

GHOSTS
AND
WITCHES OF
MARTIN COUNTY

By LOUISE ROBERTSON BOOKER

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WITCHES OF
MARTIN COUNTY

By LOUISE ROBERTSON BOOKER

Printed By

ENTERPRISE PUBLISHING COMPANY

Williamston, North Carolina

1971

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PREFACE

To the People of Martin County:
Martin County is the place for me;
Such friendship and hospitality you seldom see,
The people of that region are so kind—
And nicer people you'll never find.
The children greet you with a smile.
It makes life wonderful!
It makes life worth while!

Martin County is the haven I've found.
Williamston is my home town;
No place like it have I found;
There I hope I'll always live—
To share my life
And my friendship give.

All the stories and illustrations in this book were furnished by friends in various sections of Martin County. I wish to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to all who contributed by sharing their stories with me and providing the illustrations which have made it possible for me to preserve them for future generations of Martin County people.

LOUISE R. BOOKER.



Ghost of Sweeten Water Creek

Matthew Yarrell came to Martin County, North Carolina, in the 18th Century, and he and his descendants attained positions of prominence.

The traditional Yarrell residence was in Griffin's Township near an old bridge which spanned Sweeten Water Creek. During the Civil War one of the Yarrell girls came by a mysterious death. Her body was found in the creek. Some people believed she had been murdered, others thought that she drowned while swimming, and still others felt that she had committed suicide. The tenacious mystery magnified the importance of the event, and there grew from it several stories.

At times when people crossed the bridge they would see a beautiful woman sitting on a cypress knee a short distance away. In later years Old Aunt Francis Jones, who lived near the



bridge, reported hearing moans and groans in the forest near the bridge. Still others heard the eerie cries and the spook-wary residents of the community began to avoid the bridge at night.

Martin County residents were so fascinated with the stories that only recently a Williamston woman announced she would cross the bridge alone at night. Some local boys were ready beneath the bridge, and they cried "Help me! Help me! Help me!" For three nights afterwards the woman took a Williamston policeman to the bridge. Only silence. Yet it is to be remembered the phantom lady would make her presence known only at certain times.

Pat's Ghost

(From the Warren Biggs Collection)

Sitting around a cozy fire in an old barroom, several men were engaged in telling yarns. Old Man Pat Perkins pulled a straw from a broom standing by the fireplace, touched it to the fire and then to his clay pipe and began puffing away as he started on one of his tall stories. Pat came into town about three days every week and would treat the men hanging around the bar, so naturally they felt obligated to listen to his stories. This is the story told on one occasion:

It's like this—I used to be a terrible drinker, but I got broke of that habit. I came to town one Saturday morning and stayed all day. I took a drink now and then to keep up my spirits. Along about night I began to feel my licker pretty smartly. It was already dark, so I decided to go home. I got up and picked up my mail and about that time one of my friends came along and invited me to have a drink with him. I wasn't one to refuse.

"'What'll you have?' says he. 'A little more of the same,' says I. 'What did you have last?' he asked. 'Dad-gimmec, I think I'll have a little red licker,' I replied.

By this time my mind got kinda foggy and I don't know how many drinks I tuck. The first thing I knew I was in a strange place. I saw a whole lot of white looking objicks standing all around the place. I made towards one of them and I attempted to tetch one of them but there wasn't a thing there! My fingers just waved in the air. I shivered and shook all over! I then realized that I was in a burying ground, which was about two miles from my home. I looked all around me and I saw ghosts all over the place. Dey wuz gazing right through me. My head was spinning around so, I couldn't tell which way to go.

"All of a sudden I heard somethin' comin' down the road. I looked up and saw a white mule with a man ridin' on his back. 'Hold on a minute,' I said. This frightened the mule and he started kickin' up and down. The man fell off the mule's back, and I crawled to my feet and tried to get to the road. I said to myself, 'Dad-gimmec, I'll just keep in sight of this man.'

"Still holding my mail in my hands, I slipped to the road and tried to keep up with the man. The fellow just jumped and jumped and I also jumped and jumped, trying to keep up with him. I said to him, 'You needn't try to run away from me, as I'se gwine with you, you hear me?'

"We got along the road a piece and I could see better and sorta got my bearings. We came to a schoolhouse, which was about a mile from my home, and then I knew where I was. I looked up and saw an open well and I said to myself, 'A drink of water would taste mighty good.' I handed my mail to the man, and he ran down the road a-flying, flinging my mail in all directions. I dropped the handle of the pole holding the bucket, which flew up in the air with a loud rattle, and I lit out for home as fast as I could.

"I was so skeered, the red licker died a natural death, and when I got home I was cold sober. After I went to bed I couldn't sleep, as I wuz having nightmares all night long. Ghosts were flying all around the room.

"Next morning my old woman made me some black coffee—my head was about to split open. I told my wife, 'I believe I'm goin' to die.' 'I reckon not,' says she. I said 'I seed spirits last night.'

'Yes; your breath did smell like it,' she replied. 'No; I don't mean that kind of spirits—I mean the kind you find in a graveyard.' I reckon not,' says she. 'Oh, yes I did! Yes I did.' says I.

"Then I told her the exciting experience that I had had the night before. 'Pat, maybe the Lord is warning you,' she said.



“Anyway I decided to go to church meeting the following Sunday. We got there, and I noticed a group of people standing around. I went over to see what they were talking about. Lo and behold, they were telling the same story I had told my wife! They even said the ghost had thrown my mail all over the road. I then went over and told my wife that I felt bad and was going home. She said, ‘Why, Pat, let the Lord have a fair chance with you.’ I told her ‘Some other time will do jest as well. Don’t take on so; ’tain’t no use naggin’ me, I’s gwine home.’

“Then I put on my thinking cap, and said to her, ‘Those people over there said that you were fat and dey made a slightin’ remark about your dress.’ She got powerfully mad, she did, and said, ‘I’s gwine to leave this church and go jine the Baptists.’ ‘Next Sunday will do,’ said Pat. ‘I always knew there were hypocrites in the Methodist Church. I tell you I’m going to ask for my letter right away.’

“And dat’s de way I got out of that jam,” Pat told his friends. “My old woman was so mad she forgot to ask me how come my mail was all over the road.” The old man knocked the ashes from his pipe and chuckled.

He finished the story by saying, “I kept sober for about a year. However, I ain’t jined de Baptist church—and I ain’t jined the Methodist church, nuther.” Pat took another drink and headed home.

A Haunted House of the 1880’s

(From Notes of the Late Miss Sue Leggett of Williamston, Collected
While Engaged in a WPA Writer’s Project in 1939)

Upon the banks of the Roanoke River in eastern North Carolina there formerly stood a handsome two-story home of the 1800’s that evokes pleasant memories of a distant past. As I drove up a winding lane, the colonial-type house came into view in a setting of long-leaf pines and moss-covered oaks, beyond which lay the meadows and fields of corn and other crops.

Members of the family often spoke of their grandmother’s beaux coming to the house in knee pants and wigs, with gold and silver buckles on their shoes. They also spoke of the guests who arrived in ancient coaches drawn by thoroughbred horses.

Entering the lovely home, you came into a spacious hall extending the depth of the house, at the far end of which was an enormous fireplace which held six-foot logs. Over the mantel your eyes were arrested by a beautiful family portrait. Lovely mahogany furniture was all over the place.

The first object to catch the eye was a gorgeous hand-carved grandfather clock. Near the fireplace was a quaint and handsome corner chair that had been in the family for nearly 300 years, having been brought to this country from England. On one side were two parlors which could be thrown together to form a large ballroom, the beauty of which was enhanced by a rosewood piano, and there were several violins near by.

A winding staircase led to the second floor. The upstairs hallway had long closets filled with lovely satin and brocaded ballroom gowns. The bedrooms of the home were also to be found on the second floor.

On the third floor there was one room which was called “the dark room.” As it had no windows, they used this room for the casket when a member of the family passed on. This was also used as a chapel for funeral services when they were not held in the churches. What a wealth of interest this room held for the children.

The colored “mammies” were always telling them weird old ghost stories. Practically all the people of that time were very superstitious and believed in phantoms and ghosts.

In the attic was a “cuddy hole,” containing several old trunks covered with animal skins studded with brass nail heads. Some of them were filled with old shawls, fans, and empire dresses,

and other mementoes of the past. (Author's note.—I have one of these old trunks in my own home which was willed to my grandmother, Charlotte Ellison, by her aunt, Charlotte Andrews.)

Forebears of the family which owned the home were said to have entertained quite a lot and many balls were given. On one of these festive occasions, two distinguished gentlemen, one of them a noted musician, became involved in an argument on the second floor. Angry words were passed and they began fighting. In the struggle the musician was pushed down the winding stairway and his neck was broken. He died before a physician could be summoned.

