



10. Ghost Stories

Nearly all of the old-time hillfolk are firm believers in ghosts and wandering spirits, although few adult males will admit this belief to outsiders nowadays. But in the childhood of men and women still living, the telling of ghost stories was much more common than it is today. The pioneers used to invite people to their cabins for the express purpose of swapping supernatural tales. It was a recognized form of social entertainment, especially favored by people who did not hold with dancing or card playing.

Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, thinks that the decay of ghost stories in the Ozarks is due to the fact that there are so few really *lonesome* places nowadays. In order to raise a good crop of ghosts, she says, we must have a lot of old mills and deserted houses and covered bridges—and these romantic spots are not so common as they used to be.

It seems to me that the Ozark ghost stories do not differ greatly from those that are told in other sections of the United States. An account of Ozark superstition, however, would be incomplete without any mention of these tales, so I record some of them here for what they may be worth.

There are many humorous cracks about the hillman's belief in ghosts. One ancient wheeze refers to a superstitious fellow who was afraid to walk past the graveyard at night. His friends tried to build up his morale, assuring him that ghosts have never been known to hurt anybody. "Maybe not," said the hillman, "but I just don't want 'em a-follerin' me around!"

Mr. Lewis Kelley, Cyclone, Missouri, told me a kind of comic

ghost story he had heard near Cyclone in the eighties. It seems that old lady Jones and her two sons were stealing sheep from Jim Bray, a rich old man who had not walked for years because of his rheumatism. The old woman would wait in the graveyard by the road, while her two boys went into a field and got one of Bray's sheep. She always examined the animal they carried out, and if it wasn't fat enough she'd make the boys turn it loose and go back after another. One dark night she sat in the graveyard and waited impatiently. The boys were a little slower than usual. Meanwhile Jim Bray was talking to his family, upbraiding them because they didn't catch the sheep thieves. "If I could walk," he cried, "I'd go over an' lay for 'em in the old graveyard, an' I'd stay thar till I *did* ketch 'em." Finally two of the Bray boys said "All right, Pappy, we'll jest pack you over thar," so they picked up the old man and carried him across the pasture. It was a very dark night, but they knew the path. When the two boys carried their father into the graveyard, old Mis' Jones saw them dimly and thought that it was *her* boys returning with the sheep. "'Bout time you-uns was a-comin'," she croaked hoarsely. "Is he fat?" and she pinched the old man's leg! With wild yells of terror the Bray boys dropped their Pappy and "tuck out" for home, but the old man was right at their heels when they reached the cabin. Mr. Bray never doubted that the Devil himself had been waiting for him in the graveyard. All the rest of his life he boasted that the Old Boy had riz up out of hell to cure his rheumatism, after the doctors had plumb give up the case.

Another old tale of the same general type was about two men who heard that the Devil had been visiting a certain buryin' ground, so they went and hid behind a stone wall to see what they could see. This was just before dusk. Two little boys came along, with a sack of pawpaws they had gathered. They spread the pawpaws out on the ground, on the opposite side of the wall from where the two men were hiding, and began to divide them. "You take this one, I'll take that one; you take this one,

I'll take that one," one of the boys chanted, as he placed the pawpaws in two separate heaps. Finally the other boy said: "Well, that's all, except them two big ones over there. You take the dried-up one, and I'll take the fat one." This described the two men pretty well, and they broke out of hiding and ran yelling for home. They thought that some Evil Spirits were dividing up the dead, and that they had been counted in with the others.

One of my friends at Mena, Arkansas, told of a young man who was notoriously afraid of the supernatural, and some of his comrades planned to play a joke on him. They dressed in white garments and hid near an old graveyard. When the "skeery" fellow came along the road they sprang out with loud groans and shrieks. The young man was frightened almost to the point of madness. He gave one great leap and ran blindly until he was stopped by a wire fence. Screaming at the top of his voice he snatched out an old revolver and emptied it at his tormentors. Two of the masqueraders were hit, one of them being quite seriously wounded. There has been no more "playin' ghost" in that neighborhood.

A woman near Sparta, in Christian county, Missouri, tells a story she learned from her grandmother. A young man had been visiting his sweetheart, and as he rode away from her gate at midnight she called out "I'll be with you all the way home." Soon he noticed something white floating in the air behind him. He put spurs to his horse but the white thing stayed close. Just before he reached home the young man's hat blew off, and he did not stop to look for it. Next morning he told his mother that the girl was a witch, and that he would never go to see her again, or have anything to do with her. The girl had no idea what was wrong; she wrote several letters to the young man, but he did not answer them, and a few months later she married and moved to Oklahoma. Our young man never saw her again, but that fall he walked out in the woods one day and found the lost hat in a patch of brambles. A roll of cotton was attached

to it. The girl and her mother had been carding cotton on the night of his last visit, and some of the stuff had caught under his snakeskin hatband. The long roll of cotton, streaming from the hat, was the "white thing" that had floated behind as he rode homeward.

In Jackson county, Missouri, the old folks tell of two loafers who were employed to transport a corpse secretly from a village graveyard to a medical school in Kansas City. This was in the eighties, and they had the body wrapped in canvas and covered with straw in the back of a wagon. It was a dark, cold night, and the ground was covered with snow. They stopped for a toddy at a roadside tavern, and while they were inside a drunken country boy, knowing nothing of the corpse under the straw, crawled into the wagon box and went to sleep. When the grave robbers started on again they had a bottle of whiskey and became gradually more jovial. Finally, as they were taking a drink out of the bottle, one of them turned around and shouted to the corpse: "Git up, old stiff, and have a snifter!" This aroused the country boy, who sat up with a jerk. "Don't keer if I do," he answered loudly. The boy was astounded when both men screamed wildly, leaped out of the wagon, and fled into the woods. "I could hear them fellers a-hollerin' for a long time," he said later on. "They kept a-gettin' fainter an' fainter, but they was still a-hollerin'," he added.

