a bench. Being a courteous Southern gentleman, he spoke to the old man and said "How are you Uncle?" The old Negro replied:

Boss, I never saw you before, but I thinks I knows your face, and I thinks I recognize your voice. Mought you not be some of Col. "Elisha McBrayer's close kin? He was my master in slavery day and I used to be foreman on his farm."

It was a dramatic experience for Mr. McBrayer. He did look exceedingly like his grandfather, Col. Elisha McBrayer, and furthermore he had been told many times how this Negro, Ned, had rescued his father, Col. Rube McBrayer, from drowning when he was a little boy.

### WHIPPINGS BY KKK

In his theme "Reconstruction in Cleveland County," J. R. Davis says:

"The Ku Klux Klan which is often looked upon as being unnecessary and as exerting a detrimental influence, really had a great

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mission and a noble purpose, and truly did a great work at first. Though it finally became too vio-

lent in its methods and too corrupt and disgraceful in its procedures. The influence for good was, by far, greater than the influence for bad . . . Some of the very best citizens in the County were members of these dens. The grand chief of the county was

Capt. Plato Durham, a prominent lawyer and statesman of Shelby, and the Cyclops was Col. LeRoy McAfee, his law partner. "There were, altogether, something like twenty-five night outrages in the county, and the burning of one schoolhouse. Several prominent men became frightened after having participated in Klan raids, and left the State. Among them we might mention Madison McBrayer and Richard Martin."

Mr. Davis mentions the whippings of Martin Hawkins and his wife. He says: "Hawkins was a creditable man but a strong Republican. Thirty or forty men in Ku Klux disguise went to his home and beat Hawkins, and dragged his wife downstairs and crippled her. A man named McGahay, a republican who was a friend of Hawkins, recognized one of the disguised Klansmen as DeCatur DePriest. McGahay, upon seeing him, shot him causing instant death, then fled from the country."

The whipping of Aaron V. Biggerstaff, is also discussed at length by Mr. Davis. He described Biggerstaff as a prominent farmer of Rutherford county, a Republican, and a man of some

property

I am not sure just why Biggerstaff was whipped, but Mr. Davis says that he was obnoxious to the Democrats because he would tell to Superior Court Judge George W. Logan everything he could find out the Democrats did that was bad. Logan, in his extraordinary and unusually powerful position as Judge, could make matters very unpleasant for these individuals, who of course were opposed to him and to the carpet baggers and scalawags and others who incited the Negroes to crimes, against the white people.

### 39 PROMINENT CITIZENS JAILED

Biggerstaff was beaten twice. The first time in the spring of 1871 he was dragged out his bed at his home in Rutherford county and into the highway and badly bruised and beaten.

United States Marshall J. G. Hester and his Federal troops arrested 30 citizens charged with being members of the KKK and responsible for the whipping of Biggerstaff. They were arraigned before United States Commissioner John Moore. Biggerstaff was sent for to testify against them. The Biggerstaff family — several of them — set out from Rutherford county, but stopped overnight at a small house by the roadside. Here the KKK found them at 2 o'clock in the morning. Biggerstaff was again beaten, and the Klansmen were ready to shoot him and several members of the family. The Biggerstaffs promised not to testify against the Klan, and were permitted then to return to their home. They declined to come to Shelby in response to subpoena issued by Comm'r Moore saying they feared they would be murdered, if they testified.

Of course an outrage like the beating of Biggerstaff should have been punished but since U. S. Marshall J. G. Hester and Judge Logan and others could not identify the individuals, out of spite they arrested a whole neighborhood of men from Rutherford and Cleveland Counties — 39 of them — put them in a horribly filthy jail in Raleigh, and Judge Bond declined to accept \$45,000 for their bail. They were held there for a week — many of those arrested were men whose "character and standing, for fifty years, gives assurance of their innocence. But at that time the Yankees had their foot on the necks of the people of the South. The younger people will not be able to understand this whipping, but the older people who came up just after the War will understand.

Only the people of Germany, after the Nazis took over, can have any comprehension of the reign of terror in the South under reconstruction. And the evil acts of men like Judge Logan, U. S. Marshall J. G. Hester, and others.