From that fact the house acquired the reputation of being "haunted." It was said that queer noises could be heard with frequency soon after the tragic event. People believed the spirit of the dead musician had come back to the scene of the terrible event.



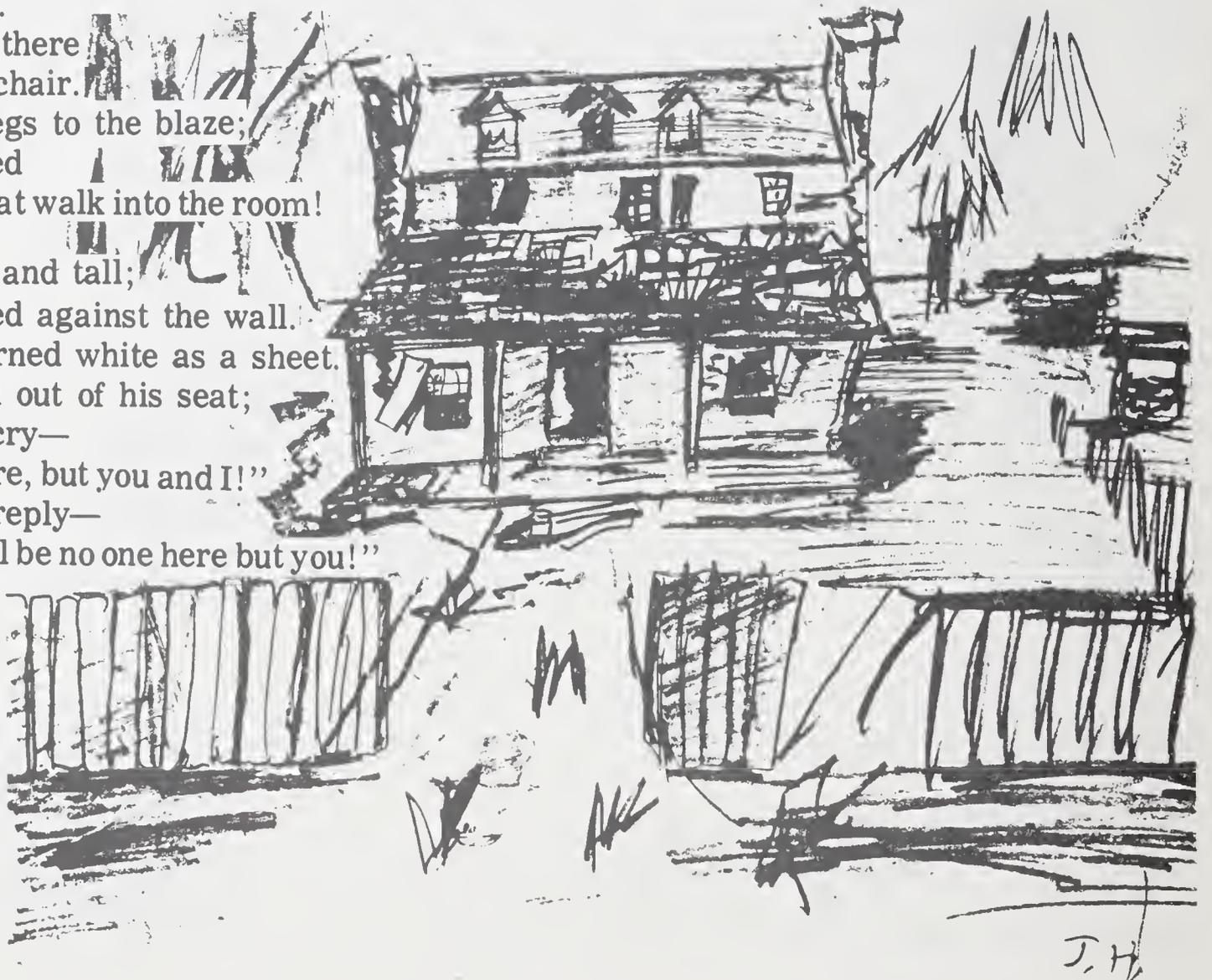
A Haunted House of 1862

(As Told by Mrs. Matilda Thrower)

During the Civil War a man owned
A beautiful ancestral home.
The family which owned the house became hard up.
They had to rent their home—in order to save it.
As soon as the first stranger set foot in the house
Trouble began.
No one would stay in the house.
It became a jinx.

Stories were heard of hauntings!
Strangers moved in.
Strangers moved out.
Finally, people began calling the home
“The haunted house.”
A brave young man who hooted at the idea of
“Ghosts and spirits” decided to rent the house.
He built a roaring fire in the living room grate.
It was getting late.
By the fire he sat there
In an old rocking chair.
He stretched his legs to the blaze;
And he was amazed
To see a big black cat walk into the room!

The cat was large and tall;
His body silhouetted against the wall.
The man's face turned white as a sheet.
He quickly jumped out of his seat;
He heard a voice cry—
“There is no one here, but you and I!”
This is the man's reply—
“And soon there will be no one here but you!”



The 18th Century "Haunted Hotel"

On the brink of what was once known as "The River Hill" at the east end of Main Street in Williamston there formerly stood an old hotel building. Owned and operated by the Edward Yellowly family in the early and middle 1800's, the hotel was frequented by captains and sailors from barges and ships while they were docked at the Roanoke River wharf just below "The River Hill."

Incidentally, one of the Edward Yellowly sons, Edward C. Yellowly, practiced law in Greenville and was one of the principals in what was said to be among the last duels fought in North Carolina. The duel took place at the Virginia-North Carolina state line along the Dismal Swamp Canal in October 1947, and Yellowly's opponent, C. F. Harris, another Greenville lawyer, was killed in the encounter.

Returning to the old hotel; it had a handsome mahogany stairway and a large balcony covered the entire front. The front veranda was elevated so that carriages could drive under it.

It's told that a misunderstanding developed between a honeymoon couple staying at the hotel, and the young bride leaped off the balcony to her death. It was for this reason, that the place developed a reputation for being "haunted."

The hotel was finally abandoned, but an ancient piano was left in it. Some of the neighborhood children in the old days would go into the abandoned structure and play on the piano. There were also rumors that musical sounds can be heard in the building when there was no one around. Some thought the music was played without human hands, and examination would show that there was undisturbed dust on the keys of the piano.

When this writer was a child, all children were afraid to go into this old hotel or even pass by the place when alone. It was widely known among the children as "The Haunted Hotel."



The Ghost of a Baby Girl

In a conversation with Mrs. Peggy Bailey at the bus station in Williamston, my first book, "Historical and Traditional Tar Heel Stories," was mentioned. I told her that ghost stories and legends are among my favorites, Mrs. Bailey said that her mother, Mrs. John Mobley, who lives on the Prison Camp Road, might give me some stories. I got in touch with Mrs. Mobley, and the following story is the result:

On one occasion Mr. and Mrs. Mobley visited his mother, Mrs. Millie Jane Bowen, who lived near Bear Grass. During the night they were awakened by a noise in the yard. Mr. Mobley went to the door and called out. "What's going on out there?" The noise stopped for a few minutes and they returned to bed. Mr. and Mrs. Mobley were not satisfied, so they went back into the yard and listened closely. This time they heard a baby crying. They followed the cries, which led them to her sister's home, a short distance away.



Upon reaching her sister's home, they called to her. She came to the door and Mr. and Mrs. Mobley told her about the baby's cries. She went into the yard with them and they all listened carefully, hearing the baby crying again. They searched all around the house and the area near by, while the cries grew more faint until they finally faded away.