Some of the tales that the hillfolk call ghost stories are not very startling, but simply accounts of sights or sounds commonplace enough, except that the usual causes of these sensations are apparently lacking. Some people named Criger, for example, drove up to a house near Rogersville, Missouri. This house had long been vacant, and the villagers said it was ha'nted. The Crigers stopped because they saw smoke coming out of the chimney. They entered the house and found it empty, everything covered with dust. They examined the chimney, and made certain that there had been no fire there for a long time. There were no birds' nests in the chimney, no chimney swallows to stir

up dust. So the Crigers, unable to explain the smoke otherwise, reluctantly decided that perhaps the house *was* ha'nted.

In many parts of the Ozark country one hears of a cabin which is haunted by a wood-chopping ghost. People who try to camp there are kept awake by somebody chopping wood all night. At intervals one can hear a grindstone being turned slowly to sharpen an ax, and even detect a change in the sound every few minutes, as if water were being poured on the stone. But there is no grindstone in the vicinity, and nobody has lived there for more than twenty years.

An old lady in McDonald county, Missouri, told me that she once sat alone in her two-room cabin, with the door bolted and the windows fastened on the inside. Suddenly she heard the latch on the door move, and the sound of a heavy man walking across the floor. "I could hear one of his boots squeak at every step," she said, "and then I heard the dipper rattle in the water bucket, like somebody was a-gittin' a drink." The old woman jumped up and ran into the kitchen, but there was nobody there. The door was still bolted, and the windows were still fastened on the inside.

Tom Moore, of Ozark, Missouri, tells the story of a "Squire Reardon" who went out with some other lawyers to visit a farmer in Taney county, Missouri. This farmer claimed that he could hear his daughter singing out in the woods every afternoon, although the girl had been dead for several months. They heard "a woman's voice, gradually increasing in volume until some of the words were reasonably plain . . . as if it were traveling along the pathway . . . loud enough for the yodeling to be heard at the end of each verse." Two lawyers hurried toward the sound and watched the pathway along which the ghost was supposed to walk, but they could see nothing of the singer.¹ The "Squire Reardon" of Moore's story was easily identified as Lou Beardon, a lawyer who lived in Branson, Missouri. I knew Beardon well and asked him about this ghost-story. Beardon

¹ *Mysterious Tales and Legends of the Ozarks*, pp. 116-121.

said that he did not believe in ghosts but admitted that he heard a strange sound in the woods that day, adding that Judge Moore and others professed to believe it was the voice of a girl who had died some time before. "We all heard something," said Beardon. "I never heard anything quite like it in the woods before, but I reckon it must have been some kind of a varmint, or maybe a bird. It sounded like a girl singing, but there wasn't no girl there. . . . I don't know what it was," Beardon ended slowly.

Mrs. Coral Almy Wilson, of Zinc, Arkansas, tells of a couple who tried to sleep all night in a haunted house. They barred the door with a hickory stick, thick as a man's arm. The ghost burst in the door at one blow, but there was nothing to be seen. A moment later they heard something like big marbles or billiard balls rolling over the floor. They got up and lit a candle but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The man barred the door again, and he and his wife were about to lie down again when the ghost resumed its labors. The door burst open for the second time, and as the man sprang to his feet the sound of the big marbles rolling was heard again. "Once is a God's plenty, and twice is too much," so the couple gave up the project and rushed out into the night.

Miss Emma Galbraith, Springfield, Missouri, got this tale in 1934 from an aged Negro: A yellow woman was entertaining another man in the cabin, while her husband was away. She was parching corn at the fireplace. The husband came home unexpectedly, and she braced herself against the door, so as to give the man a chance to escape by a window in the rear. The enraged husband fired through the door, and the woman was instantly killed. Neighbors both white and black declared that they could smell corn parching whenever they passed the cabin in the evening, even after the place had been vacant and dilapidated for many years.

Around Cape Girardeau, Missouri, they tell of a Yankee spy who was captured in the vicinity during the Civil War. Awaiting execution, he danced and sang and "carried on" so that many

people were disgusted. They thought that a man about to die should not sing dirty songs or shout ribald jokes at everybody who came within sound of his voice. But the spy took nothing seriously, laughed at the good priest who visited him, and even made fun of his own relatives when they came to bid him good-bye. Finally he was hanged at the big gate of St. Francis Hospital and buried in Lorimer Cemetery. To mark his grave they put up a stick about three feet high and hung the dead man's army hat on top of the stick. When anybody approached the grave at dusk, the ragged old hat would wiggle and dance about, even when there was not a breath of wind stirring.

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey once saw clearly a little cabin on a ridge in the old McCann game park, near her home at Mincy, Missouri. Never having noticed the building before, she got down the big field glasses and scrutinized it very carefully, remarking that there was smoke coming out of the chimney. But the next day the cabin was gone. And the neighbors told her that there had never been any cabin at that place, so far as any of them could remember.