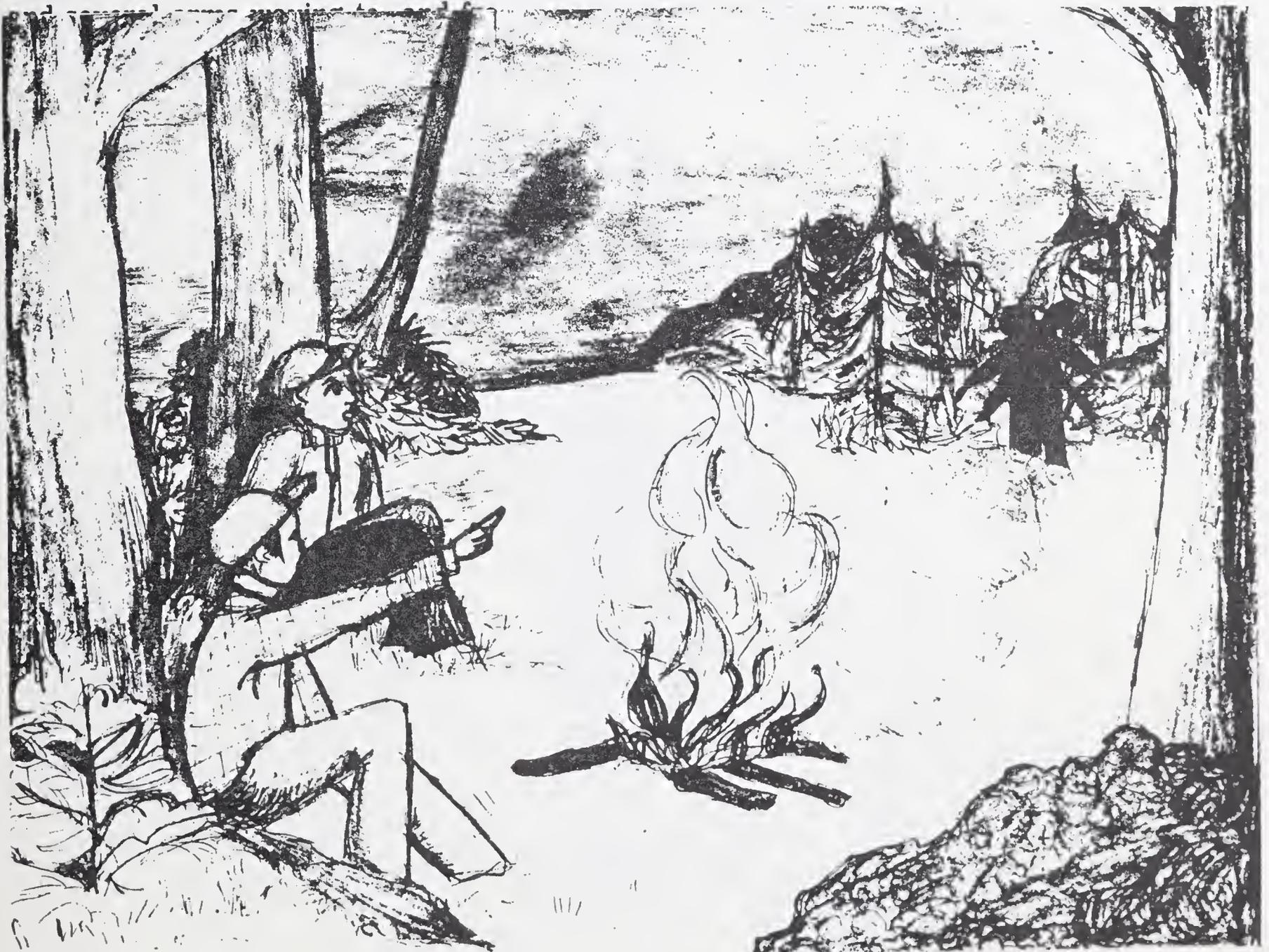
The mysterious phenomena was never solved. However, a short time after this Mrs. Mobley's brother died; and, prior to his death, his baby girl had died. The family often thought that this peculiar occurrence, in some strange way, was connected with the baby's cries and the father's death. They wondered if by some coincidence, the baby was crying for her father to meet her in heaven. After all, he died soon afterwards.

A Ghostly Figure

(From the Warren Biggs Collection)

"A friend and I went opossum hunting. It was getting late, so we decided to spend the night in the woods. We built a campfire and went to sleep.

"Just before day I got up to put another log on the fire, which was casting shadows all around. I returned to my bed under a tree, and the fire began burning brightly. I was ready for another nap when I suddenly heard a creaking noise. I looked up and saw a weird-looking object. In the shadows of the fire it looked about 10 or 12 feet tall, with two heads which nodded from side to side



“At first I thought I was having a nightmare. I pinched myself to see if I was really awake. I shook all over, but remained rooted to the spot. Even my hair stood up on my head. The figure remained still. I was never a believer in ghosts, but even if I have been a believer this apparition would have puzzled me. I had never seen anything like it in my life.

“I finally got my speech back and cried out, ‘Who’s there?’ My cries awakened my friend. He jumped and reached for his gun. By that time the object had disappeared into the woods. We followed it. I called ‘This way, Jim!’ He also saw the figure running and said, ‘There it goes,’ pointing to a narrow path in the woods.

“The figure continued to wave its arms and its head bobbed up and down, to and fro. A horse stood near a tree, and the figure jumped on it, startling the animal. He reared up on his hind legs and then threw part of the object over its head. Again Jim reached for his gun, but I cried out ‘Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!’ Something about the figure looked familiar. I looked again and recognized one of our friends who had decided to play a joke on us. Everyone had a good laugh and we often spoke of our early morning visitor, ‘The ghostly figure.’ ”

Spirit of a Confederate Veteran

(As Told by Mrs. Matilda Thrower—Illustration by Her Grandson,
J. R. Leggett, Jr.)

The strong interest in ghost or spirit lore during the Civil War, to some degree, continues today. Thus tradition has preserved this story.



A well-to-do farmer of Martin County, who lived between Williamston and Jamesville, decided to visit his aunt, who lived in the "Islands" of the Roanoke River. He was late arriving, so he decided to spend the night with his aunt.

During the night he was awakened by a strange noise, and upon looking up he saw a weird light in the room. Thinking it to be a reflection from a fire which had been built in the yard by servants, he went to a window to look. He only found total darkness outside. He saw no one, but the light continued to shine and then to move about the room. It finally settled on the wall opposite his bed.

Inside the light there appeared a man's head. His features were very sharp, and the figure was indelibly imprinted on the farmer's mind. He even noticed that the figure had blue eyes and light hair and was very handsome.

Suddenly, the light grew dimmer and dimmer. The face grew smaller and smaller until it completely faded away. Then the light vanished.

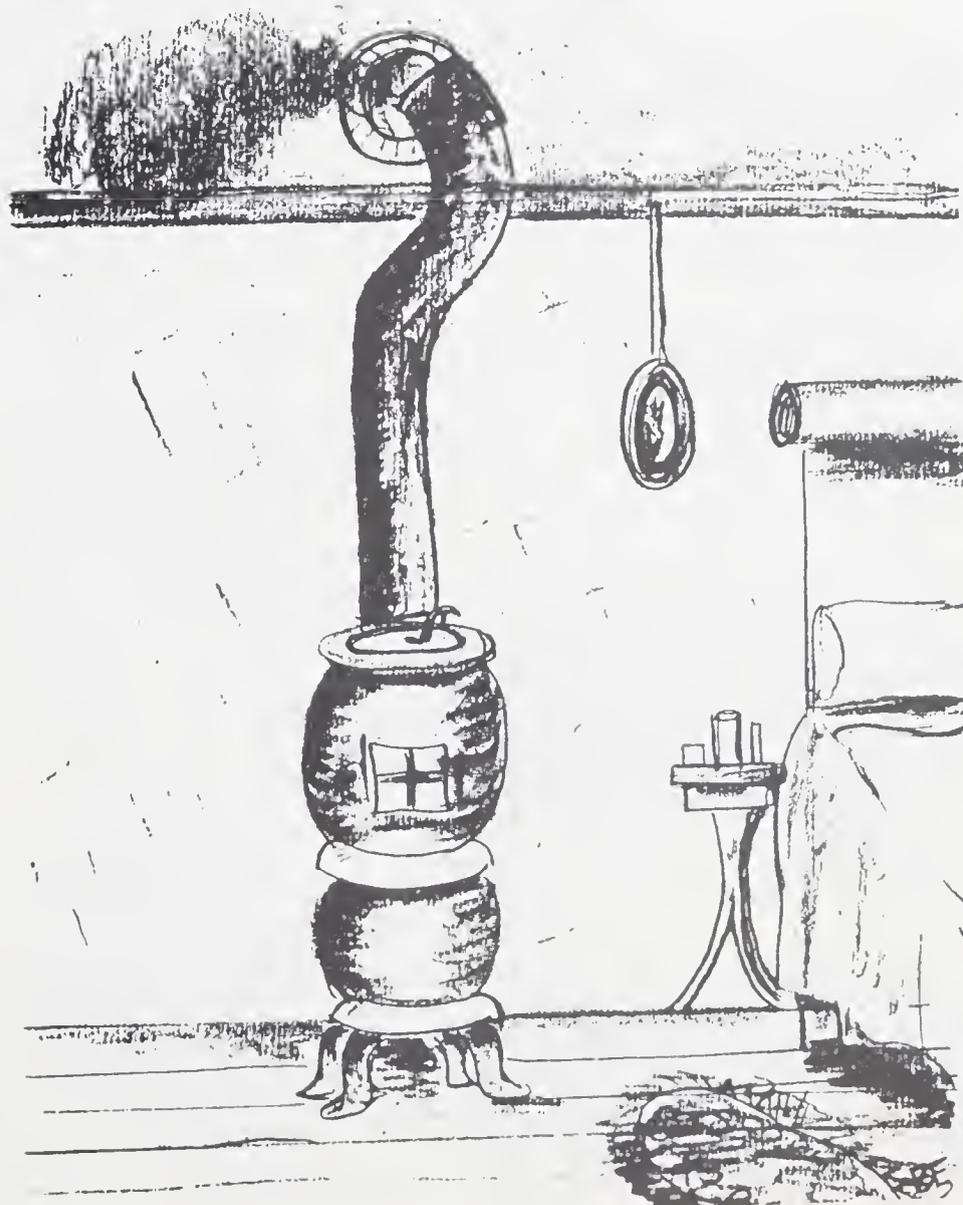
The farmer turned over and soon fell asleep. He was not disturbed any more during the night.