There are many ghost stories concerned with Breadtray Mountain, in Stone county, Missouri. Otto Ernest Rayburn repeats a number of these legends, which are largely concerned with buried treasure. "Breadtray Mountain has a legendary reputation seldom paralleled," says Rayburn. "It is a landmark of strange incident, and hillfolks carefully avoid it."² Many old-timers firmly believe that Spaniards, at some time or other, buried a great store of gold on Breadtray Mountain just before they were all killed by the Indians. This seems to be a variant of the well-known "Lost Louisiana" treasure story. Tom Moore says that people who visit Breadtray Mountain at night hear sobs and groans and smothered screams; they believe that these noises are made by the ghosts of Spanish soldiers who were massacred by Indians. Judge Moore intimates that he has heard these sobs and groans himself, as he says that

² *Ozark Country*, pp. 304-306.

his tale "does not come from second-hand information, nor is it based upon hearsay."³ Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey also refers to mysterious sounds heard by many hillfolk at night on Bread-tray Mountain.⁴

The following tale is told about one of my neighbors near Pineville, Missouri, and believed by practically everybody in the settlement. This woman was unkind to her stepchildren, and one day, as she sat alone in the cabin, a violent blow knocked her flat on the floor, while a loud voice cried out: "Be good to my children!" This story is confirmed by the woman herself, who certainly had some sort of a stroke or seizure at the time. Several of her neighbors swear that they visited her later in the day and saw the print of an invisible hand on her face several hours after the attack.

Not far from my old home in McDonald county, Missouri, according to the old-timers, a man was captured years ago by a band of night riders, who hanged him with his own knitted "galluses" until these broke and then finished the hanging with a hickory withe. Some women living nearby buried the body, but it was dug up later by dogs. Not liking the spectacle of human remains being gnawed by dogs, the ladies gathered up the bones and dropped them into a big hollow tree. 'Serious-minded, sober men and women assure me that they have seen strange lights about this tree and heard groans, and something like old-fashioned gun caps exploding all about.

Some fifty miles south of Springfield, Missouri, on the old Wire Road, the Oak Grove schoolhouse was supposed to be haunted by the ghost of a man hanged there by bushwhackers during the Civil War. Only a few years ago four men rode by the schoolhouse on the way home from a dance and saw a grinning, bald-headed fellow peering out through the window. Coming closer, they noticed that the stranger had no eyebrows or eyelashes. The hillmen addressed the man politely at first,

³ *Mysterious Tales and Legends of the Ozarks*, pp. 8-18.

⁴ *White River Leader*, Branson, Missouri, Jan. 11, 1934.

but he made no answer. Finally one of the boys drew his six-shooter and fired six shots which smashed the glass of the window, but the stranger grinned on unmoved. Then two of the boys kicked in the door and searched the schoolhouse, but the room was empty. The two boys who remained outside, however, could still see the stranger sitting just inside the broken windowpane. There are several versions of this tale. Judge Tom Moore, of Ozark, Missouri, who says he is not superstitious, writes the whole thing up in his book *Mysterious Tales and Legends of the Ozarks*.⁵

Mrs. Carrie George, of Toronto, Missouri, says that a cabin on Old Brushy creek, in the Glaize Park area overlooking the Lake of the Ozarks, was regarded as haunted for more than fifty years. The story is that the people who lived there had murdered a peddler for the sake of his pack and buried the body under the kitchen. The peddler's ghost returned almost every night and disturbed people so that the farm changed hands often. One owner tore down the shed kitchen and dug in the earth underneath, but did not find the peddler's bones. The ghost kept coming back as before and frightening people. For a long time the house stood empty and was still unoccupied the last I heard of the matter.

There are many tales about ghosts who speak to people, telling them to dig at such-and-such a place to find a buried treasure. The ghost is usually that of some fellow who died without being able to tell anybody where his treasure was concealed, and who cannot rest quietly until someone gets the money and enjoys it. I met one man who had a persistent vision in which his grandfather, dead for many years, appeared and told him such a tale. After having this dream three nights a-runnin', he dug at the place indicated. He found no treasure but left the hole open, so the ghost could see that his instructions had been carried out. Apparently the grandfather's spirit was satisfied, since the man had no more of these disturbing dreams.

⁵ Pages 14-22.

People in Wayne county, Missouri, say that somewhere near Taskee an old man was murdered in a farmhouse, supposedly for his money. For many years after that the old man's ghost was seen there at intervals and nobody would live in the house. Finally a traveler who was not afraid of ghosts went to bed there, after building a rousing fire on the hearth. In the night he awoke to see the ghost of an old man sitting in front of the fireplace. "Follow me," said the ghost, "and I'll show you where the money is. I caint get no rest until somebody finds the stuff and spends it for something useful." They went outside, where the ghost pulled out some small stones at the base of the chimney. Reaching his hand into the hole, the traveler found quite a sum of money wrapped in an old newspaper. The ghost was never seen again.

In Benton county, Arkansas, one hears of a family who have become accustomed to the presence of a ghost, named Sissy. Sissy was an old maid relative, who wore a peculiar slat bonnet and a sort of cape, easily recognized at a distance. Very often members of the family catch a glimpse of Sissy in the orchard, or near some of the outbuildings. She never comes into the house and never makes any noise or other disturbance. Sissy died about the time of the Spanish-American War and was still seen as late as 1940. The children are told never to laugh at her or to bother her in any way. It is said that strangers have come to the farm and seen Sissy, always at a little distance, without suspecting that she is not a living person. One member of the family even tried to photograph Sissy but never caught sight of her while he had the camera in his hands.

I personally knew a young woman, a distant connection of my family, who died under most unhappy circumstances. On her deathbed she tried to tell her parents and her brothers something—they thought it was the identity of the man who had betrayed her. But she was unable to make herself understood. The whole neighborhood believes that this girl's spirit came back and haunted the house for many years. The family con-

sulted mediums and planchettes but could never get in touch with her, although the ghost could be heard walking about and opening drawers in an old bureau almost every night.