The next morning he told his aunt of his unusual experience and gave her a description of the man who appeared in the strange light.

She exclaimed, "Why that is a good description of my brother, who was killed in the Civil War!"

A Mysterious Tap on the Arm

In the summer of 1965, C.B. Bowen, at that time a farmer who lived on Prison Camp Road near Williamston, came to my home to deliver some fresh vegetables. On this particular morning, I had



been working on my collection of Martin County true historical stories and legends, and I asked Mr. Bowen if he knew of any old legends or stories in which I might be interested. He said, "Mrs Booker, I can tell you two stories that happened in my own life."

"It was like this," he began. "One night I was awakened by a tap on the shoulder. I looked all around, but did not see anyone in the house. I glanced at my wife and saw she was fast asleep. I then got up and went into my daughter's room to see if everything was all right with her. I also found her fast asleep.

"While in her room," he continued, "I happened to glance up at the ceiling and discovered that the stovepipe had become disconnected, and in a few minutes the house would have been on fire.

"Mrs. Booker, perhaps it was my guardian angel that was looking out for me and my family," he concluded.

A Death Message

This is the second of two stories related to me by C.B. Bowen, a farmer who formerly lived on the Prison Camp Road near Williamston:



"One night my wife and I had been visiting one of our neighbors," Mr. Bowen said. "We returned home about 8:30 and retired soon after. During the night we were awakened by a loud noise. The overhead light in our room flashed on and then went off. In a few minutes the light came back on and then went off again. This happened three times. I just couldn't understand this strange thing, so I got up and went to the wood stove, which I had banked for the night. I found nothing

anywhere which could have caused the noise and the flashing of the light. We finally fell asleep thinking about this mysterious happening.

"The next morning, my wife and I discussed the queer noise and flashing of the light. We had a strange feeling that something was wrong and that we would soon hear about it in some way.

"Now believe it or not," Mr. Bowen said, "later in the day someone came to our house and delivered a death message. The message stated that my wife's father had died at the very same hour that we were awakened the night before by the strange noise and the flashing of the light."

Since Mr. Bowen told me these two stories, he has passed on. Perhaps his guardian angel is still looking out for him, as Mr. Bowen was known as a very good man.

"Uncanny Noises"

This story concerns some strange noises heard during the night at an old plantation home along the banks of Roanoke River near Williamston, as told to me by a daughter of the family concerned.

The plantation owner and his wife retired and were discussing events of the day when, suddenly, a peculiar noise was heard. It sounded as if a marble was rolling on the floor of the bedroom. It stopped directly at the foot of the bed. Both the farmer and his wife got up to investigate. Thinking that possibly the wind had blown a pecan through the window, they went over but found the window closed. They then searched the floor, but could not find anything that might have caused the noise, so they returned to bed and went to sleep.



The next morning the wife, who was not satisfied with the night search, decided to scrub the floor of the room to see if she could find anything that might have caused the peculiar noise. She scrubbed the entire room, going into all the corners and under the bed, but found nothing.

She was unable to get the strange occurrence off her mind and had a feeling that something dreadful was going to happen to one of her loved ones. At that time, her son was overseas and, naturally, she was afraid something might have happened to him.

However, the son soon returned home safely and the mother stopped worrying for a time. However, she still had a depressed feeling and could not forget the strange noise.

Believe it or not, something did happen! Three weeks after the noise was heard the husband died. No one would ever convince the widow that there was not some connection with the noise and the death of her husband.

The Ghost of a Murdered Man

(As Told by Mrs. Matilda Thrower, 101 Years Old)

A man who lived near "The Hanging Tree" on the Jamesville Road some miles southeast of Williamston killed a Jamesville man during the Civil War, and the spirit of the murdered man was said to make periodic visits to the home of the murderer. Peculiar noises were heard, and a number of people reported seeing strange lights near the home.



One night the family heard an unusual noise on the front porch. The head of the family went outside but could not find anything out of the way. Soon after the family members settled in their

places in the living room they again heard the noise, just as if the front door were opening. This was followed by a squeaking noise similar to that made by a dry-hinged door swinging to and fro.

Suddenly, a bright light illuminated the living room, causing a tallow-like cast on the faces of all the family members. Mother, father, and the children froze. In a half daze they watched the light move around the room and stop in front of the mantel. Then a clammy, chilly feeling—like the chill of death—enveloped the room, and suddenly within the light there appeared the face of the murdered man. After a brief pause, during which the hearts of the viewers were pierced in terror, the apparition vanished out of a window of the room.

A short time after this mysterious incidence, the head of the house died, and the “spirit” of the murdered man was never reported seen again.

Woodlawn Cemetery Apparition

About 5 o'clock in the morning on December 17, 1970, Plum Williams, a Martin County deputy sheriff, drove along Rhodes Street in Williamston. Reaching Woodlawn, the municipal cemetery, he glanced inside and was amazed to see what appeared to be a young girl, dressed in a flowing white robe, carrying a silver shovel and silver platter. He backed his car up to see if he could render any assistance. He was really shook up when he discovered the girl had disappeared into thin air.



It was dark and the cemetery was very spooky looking. You can imagine how the man felt. He recalled the weird stories he had ever heard about cemeteries and ghosts. It was hard to convince him he had not seen one of these ghosts.

Quickly he drove his car on into town, feeling mighty, mighty queer.

Ghosts of the Murdered Slaves

According to Henry B. Allen, of Williamston, RFD 3, before and during the Civil War a regular pirate lived right here in Martin County. He lived in a cave near Beaver Dam Swamp and there was a cool spring near by in that part of the county.

“Spottie” was the name of this pirate or thief. It seems he would take his Negro slaves, go to Plymouth, Jamesville and other towns in the section where they would steal horses and sell them in Tarboro and other places to the west.

After the horses were stolen they would be hidden in the cave until Spottie could get rid of them. After getting the slaves to do the stealing it was reported that he would take them into the cave and cut off their heads to keep his deeds a secret from his neighbors.



For years after Spottie's death, there were reports of weird lights hovering over “Spottie's Cave,” and people in the neighborhood thought the lights were the ghosts of the murdered slaves.

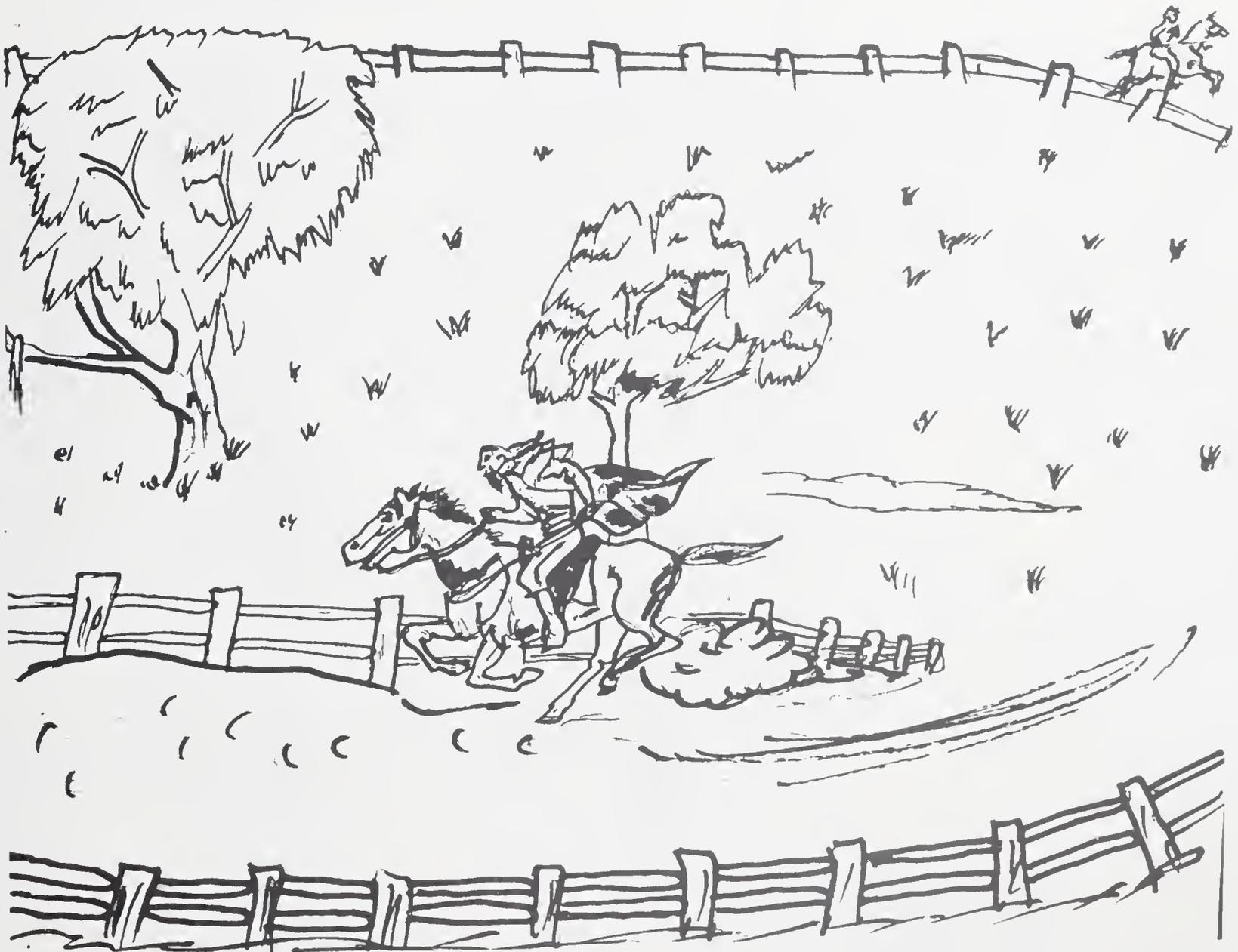
The Phantom Race Track Rider

I've heard that there was once an old race track on the Roanoke River near Herring Gut and Conoho Creek.

Horse racing and cockfighting were favorite sports of many men in the olden days, and it seems that this race track was a favorite location for them. Gambling was prevalent, and it seems that some of this pleasure may have rubbed off on the younger generation of today.

The young men of former days were accustomed to run their mounts on Sundays, and there was right much criticism of the sport for that reason.

One report has it that upon Sabbath Day, with one of the races in full swing, a mysterious rider appeared on the scene. Dressed in a flowing black robe, he was mounted on a coal-black horse with tremendous speed. He appeared from nowhere and entered the race, passing all the other contestants with ease. Then, as quickly as he appeared, he disappeared, going in the direction of Herring Gut. The crowd was both amazed and terrified. Those close enough to see the face of the rider declared that he looked like the Devil! Many of the people believed that it was the Devil, who



had appeared on the scene to warn the crowd that they were breaking the Sabbath. They possessed guilty consciences, I suppose.

Other people not so superstitious thought it was only a young man playing a prank on those engaged in the race.

The Phantom Deer and White Lamb

This is a true story as related by Claybon Summerlin, of Williamston. It concerns his two grandfathers, Andrew Summerlin and Andrew Hoard, and was told to him by the elder Mr. Summerlin.

Many years ago, the story goes, the two grandfathers went on a raccoon hunt along the banks of Roanoke River near Conoho Creek. It was late when they gave up the hunt, so they decided to camp under the stars. For a while they sat around the campfire spinning a few tall tales.

One of them brought up the subject of the so-called "Phantom Deer," about which many stories had been told in Martin County. Some hunters had claimed that they had seen this phantom, which could outrun any animal in the woods. They said it was faster than the wind and that it appeared nothing could harm it since it was immortal. The deer was said to be able to appear suddenly and just as quickly to make itself invisible. In fact, the deer was said to be truly a "spook." During the story telling, it came out that neither of the men had ever seen the deer, although both had heard about it.

The hunters grew weary and turned in for the night. Mr. Summerlin allowed his 'coon dog to



snuggle up to his back to help keep warm, as the night was chilly. Not too long after they went to sleep the two men were awakened by the dog snarling and barking. Both jumped up to investigate the dog's uneasiness and were startled to see a white object appear at the edge of the forest.

Naturally, both thought of the "Phantom Deer" and thought they were seeing a ghost. The white object started moving toward them and the two men started shaking in their boots.

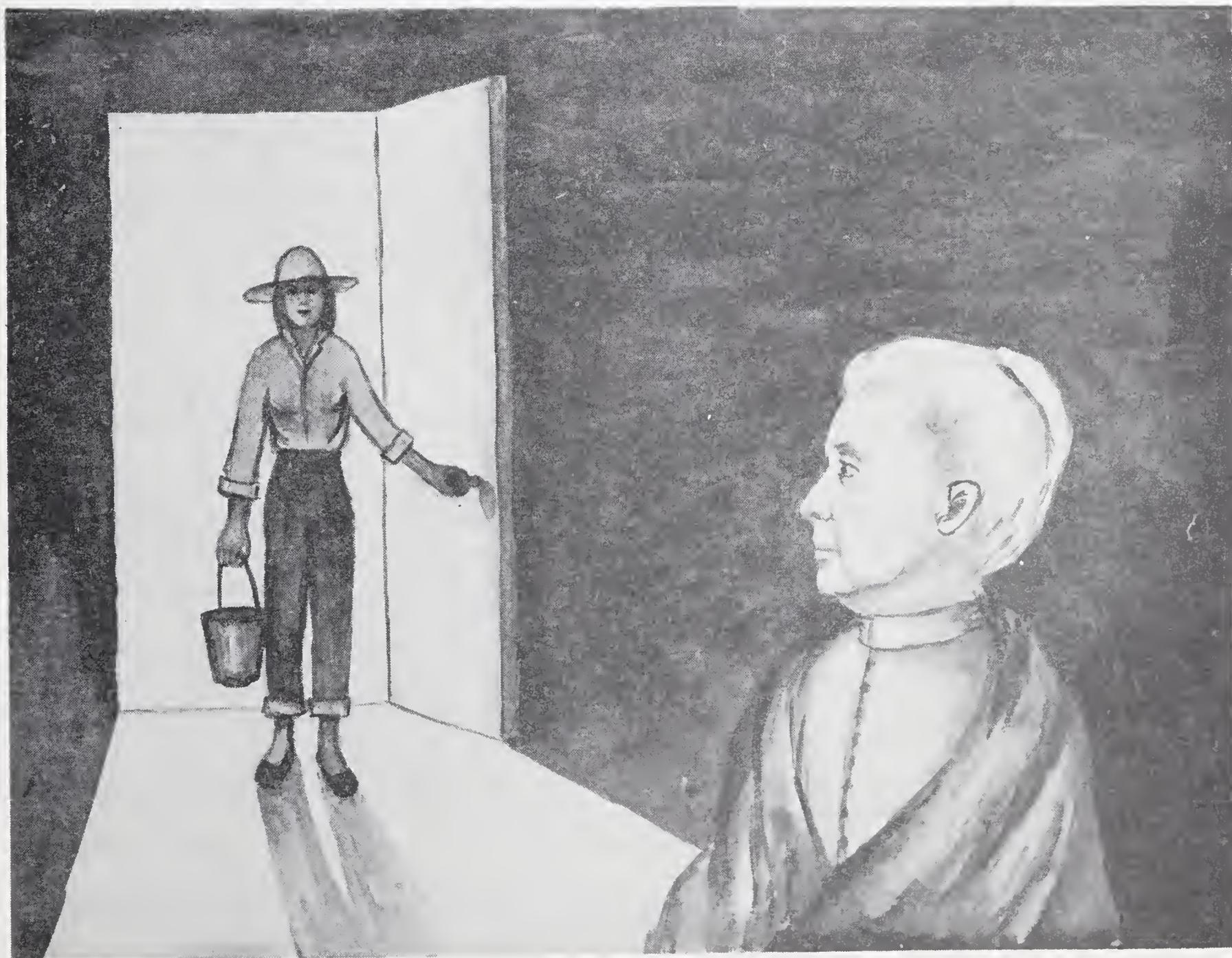
As their eyes became adjusted to the darkness and the apparition came closer, they discovered it was only a white lamb that had strayed away from Bill Leggett's farm at Conoho, not too far from where they were camped.

And, quite naturally, the two hunters felt rather "sheepish" for letting their imagination run away with them.

Daughter Sees Her Mother's Spirit

This story is more than a hundred years old and was told to me by Mrs. Ferrell, mother of Mrs. Evelyn Daniels, of Williamston. It concerns the mother and grandmother of Mrs. Ferrell.

On the day of this occurrence, Mrs. Ferrell's mother, then a very young woman, waited until late in the afternoon to gather vegetables from her garden, since the weather was very hot. While in the garden, which was surrounded by trees, she happened to glance toward her home and saw the figure of a woman who looked very much like her mother. The figure disappeared, going in the direction of her home. She paid little attention to the occurrence, as she thought her mother had simply gone into the yard for some purpose.