In November, 1934, the Associated Press carried a long story about "The Ghost of Paris"—a specter which has been seen at intervals in Paris, Missouri, for more than seventy years. The "Ghost of Paris" was a woman, tall, dressed in black, carrying some sort of wand or cane in her hand. She appeared every year about the middle of October and was seen now and then about the town until spring. The story identified this ghost as the jilted sweetheart of a Confederate soldier; on her deathbed she swore to haunt her faithless lover and the whole town forever. The "Ghost of Paris" was never known to injure anybody, but she frightened children into hysterics. Even grown men, in several cases, had been known to run down the middle of the street, yelling for help. It seems that the ghost has not been seen in Paris since 1934, and some people have suggested that the newspaper publicity somehow exorcised it.

It was in 1932, I think, that an odd story went the rounds in Madison county, Missouri. A party of local people coming along Highway 61 noticed that a certain house had burned down. Nothing was left but the chimney, with the remains of a cookstove and two iron beds standing upright in the ashes. Several days later, having told their friends about the house being burned, they passed the same way again. They were astounded to see the house intact, and the people who lived nearby said that there had been no fire. Most persons regarded all this as a sign that the house *would* burn down in the near future, but it was still standing when I drove by the place in 1940.

About three miles west of Reeds Spring, Missouri, is a little hog wallow known as Dead Man's Pond, so called because two bank robbers were killed there not long after the Civil War. About 1886 Mr. Will Sharp, of Reeds Spring, found a skull and some other human bones in the mud. He picked them up and

put them in an old hollow stump nearby. The neighborhood of Dead Man's Pond has long been supposed to be haunted, and many persons have reported strange doings in the vicinity. Will Sharp, who still lives near the place, refuses to admit that *he* ever saw a ghost there, but says that his brother, Palmer E. Sharp, had a peculiar experience. "Palmer had been to take his girl home," writes Will Sharp. "They had attended a party, riding a horse apiece, and he was leading her horse in the old-fashioned way. As he went back home alone it was a nice starry night. Just as he was passing the Pond, the horse he was leading slowed up and caused Palmer to look around. He said he would have sworn there was a man in the saddle of the horse he was leading. The man just seemed to disappear right before his eyes, and Palmer always tried to beat the dark after that. Now, my brother was not afraid of ghosts, but what did he see?" Mrs. May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, refers to the ghost stories about Dead Man's Pond and tells of one Willie Webber, who saw a woman in black "with a red apron, and her hands rolled in the apron" coming along a path near the pond. Suddenly the woman's figure vanished, though it was "late evening" (which means late afternoon, before sundown) and Webber could see plainly for several hundred yards in all directions. There was no way that the figure could have disappeared so suddenly, but it *did* so disappear. Mrs. McCord lived not far from Dead Man's Pond as a child and often heard stories of its being haunted. She says that even now she would be afraid to go there alone, after nightfall.

In several widely separated localities I have heard the story of a savage, ill-tempered woman who was always fighting with her husband. She died suddenly, and some people thought the man must have poisoned her, but the doctors found no evidence of poison. After her death, the widower continued to live in the old house. Neighbors heard noises, as if he was still fighting with his wife. Dishes breaking, shouts and curses, furniture being thrown around, and so on. One neighbor rushed over there,

and found the man sitting quietly in front of the fire. All the racket seemed to be in the lean-to kitchen. The neighbor could plainly hear the woman cursing; he recognized her voice as well as certain unusual cuss words and obscene phrases to which she had been partial in life. "Don't get excited," said the widower quietly. "She ain't mad at nobody but me."

There is an old story of two villagers who had to pass a buryin' ground on their way home from sparkin' some country girls. On several occasions they saw a gigantic white bird flopping about among the tombstones—like a swan, or maybe a pelican, but much larger than either. Finally one of the boys decided that it was a ha'nt, and called out loudly: "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, what's the matter with you?" The great bird croaked a reply: "I'm lost and tortured in hell! I'm lost and tortured in hell!" Having said this, it flew away toward the south, and was not seen again.

Otto Ernest Rayburn quotes an old-time hillman who remarked: "If a white moth lingered about us, we thought it was the spirit of one of our deceased grandparents hovering over us."⁶ I have mentioned this to many Ozarkers but have never found anybody who had heard of such a belief. The general feeling is that while demons or perhaps lost souls might assume the forms of birds or animals, the idea of one's grandparents turning into *insects* is an alien notion. "It must be that feller has got some Injun in him," one old man observed. "An Injun will believe any kind of foolishment," he added solemnly.

A very common backwoods tale concerns a cabin where a peddler or a traveler is supposed to have been murdered many years ago. There was a big blood spot on the floor, and this became wet with fresh blood every year on February 2, the date of the peddler's death. A man sitting in this house on February 2 would see weasels, skunks, minks, wolves, or even deer dash in at the open door, plunge into the big fireplace and vanish up the chimney. I have heard this story perhaps twenty-five times,

⁶ *Ozark Country*, p. 157.

in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, but I have never yet found anybody who could tell me just where the cabin was located.

There are many tales of great ghost dogs, and other monstrous animals. One of my best friends told me seriously that as a little boy in McDonald county, Missouri, he once met a spotted hound that was bigger than a cow, and made tracks in the snow nearly two feet across. At the time he was astounded that a dog should attain such a size, but it never entered his head that there was anything supernatural about the animal. It was years later, when he came to realize that there were no such dogs anywhere in the world, he knew that he had seen a "booger dog." When I first heard this tale I suspected that the man had invented it for my especial benefit, but on checking with his relatives I learned that he had told the same story more than twenty years previously, and that it was known to everybody in the neighborhood.