After gathering the vegetables, the young woman returned to the house and went immediately to see if her mother had been looking for her. She entered the living room, where her mother was sitting in a corner knitting.

“Mother, have you been in the yard today?” the daughter asked. “No; I have been right here, knitting on this sock,” the mother replied.

The daughter then told her that she had seen someone who looked exactly like her in the yard. “You must have seen my spirit. It was telling you that I will soon go away.”

Sure enough, within a few days after this occurrence, the mother passed on just as she had predicted she would.

Mrs. Ferrell’s mother always thought that the figure she saw from the garden near home was “The spirit of her mother.”

Ghost of the Legless Lamb



Henry B. Allen, who lives on the “Wildcat Road,” near Williamston, tells the following story as it was passed on to him by his paternal grandfather:

During the Civil War, a man who lived on the McGaskey Road about two miles from Williamston committed a horrible crime. He flogged a colored man unmercifully, beating him almost to death. Mr. Allen’s grandfather and a friend saw the slave on the road and dragged him into a cabin near by. They tried to revive him, but were unable to do so; and both men later spoke of the terrible, gasping noises the man made in the last moments before he finally died.

Several years afterwards, Mr. Allen’s grandfather and his friend again drove by the scene of the flogging. They saw a strange object in the woods near by and stopped to investigate. They went over the wooded area and looked all around the cabin where the man had died. In the woods back of the house they found a legless lamb. They decided to kill the animal to put it out of its misery. Mr. Allen pulled a knife out of his pocket, but at the click of the knife’s blade, lo and behold, the lamb completely vanished into thin air!

Naturally, the men were badly shook up. They wondered if the legless lamb was the “ghost” of the murdered colored man.

After this occurrence, all kinds of queer things were reported seen and heard near the cabin. And even to this day, weird lights are reported being seen in that neck of the woods.

The

Hanging

Tree



The Ghost of Martin County's Hanging Tree

There is a mystic atmosphere in the vicinity of Martin County's famous—or infamous—"Hanging Tree," which was located some half dozen or so miles southeast of Williamston and not too far from the Roanoke River. People of the region claim that "the spirits" of some of the hanging tree's reputed many victims still lingers on.

History states that about 150 people were murdered during the Indian massacre along the banks of the Roanoke during the first three days of the Tuscarora war in the Colonial period. There are many other gruesome stories told about this section of what is today Martin County.

This concerns the outline of one old story which was found among some old papers in the collection of the late Warren Biggs, well-known historian of Williamston. It follows:

"Many mysterious tales have been told of various places where hangings and lynchings have taken place. This is just another old legend where a horse thief had been hung by a mob. Soon after the lynching, various rumors began floating around that a 'ghost' could be seen suspended from the identical tree upon which the horse thief had been hung. Several parties reported that while riding along the road near the hanging tree, they had seen hanging in mid-air a ghost-like figure which emitted a pale silvery light. At first, it is stated, the whole tale was laughed at and people hooted at the very idea that a supernatural figure had been seen.

"Finally, three citizens of that community decided to satisfy their curiosity in regard to this rumor. Upon arriving at the spot where the 'ghost' had been seen, they looked toward the tree; and, sure enough, there it was—between heaven and earth there was a white figure, giving forth a wierd light.

"The matter was the talk of the neighborhood. It created so much excitement that a crowd of some 25 people was made up that night to investigate this mysterious phenomenon. If it was a joke, they would expose it. The people had been frightened enough by what they believed to be a 'ghost.'

"When the party came within a hundred yards of the spot, they stopped. Five of them went forward to see if the 'ghost' had made its appearance. They rode forward and, seeing nothing, they called to the crowd to come up. They stopped by the tree for a while, but no ghost appeared. Members of the crowd were sitting there on their horses when suddenly someone happened to look toward the hanging tree and there, within 20 steps, hung the ghostly object!

"A feeling of horror came over the entire crowd. One man described the sensation they felt: 'The blood ran cold in my veins! A terrifying feeling came over me that I will never forget until my dying day.'

"All of the crowd froze in their tracks.

"After viewing the unearthly object for a few minutes, the crowd rode off for consultation; but, of all the brave men in the gathering, not one would approach the ghostly figure. They were all satisfied that it was not of this earth.

"No one present was anxious to go back to the hanging tree for further investigation. This ghostly experience still remains a mystery.

"True or false, the people in that neighborhood were frightened nearly to death, and from that time on there were very few visitors to the hanging tree."



Martin County's "Lynching Tree"

During the Civil War, it became quite commonplace in some sections of the rural South to lynch persons accused of serious crimes. The people of Martin County were among those who sometimes took the law into their own hands and dealt with criminals in summary fashion without waiting to give them a fair trial.

Between Williamston and Jamesville there once stood a very large oak tree with long large branches extending almost horizontally from the trunk which made it an ideal "hanging tree." The roots and a portion of the trunk of this tree are said to be still there.

This tree was used for a number of lynchings. It served as a gallows and an ordinary rope would be used for the hangings. As a matter of fact, the tree gained some notoriety among people of the section as the "lynching tree."

Following some of the lynchings, there were reports of peculiar lights being seen in the woods near the tree. Rumors grew and were spread around that the lights were the "spirits" of the people who had been hung there. There were also reports of cries and sobs being heard, along with the ringing of bells.

The imagination of those reporting the noises apparently ran away with them, as they said there were balls of fire lighting up the wooded area and that the temperature would be several degrees higher in the vicinity of the old tree.

Bright Lights Near "The Hanging Tree"



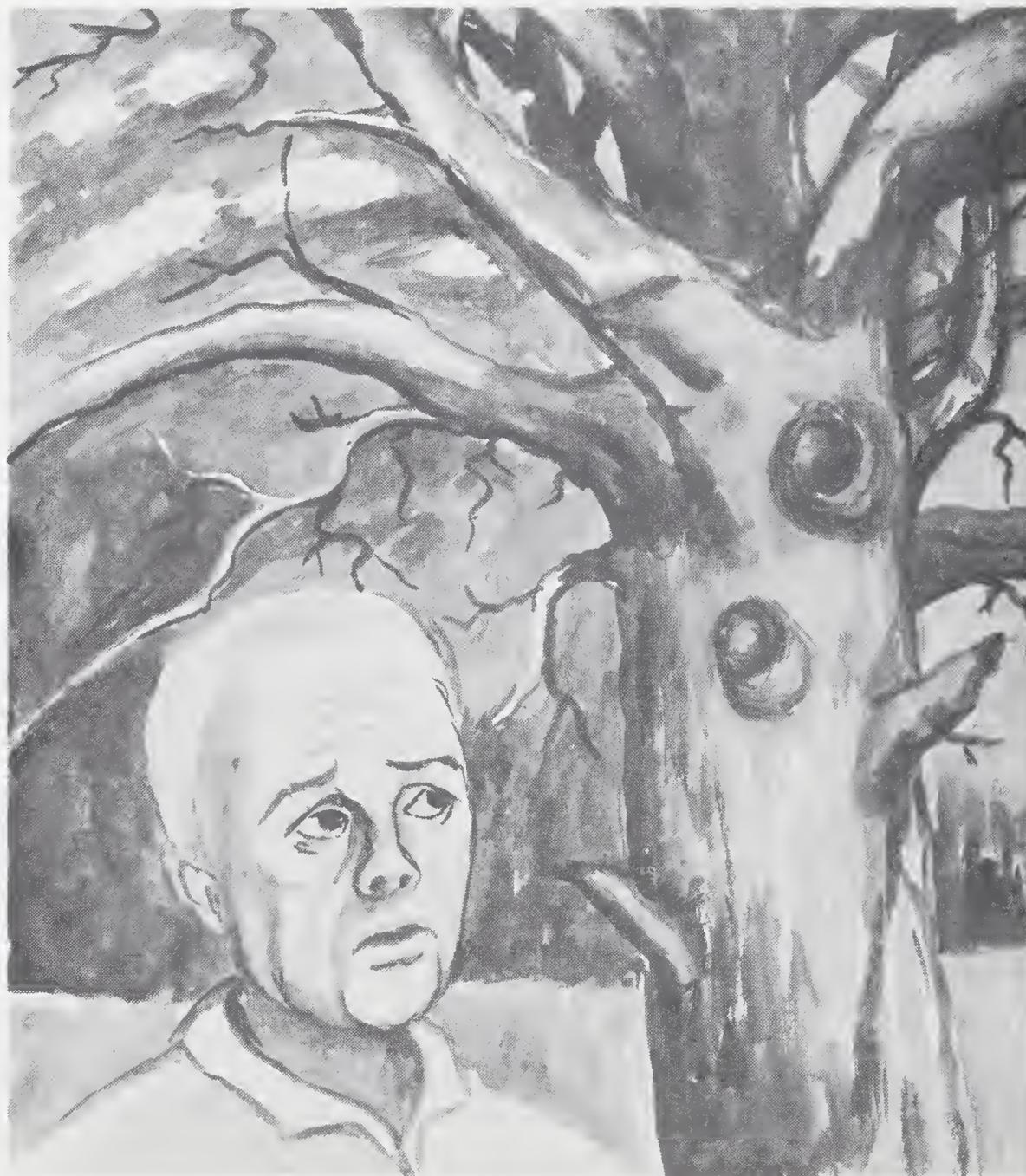
Arthur Williams, a native and life-long resident of Martin County, tells an unusual story about a possum hunt in the vicinity of the old so-called "Hanging Tree," located between Williamston and Jamesville.