Around the town of Bunker, in Reynolds county, Missouri, they still tell of the ghost dog that Dr. J. Gordon encountered years ago. Crossing a little stream on horseback, near the Bay Cemetery about nine miles west of Bunker, late at night, he saw a figure like a dog, but very much larger. This thing apparently walked on the water without a sound or a ripple. Dr. Gordon saw it many times, once in bright moonlight. Sometimes it crossed ahead of him. Once it jumped on the horse behind the doctor. The animal plunged wildly, and the doctor fired his derringer into the ghost dog twice, but it was not dislodged. He struck at the beast with his fist, the gun still in his hand, but could feel nothing, and his arm slashed right through the figure as if there was nothing there.

Some night hunters in Pemiscot county, Missouri, swore they saw an enormous black dog, fully eight feet long, without any head. They came close to the creature, and one man threw his ax at it, but the ax passed right through the body of the booger dog and stuck fast in a tree. The coon hounds which accompanied

the men paid no attention but acted as if they didn't see the big varmint at all. One member of the party had been drinking, but the rest of the hunters were quite sober. And every one of them saw the headless ghost. The fact that the dogs paid no attention somehow reassured them, and they were not panic-stricken as might be expected.

Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Mahnkey tells how a fiddler named Jake Lakey was killed at a dance in Taney county, Missouri, about 1900. Her neighbor young Lewis Blair and another boy were sent on horseback to break the news to Jake's wife, who lived several miles away. Blair told Mrs. Mahnkey that a great black dog ran beside their horses all the way, and when one of the riders struck at the creature with a quirt, the quirt slashed right through it. And when they got to their destination, Mrs. Lakey said calmly: "You'ens have come to tell me that Jake is dead." ⁷

A young man near Alma, Arkansas, was passing a deserted house one night, when he saw a strange woman in a long white robe standing at the gate. A little fuzzy white dog ran out in front of him, and it seemed to be barking, although he heard no sound. The boy threw a stone at the dog and was astounded to see the animal separate into two parts, let the stone pass through, and then go back together again. He talked the matter over with his parents, and they agreed that it was evidently a warning of some impending evil, probably an early death. The young fellow lived for many years, however, and I believe he is still alive. But about a month after he saw the ghost dog, he had one of his eyes gouged out.

Farmers near Braggadocio, Dunklin county, Missouri, tell of a headless dog supposed to live in a hollow elm tree just outside the town. At night this phantom runs through the village streets. It behaves just like any other dog, but it is clearly headless. Many people have seen it on moonlight nights, usually at a distance of about twenty yards. The town dogs always get

⁷ *Ozark Life* (June, 1930), p. 31.

out of its way but do not seem panic-stricken or unduly alarmed.

Tom Moore tells of an old woman who lived alone in a shanty near Galena, Missouri. Each evening passers-by heard her talking animatedly, although they could see that she was alone. People who heard her talk said that she spoke as if to a man and often referred to a dog which accompanied the man, though neither man nor dog was visible. Finally the old woman became ill and was taken to the poorhouse where she died. After her death several residents of Galena saw a whiskered stranger with a big dog near the old woman's cabin. This man and dog were seen by different people on several occasions but disappeared suddenly at the edge of a cliff. Because of this unexplained disappearance, apparently, Judge Moore and others decided that the stranger and his dog were somehow supernatural.⁸

People near Pevely, in Jefferson county, Missouri, tell of a ghostly white fox which has been seen by many farmers, and even by motorists on Highway 61, as recently as 1932. Albino foxes are not unknown in the Ozarks, but there was something very special about this one. It was quite tame and had been fired on many times at close range, but without result. Foxhounds seemed aware of its existence, but they would not chase it. Several persons believe that it could transform itself into a skunk at will; others say that they actually saw it turn into a short-haired black and white dog, with a stump tail.

In southeast Missouri old soldiers claimed that during the War between the States some men used to see the specter of a monstrous black hog just before a battle. This was recognized as a sign that the man who saw the thing would be killed in action. He told his comrades, made arrangements for letters and keepsakes to be sent home, and so on. It is said that a man who saw the black boar never lived more than seven days. They tell of one trooper who saw the death sign just before a major engagement but came through the battle unhurt. He laughed at "superstition" and bragged about his escape, but was killed the

⁸ *Mysterious Tales and Legends of the Ozarks*, pp. 142-148.

next evening by the accidental discharge of a comrade's revolver. It was a Yankee pistol captured in the battle, one of the new double-action or self-cocking kind, with which the boys were not familiar. While the new owner was fiddling with the lock of the weapon, it was somehow discharged. The bullet smashed through the brain of the cavalryman who had seen the great black boar.

In Stoddard county, Missouri, near Bloomfield, stood the ruin of an old house, so dilapidated that there was not much left save the big stone chimney. There was a neighborhood story that gold and silver were buried somewhere about the place. People who tried to dig for the treasure were all driven away by pigs—dozens of wild pigs which came squealing and dashing back and forth over the site of the old building. They were ghost pigs, not affected by stones or bullets. One man fired repeatedly with a shotgun at very close range, but the animals paid no attention. The general impression was that the phantom swine were somehow stationed there to drive off treasure hunters.