He had heard many of the stories about the old tree and the appearance of strange lights near by. On this hunt he happened to look toward the tree and was astounded to see what he described as "about a thousand lights" in the heavens surrounding it. He was so frightened he could not move for a few seconds. In fact, he could be described as "treed" instead of the possums he was hunting. "Those stories must be true," he said to himself, "for I have seen the lights with my own eyes." He gazed at the lights until they seemed to disappear behind a certain tree, which he decided to mark with his hunting axe. However, he did not tarry long in those woods, in fact, he almost ran home.

He could not get the mysterious event off his mind. He thought about it quite a bit that night, and the next morning he decided to return to the tree he had marked and see if he could find any evidence of the strange lights. He located the tree, which had a hollow in it, and proceeded to examine it very closely. Lo and behold, he found in the hollow a large mass of "lightning bugs."

This solved the mystery of the wierd lights about the old "Hanging Tree"; at least, so far as he was concerned, Mr. Williams said.

Weird Lights Near "The Hanging Tree"



Arthur Williams is also the source of another story about the weird lights reported by many people as having been near the old "Hanging Tree" between Williamston and Jamesville.

It is said that numerous people took pot shots at these lights, but no one was ever able to hit anything connected with them. And there were some very good shots in that neighborhood, too.

On one occasion two brothers saw the lights and decided to try their luck. After firing several shots toward the lights and other objects dimly seen, they decided to go home for some rope and try to lasso them. They secured the rope and returned to find the lights still glowing. They tried out their lariat, with no success whatever, and finally had to give up. They reported that the lights vanished shortly afterwards, going in the direction of the Roanoke River, which is near by.

On another occasion, a group of reputable people said they were driving along the road near the "Hanging Tree" when the lights suddenly appeared! This time the lights came down near the roadside, then went under the wagon in which the people were riding, and hovered there for a few minutes before disappearing.

Could these lights have been the "spirits" of the early settlers who were murdered along the banks of the Roanoke River by Indians during the war with the Tuscaroras? Who knows?



The Phantom Hijacker

There is no section of our country that can claim more mystifying and intriguing old legends and ghost stories than eastern North Carolina. Before the Civil War, many of the children were brought up by the old colored slave "mammies," who were very superstitious, and some of their superstitions naturally rubbed off on the youngsters in their care.

Here is an old story gathered by Miss Sue Leggett, of Williamston, while engaged in a writer's project for the WPA in 1939. True or false, I'm passing it on to you just as told to Miss Leggett:

"One Sabbath Day I was taking a load of tobacco to Williamston. I lived between Jamesville and Williamston and had to pass the 'Haunted Woods,' which is located in the area of the old 'Hanging Tree.'



"I heard a peculiar noise near the 'Hanging Tree' and glanced up. Lo and behold! Out of the woods there appeared a man who went for my horse's head. Naturally, I thought he was going to hijack my tobacco. Then, just as swiftly as the man appeared, he vanished into the woods near me. The apparition gradually became less and less visible until soon there was nothing left but a silver blur.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. My dog continued to bark as if a human was still on the road; and, in fact, my horse reared up as if someone was blocking the road. I almost fell off my wagon, and I barely managed to control the horse and keep it from running away with me. I was so frightened and unnerved that I shook all over, and it took a while for me to get myself under control.

"As I drove toward Williamston, my conscience began to prick me for hauling my tobacco on Sunday. And from that day on I have never hauled a load of tobacco on the Sabbath Day."



Witchcraft in the 18th Century

(From "Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross")

As the Eighteenth Century opened, frightening and idle tales of fairies and witches were to be heard in almost every home. Children were provided with a large collection of these old stories, given to them mostly by their colored "mammies."

At this time England had to offer to the New World and the early settlers all the imaginable kinds of spirits, ghosts, demons, fairies, brownies, black dogs, cats, witches, nightbats and the like.

The frontier life sometimes turned women into hags, supplying the devil with an abundance of candidates for witches. These women usually wore their hair long, part of which they brought forward and the rest dangled down their backs.

There were several of these witches reported to be in Martin County. They usually held their meetings in wooded areas. These old hags amused themselves, it was said, by taking men out of their beds at night and riding them up and down the county. They would select those they disliked or those who had offended them in some way. They were merciless riders, going straight forward through underbrush, streams and woods.

It was said that many a fellow was found in his bed in the morning more dead than alive, all covered with dust and mire. The witches would permit them to rest a day or two and they would take the men out again. They continued this kind of treatment until the poor fellows would become weary of life and finally give up and die.



Spell Broken by Old Iron Stake

The southern concept of ghosts and spirits was generally of English origin. African slaves believed in both animate and inanimate beings possessed of "spirits" and both the slaves and the colonists believed in witches. Early settlers in the American colonies almost without exception believed in human "ghosts" and that witches used their magic powers in various ways. Most of the slaves used bags of various witches' concoctions; and, lacking material means, they used witchcraft as a means of revenge. Sometimes even the master of the slaves turned to the witches for advice in seeking revenge on his enemies. Most people were afraid of the witches and did not relish the idea of being "conjured" by them.



This is supposed to be a true local story. It happened in the vicinity of Bear Grass. In olden times a so-called witch in this community would plant her garden on any land that suited her fancy. At this particular time she elected one of her neighbors as a victim. It happened that the neighbor became angry when she chose his land for her garden. He paid her a visit and told her to get off his farm.

This made the witch angry and she told the farmer to mind his own business and leave her alone. "If you don't go away and leave me alone," she said, "I will haunt you to your dying day."

Soon after this occurrence, the old witch died. She kept her promise to the farmer. Soon after her death, the farmer began to have all kinds of bad luck. It is reported that he would see his hoes, shovels, pitchforks, and other implements and tools go flying off across his farm and other queer things began to happen to him.

Days went by, with the farmer becoming so nervous and upset that he could stand the witch's hauntings no longer. He thought up a plan to break the witch's spell. He went to the cemetery where the witch had been buried, taking an old iron stake with him. locating the grave, he drove the stake into it so that the point went directly into the heart of the witch. This must have broken the spell, as he was never again bothered by the witch's "conjurations."

Witches of Martin County



James Ross, in the biography of his father, "Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross," published in the last century, made mention of his father's life among fishermen of Roanoke River in Williamston, which brought the elder Ross into contact with a variety of characters of that class.

Even late in life Elder Ross repeated many of the amusing and strange anecdotes he had heard from these fishermen. Also people came down to the river from a distance in vehicles of many types to get fish for their families, some of them very superstitious, and would tell marvelous tales about witches, ghosts and apparitions. Elder Ross, as a boy, listened with great interest, especially to those from the so-called "pineywoods," reported in those days to be abounding in witches.

One old witch believed she lived close to the devil, and if anyone came near her house they were greeted with a handful of pebbles. Time passed and the witch became so ill she wasn't expected to live. Neighbors went to visit and were told, "Don't be afraid. It's reported that the devil has come to git me." Following her death, it was said she was buried during a terrible thunderstorm; and among her belongings were found numerous snake skins, charms, herbs, oddly shaped roots and like objects.

In order to become a witch, the story goes, the candidate would take a black cat at midnight to the fork of two small creeks flowing eastward; boil the cat until the flesh dropped from the bones and then throw the skeleton in the creek. All the bones except one would float downstream, while the devil would get the one bone which floated upstream. The candidate would wait until daylight and shout, "Devil, my soul is yours."

Many people believed that the devil not only worked on the land, but also on and in the waters of streams near the Roanoke River. It seems that "Devil's Gut," a waterway mentioned in another of these stories, was supposed to be one of the devil's hideouts.

Poisonous Reptiles, Roots and Herbs

James Ross, in a biography of his father, "Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross of Williamston, N.C.," published in the 1870's, presents a graphic picture of the fear held in eastern North Carolina for the Guinea negroes. In 1807 the author, at the age of six, had removed from Williamston to Tennessee, but his familiarity with his subject suggests the quaint darkies from Africa subsequently became a topic for family discussions. Ross writes:

"The children of Williamston were afraid of Guinea Negroes. The slave trade was lawful at that time and a great number of Negroes were brought from Africa and sold to the Carolina planters. As I remember them, they were generally large of stature and perfectly black. When first brought over, they couldn't speak a word that anyone could understand except themselves. The rich men in and near Williamston owned great numbers of them.