A very similar story used to be told in the vicinity of Jane, Missouri, near the Missouri-Arkansas line. In this case the pigs were said to be guarding the place where a murdered woman was buried many years ago. The woman had some valuable jewelry concealed on her person, and it is said that her own half-wild pigs prevented the murderer from exhuming the body and getting the valuables which he overlooked at the time of the killing. This all happened long ago, of course; the pigs which guard the spot nowadays are not living animals, but ghost pigs.

The children near Southwest City, Missouri, a few years ago, were afraid to go near an old slaughterhouse. The story is that the place was full of ghost cattle, some of them headless. A prominent citizen told me that he himself had seen the shadowy figures of "little bulls" with great spreading horns, often seven feet from tip to tip. He mentioned this as showing that the cattle ghosts somehow derived from pioneer days, as there have been no long-horned cattle in the Ozarks for many years.

Much has been written about the "headless ghost of Nickerson Ridge," but I have been unable to get much information beyond that published by my old friend Otto Ernest Rayburn, the author of *Ozark Country*. It appears that Tomp Turner, who lives near Kimberling Bridge on White River, in the southern part of Stone county, Missouri, is not a superstitious man. He did not believe the headless ghost story until about 1915, when he saw the thing himself. Highway 13 follows the old Wilderness Road, where the headless specter had been reported by the settlers in pioneer days. One night Tomp was riding south on the highway, when his horse suddenly became very nervous. He saw the figure of a headless man approaching slowly—not walking, but gliding along as if on roller skates. When the thing came within thirty steps, Tomp's horse became unmanageable and bolted into the brush. Tomp finally forced it back into the road again, some fifty feet beyond, but the ghost was nowhere in sight. And, as Tomp himself remarked, he didn't go back to look for it. Several other people have caught glimpses of the thing in recent years. On wet nights it is said that the ghost keeps to the brush along the roadside, and groans and cries are heard from among the bushes. It seems that the headless ghost is never seen or heard except on a particular stretch of road, not more than two or three hundred yards in length. I met Tomp Turner myself at his home in July, 1932, when Otto Ernest Rayburn and I went down White River. It was Rayburn who told me the story in the first place, and he has never been able to find any legend or history of a murder at this place which might explain the apparition.

Another headless ghost has been seen in Morgan county, Missouri, since the Civil War. Some claim that it was on the job even before the War, as early as 1850. John A. Hannay, formerly of Versailles, Missouri, says that he saw this ghost sitting on top of a strawstack in the moonlight. It was plainly headless, but was called "Old Raw Head" by the natives. When Mr. Hannay saw the thing it was about forty yards distant, but

as he approached the ghost slid down the opposite side of the stack and was gone. Hannay's grandparents had seen the same specter many years before, according to the family tradition; they were riding along a country road, and this headless thing ran right between their horses, frightening the lady almost into hysterics. Some people claim to have heard "Old Raw Head" scream and even pronounce words distinctly, but I have never been able to find out just what the headless specter said. Some people have thought that it must be the ghost of someone who was murdered in the vicinity. Mr. Hannay says that there were plenty of cold-blooded murders committed here in the years following the Civil War, and that he knows the names of many people involved in these killings; however, he thinks that it is best not to mention these people now, because their relatives and descendants are still living in Morgan county.

Some farmers tell of a headless ghost in St. Francois county, Missouri, at a house on Back Creek, near Highway 61 south of Farmington. This ghost appears at upstairs windows of the old house and rattles chains to frighten campers and tourists away. They say that a family named Griffin once lived there, and that the Griffins used to give semipublic dances in the building. One night there was a big fight, and a fiddler cut off Johnny Griffin's head with his bowie knife. Griffin was short of stature, while the ghost appears very tall even without his head. Nevertheless, many people believe that the headless specter is the ghost of Johnny Griffin, doomed to haunt forever the scene of his decapitation.

There are men and women still living who recall the excitement that swept the village of Fair Grove, Missouri, in 1895, when a picture of the Devil suddenly appeared upon the wall of the Methodist church. The following account is clipped from the Springfield (Missouri) *Republican*, dated Jan. 5, 1896.

If anyone should entertain the idea that superstition is forever banished from the minds of the American people, he should visit just now the little town of Fair Grove in Greene county. The appearance of

a face upon the Methodist church wall has aroused the whole community and many are speculating upon its origin. During the prayer meeting on the night of December 19th someone made a discovery. On the north side of the cupola, in the church room facing the pulpit, appears a curious looking picture. How, when, or from what source it came is a mystery and will perhaps never be solved. The picture is about life size and the most hideous looking thing that can be imagined. The face has the appearance of Satan with fearful eyes, wide open mouth and a terrifying look. The next morning after the discovery people all around town began flocking to the church to see the strange picture. Some were quite sure it was the work of the devil; others believed it the work of God. Some thought it the work of human hands, and some thought it had been caused by a leak in the roof. It was plain to see that the likeness had not been placed there by a human hand, as there was no paint used, and it was perfectly dry when found, and could not be erased. The theory that it had been caused by the rain appeared to be contradicted by the fact that the top of the picture was three feet from the ceiling, and all above it was perfectly dry. The rain could not have come through the building wall as that wall was on the inside and some eight feet from the outside of the church. Many people in and around Fair Grove are much wrought up over the matter. Like the handwriting on the wall at the feast of Belshazzar it stands. It is said that a few days prior to this strange appearance, Rev. John Morgan and Rev. E. Plummer were conducting a revival and little interest was manifest. After preaching an eloquent sermon on the righteous life, the minister requested those who wanted to live this life, and go to heaven, to stand up. Finding no one who responded, the minister then asked if there was anyone who deliberately chose to go to hell, and if so to stand up. One young man promptly arose to his feet, much to the surprise of all present. It is claimed by some that the young man did not understand the minister's proposition, and stood up by mistake. At any rate he is of good family and stands well in that community. Those who are superstitious about the strange picture which has appeared on the wall of the church, think it was sent there as a rebuke to the young man who arose to his feet on that occasion.

Mrs. C. P. Mahnkey, of Mincy, Missouri, tells of several local people who thought they heard a baby crying in a certain deserted log house. But there was no baby there. After some puzzled talk about this, it was remembered that "a family had

formerly lived there who had a feeble-minded girl. This girl was known to be an expectant mother, but no one ever saw the infant and after a time the family left the country." Mrs. Mahnkey was content to leave it at that, but local opinion is that the baby was born and was killed by one of the girl's brothers, who probably buried the little body somewhere about the cabin.

Another of Mrs. Mahnkey's stories of the supernatural concerns the death of a certain "old man Cook," head of one of the great clans of the Swan Creek neighborhood, in Taney county, Missouri. "One of the women told me a curious tale of the night Gran'pap died," writes Mrs. Mahnkey. "Some of the watchers were out in the yard. They knew that the end was very near. Suddenly they were startled to see a solitary horseman ride up to the front gate, a military figure on a great white horse. Phantom-like and eerie, as there was not a sound. And just then someone came out from the house, and said the old man had died, and the silent rider and the big white horse disappeared."

Tom Moore tells of an old building at Sand Springs, on the road between Rolla and Springfield, Missouri, where during the Civil War a preacher used to hold forth against the Southern cause. One Sunday night a Confederate officer threatened the preacher, then rode his horse right into the meetinghouse, and had almost reached the pulpit when he was shot dead. The officer's body fell to the floor near the pulpit, and his horse turned and walked slowly out of the building. In recent years, according to Judge Moore's version of the tale, people who visit the place at night have heard the horse walk into the building. A moment later they hear the thump of a falling body on the dirt floor, then the sound of the horse walking slowly out of the place. Several persons have followed the sound of the horse's hooves with flashlights but have seen nothing.⁹

Miss Mae Traller, schoolteacher at Everton, Missouri, reports her investigation of a ghost which frightened the country

⁹ *Mysterious Tales and Legends of the Ozarks*, pp. 35-51.

folk near the town. Many persons in the neighborhood had seen this ha'nt near the old Payne orchard. Usually a vague, gaseous shape would rise in front of some startled pedestrian, float along ahead of him for a bit, and then sail slowly away into the tree-tops. Miss Traller and another teacher drove out to the haunted orchard at twilight and loitered about waiting for the ghost to appear. Suddenly they both saw it—"a strange luminous object, something like a fog, but I shall always declare it had a human shape," writes Miss Traller. "The thing wavered and started toward us, then with a faint breathlike sigh it drifted off above the orchard and away." Oddly enough, this seems to have been the ghost's final appearance—Miss Traller never heard of its being seen again.

People around Nixa, Missouri, still talk about the mysterious motor car that forced Sheriff Frank Jones off the road and caused his death in the spring of 1932. Several prominent citizens have seen this phantom car on the highway between Nixa and Ozark, and Fred McCoy, manager of the local telephone system, narrowly escaped being wrecked at the exact spot where Sheriff Jones was killed.

A spectral horseman has been reported occasionally for many years at a certain point on what is now Highway 13, in Polk county, Missouri, not far from Bolivar. A little knoll about a hundred yards east of the highway is called Dead Man's Hill, and there is an old story about a horse thief who was shot to death here and buried on top of the knoll. A rude headstone may still be seen, but there is no inscription, since the man was a stranger. Flowers were found on this grave at intervals for many years, so it was believed that the thief's identity was known to somebody who lived nearby, but who did not reveal the secret. Men who have seen the ghostly rider have remarked particularly his neat homespun garments, dyed brown with butternut juice, his cowhide boots, and the two big Colt revolvers swinging at his side. There is nothing in this to identify

the ghost, however, since many figures similarly attired rode the Missouri trails in the early days.

Members of the McDowell family, pioneers in Stone county, Missouri, tell of a ha'nt that used to live in a big black-oak tree, just across the James River from Galena, near the Fred McCord farm. The McDowell children would slip down the road sometimes just at dusk and stand well back from the haunted tree, keeping an eye out for the ghost to appear. Soon or late one of them would see "something white a-risin'" in the underbrush, upon which they all screamed and lit out for home at top speed. Nobody ever stopped for a second look, and therefore no detailed description of the "black-oak ghost" is available, but at least two generations of the McDowell clan were firm believers in it.

In the northeastern corner of Oklahoma, some fourteen miles from Joplin, Missouri, is a lonesome stretch of country road called the "Devil's Promenade." Some mighty strange people have lived along this road, and some very strange things have happened there. The best of the "ha'nted road" stories cannot be told at this time, but there is no longer any secret about the phenomena of the "Indian lights," which have been seen by thousands of tourists and discussed in newspapers as far off as St. Louis and Kansas City. One has only to drive slowly along the road any night after dark to see the "jack-o'-lantern" come bobbing along, always traveling in an easterly direction. Sometimes it swings from one side of the road to another, sometimes it seems to roll on the ground, sometimes it rises to the tops of the scrubby oak trees at the roadside, but it never gets more than a few feet from the road on either side. I have seen this light myself, on three occasions. It first appeared about the size of an egg but varied until sometimes it looked as big as a wash-tub. It is hard to judge the distance, but the light seemed about a quarter of a mile off when I first saw it and disappeared when it approached to a distance of perhaps seventy-five yards. I saw

only a single glow, but other witnesses have seen it split into two, three, or four smaller lights. The thing looked yellowish to me, but some observers describe it as red, green, blue, or even purple in color. One man swore that it passed so close to him that he could "plainly feel the heat," and a woman saw it "burst like a bubble, scattering sparks in all directions." A fellow who drove his car straight at the dancing phantom lost sight of it, but others standing a little way off said that they saw the light hovering impishly above the pursuer's car, out of his sight but plainly visible to everybody else in the neighborhood.