"The other Negroes, who had been longer in the country and considered themselves highly civilized, looked down on these newcomers, not only with scorn and contempt, but with intense hatred and fear, which they instilled into the little white children also. They believed them closely leagued with the Evil One; and that, when they chose to do so, they could prepare a mixture of noxious herbs, roots and poisonous reptiles, and lay it under the door-sill of another Negro against whom they might have a grudge, which would, sooner or later, produce death unless counteracted by some more powerful conjurer.

"Many poor Negroes in good health, imagining they had been thus foully dealt by or tricked, would pine away and die notwithstanding all that could be done for them.

"Sometimes they would make a poison of a different kind and conceal it in the path of the Negro they hated. If the Negro happened to step over it, he would soon, as they thought, begin to feel its effects in every part of his body and gradually grow worse as the poisonous articles decayed more and more, and just as decomposition of the poison took place, death would ensue. This belief

brought out another set of imposters, who professed to be able to relieve those affected, by counteracting remedies, which often produced death.



“The Devil’s Pocosin”

“The Devil’s Pocosin—a thick, dark, hazardous swampy area—was the reputed haven of “evil spirits” as well as the wildcat, the panther and the bear during the colonial and ante-bellum days.

Yet those wet lands produced such an abundance of huckleberries that groups of pickers would take a chance in its thickets with their wildcats, panthers and the deadly cottonmouth moccasin.

People generally believed that the pocosin provided haunts for the devil and the ‘witches’ from nearby communities. Here they were said to gather and plot wicked schemes against the good people of the section.

Jack-o-lanterns or will-o-the-wisps were often seen around the borders of the pocosin, enticing men into the thickets, where they often became lost and wandered around until daybreak. No hunter would dare to enter the pocosin alone.

The January, 1971, issue of "North Carolina Folklore" states that one of these pocosins, dense and impenetrable, lay deep in the west dismal swamps, located partly in Martin County between Washington and Jamesville, near Dymond City, and only a few miles from Jamesville.



Voodooism

Voodooism is a combination of sorcery and religion which originated in Africa and was brought to the United States during the days of slavery. Some of its practices created widespread fear among the colored slaves and some of the white people, who would become terror-stricken at the mere mention of the word.

Some of this fear is described by R. W. Taylor in an article which appeared in "The North Carolina Historical Review" in January, 1928, as follows:

"A Negro wench, tried in a slave court for poisoning her master, was sent to the gallows. The testimony led to the trial of a number of other slaves, charged with plotting to poison the whites.

"During the 15-day hearings, a number of snake and scorpion heads were found in possession of the slaves and exhibited. The sight of this apothecary of the black arts 'did great violence to the imagination of the credulous and affected them with imaginary pains.' "



Hudson Tavern—Childhood Home of a Martin County Witch

The brief sketch which follows, collected while she was engaged in a WPA writer's project back in 1939 was found among the papers of the late Miss Sue Leggett of Williamston:

Back in the Revolutionary period, there was an old tavern in Williamston which is believed to

have been one of the first taverns in Martin County. It was known as Hudson's Tavern, since it was owned and operated by a man by the name of Hudson.

Little is known about the tavern, except that its owner had a daughter named Marina, who was



the belle of this important Roanoke River port at that time. The daughter, Marina Hudson, it has been told, possessed great beauty and numbered her admirers by the dozens. Although she had numerous suitors, strange as it may seem, Marina never married.

Time went on, and the years took their toll. Marina became careless about her appearance and in her old age, she was believed to have become a witch.

Miss Belle Whitaker, an aged native of the county who was still living in the early part of the 20th century, recalls as a young girl seeing the alleged witch, stating "I can see the old woman quite vividly along the streets of Williamston, smoking her pipe and begging from house to house."

A Witch and a Deer

Prior to the Civil War, people generally were very superstitious and devoted a lot of attention to ghost stories, witches and phantoms. Until recent years, most of the residents of eastern North Carolina were descendants of settlers who came to this country from England. They brought with them their superstitions and legends, which were handed down from generation to generation. Even today, here is still right much interest in ghosts, witchcraft, and other early folklore.

Following is an unusual story concerning an old witch and a hunter, substantially as recorded in "The Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross," a biography published in the 1870's:

"A hunter, it was reported, took his gun one morning and went into the woods to hunt deer. He did not go very far before he saw a fine deer standing near him. He raised the gun to his shoulder, took deliberate aim and fired. The deer seemed to be more amused than otherwise and ran several steps and stopped. The hunter reloaded his gun and fired again, with no better success.



"He then remembered that he had a small piece of silver in his pocket. In those days people generally believed that phantoms could be killed only with a silver bullet. The hunter again reloaded his rifle, using the silver as a bullet, and fired. This time, he hit the deer in its side. The deer fell, then sprang to its feet and ran off into the woods.

“Going to the spot where the deer disappeared, the hunter saw blood on the ground where he’d shot the deer. He followed the trail of blood, he was led to a house where it was reported that a witch lived.

“The hunter inquired about the health of the family and was told by a young boy that his great-grandmother had just died. He asked the boy about her ailment, and was told that the great-grandmother had died as the result of a pain in the side.”

Iron Nail Ends Conjunction

This is the story of a belief in conjunction which continues right up to these modern days. An aged woman recently went to a Williamston hardware store and asked the sales clerk for something made of iron. Asked what she wanted, she said, I want to buy something to get rid of the funny noise I have been hearing under my house recently. I believe someone has conjured me.”

The clerk gave her a nail. She walked out of the store satisfied in her own mind that the nail would get rid of the peculiar sound under her house and would rid her of the “conjunction” which she believed had been cast on her.



The Witches of Williamston in 1800

Witches were especially active in antebellum North Carolina, and James Ross leaves an interesting account of his impressions obtained of them while a child in Williamston soon after 1800; published in a biography of his father, elder Reuben Ross, who removed to Tennessee in 1807:

“I used to stay in one of the stores in Williamston and watch the customers coming and going. I would often take my seat at the door of the store to watch for witches as they passed along the streets of town. We village urchins could tell a witch as far as we could see one, as we thought. When they came to town they always appeared in the form of a little old woman, with bright scarlet cloaks and hoods drawn over the head so as to conceal their faces. If they were very much bent with age, and shaking a little with palsy, so much the better. They generally supported themselves



each with a long staff, which they held in their hand, a little above the middle. Their skin, when it could be seen was like old parchment; their eyes black and restless. They came to town to buy a little tea, chocolate, tobacco or snuff: but this was always a pretext, as we thought. They were always really bent on mischief of some kind. On seeing one of these witches approaching us, we children would dart around like so many partridges and watch them around the corners. He who pointed his finger at one of them was a doomed boy! Perhaps, in less than a week he would be attacked by some strange disease that no doctor could cure. These were terrible witches, according to our belief, that took men out of their beds at night and rode them to the places where they held their dances, around a tree that had been struck by lightning in some wild, desolate place. Alas! that these poor old women should have had so bad a name.

“Old women, in former times, used to have their thumbs tied together and then thrown into deep water. If they sank and were drowned they were considered innocent. If they did not sink, they were guilty of being witches—they were taken out and burned. . . .”

Witches' Brew

This is a true story, as told by the late “Miss Pat” Crawford, of Williamston. It concerns an old colored servant by the name of Jess Morris, who worked at the old Blount Hotel in Williamston, where he was associated with the Blount and York families, its owners, for many years.



When Dr. H. B. York and his wife, Kate Blount York, moved to their new home on Simmons Avenue in Williamston during the early part of this century, they built a small cottage in their backyard for Jess to live in. The cottage has since been torn down.

Jess was very superstitious and believed in ghosts and witches very strongly. He often had some strange tales to tell about them.

One day "Miss Pat" was talking to Jess. During the conversation she asked him how he was feeling. Jess replied, " 'Miss Pat,' I feel mighty poorly. The witches rode me all night long." "Miss Pat" said, Jess, I have some witches' brew at my house that will help you, and you will never be bothered with witches again. You will have to use it exactly like I tell you. You make a circle of this brew around your bed. Now be sure and don't break the circle, or it will not work. You can step over it when you go to bed."

"Miss Pat" went home and made up some kind of concoction including flour, sugar and pepper, and gave it to Jess.

The next day "Miss Pat," who was very anxious to know how her "witches' brew" had worked for Jess, looked him up and asked how he was feeling. Jess replied, " 'Miss Pat,' I feel just fine; the witches left me alone and I feel the best I have felt in years."

So you see the "witches' brew" really worked successfully for old Jess Morris. It broke the witches' conjuration and from that day on the witches left Old Jess alone.