Some people think that the light at the "Devil's Promenade" is the ghost of an Osage chief who was murdered near this spot; others say it is the spirit of a Quapaw maiden who drowned herself in the river when her warrior was killed in battle. Others have suggested that the effect is produced somehow by electrical action of the mineral deposits in the ground, or by marsh gas. Mr. Logan Smith, of Neosho, Missouri, always contended that the mysterious lights are those of automobiles driving east on Highway 66, some five miles away. F. H. Darnell of Neosho, and a group of surveyors from Joplin, also incline to the view that cars on the distant highway are responsible for the mysterious lights. A. B. MacDonald, of the *Kansas City Star*, who came down to investigate the matter in January, 1936, is another convert to the Logan Smith theory. William Shears, who lives near the Promenade and has studied the phenomena, thinks that the lights may derive from the beacons at the Quapaw airport some six miles away. But the old-timers laugh at all such explanations, claiming that the Indian lights were seen at the same spot in the deep woods, fifty years before the "Devil's Promenade" road was built. Fred C. Reynolds of Kansas City says that his grandfather, a pioneer doctor at Baxter, Kansas, observed these lights "long before there was any such thing as a motor car," adding that he himself saw the "jack-o'-lantern" as a boy. Bob Hill of Joplin, Missouri, observes that the phantom was seen by many persons in this vicinity before there was

a Highway 66, and certainly long before the airport was established at Quapaw, Oklahoma.

In many parts of the Ozark country one hears tales of moving lights, which usually appear in cemeteries. These "graveyard lights" are seldom seen at regular intervals or by large numbers of witnesses, but reports of them are fairly common nevertheless. People who live near a little buryin' ground on Highway 123, between Spokane and Walnut Shade, in Taney county, Missouri, have talked about such "fox-fire lights" for many years. A bluish light, they say, apparently about as high as a man's head, first appears among the gravestones and then slowly crosses the road. It moves about as fast as a man walking, I was told. After listening to these tales I went to this graveyard myself and waited in the dark for hours on three consecutive nights but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

May Kennedy McCord, of Springfield, Missouri, printed several tales of local ghosts and spirits in the *Springfield News & Leader* (Feb. 2, 1936). Here is a letter which she received a few days later, from a minister of the gospel:

Dear Madam—I read your ghost stories with interest, and I will add a modern daylight story. Two days before Christmas 1925, four of us were sitting in plain view of Little Creek cemetery, and there appeared a pillar of fire, about ten feet high with a flaming star at the top of it. It occurred at 4:15 P.M., and was there at the same time three days later. It appeared four times. I have lived here fourteen years and have lived in sight of other cemeteries, but that is the first ghost I ever saw and I am 75 years old. I have been a preacher 55 years. A man went to the cemetery to watch for it and be there when it came; said he would throw his coat over it. Well, it came, but *he run like a turkey*. Yours in Jesus' name, A. J. Graves, Hartville, Mo.

There is an old tale often told to children about a family that had just finished butchering hogs. That night, after they had all gone to bed, they heard a voice cry out: "Where's my hog's feet at?" The old man got out of bed but saw nothing. Pretty soon the voice was heard again: "I want my hog's feet!" The man jumped up again, and the old woman told him to keep

a-lookin' till he found the intruder. Finally he peered up the chimney and sprang back as though amazed. "God-a-mighty!" he cried. "What's them big eyes for?" A long pause, and then came the deep-voiced answer: "To see you with." The old man turned away from the fireplace, but came back in a moment to ask: "What's them big claws for?" There was a hollow groan from the chimney, then the strange voice boomed: "To dig your grave with!" This quieted the old fellow for awhile, but a few minutes later he quavered: "What's that big bushy tail for?" A long silence, then the reply: "To sweep off your grave with." No more questions were put for some time, but finally the old gentleman couldn't stand the suspense any longer. "What's them big teeth for?" he cried. "TO EAT YOU UP WITH!"—At this point the story-teller's voice rises to a scream, and he jumps at the listening child with a great show of teeth. This story is sometimes called "Raw Head and Bloody Bones" or "Raw Bones and Bloody Meat."

Another backwoods bedtime story, told to children around the fire at night, relates the troubles of a woman who killed her baby and cooked it and served it to her husband. Not knowing what sort of meat it was, the man ate the stuff without comment. Later in the night came the little ghost crying: "Pennywinkle! Pennywinkle! My maw kilt me, my paw et me, my sister buried my bones under a marble stone. I want my liver an' lights an' wi-i-i-ney pipes! Pennywinkle! Pennywinkle!"

Here's a fragment of another juvenile tale, salvaged in Christian county, Missouri, some years ago: A traveler was a-ridin' along and he come to a ha'nted house. It was plumb full of cats. There was cats runnin' all over the place, and even up on the roof. A great big cat come up to the traveler and says: "When you git to the next house, you stop and tell 'em that old Kitty Rollins is dead." So the next house he come to, the traveler got down and went in. The house was empty except for an old bedraggled-lookin' cat settin' in the corner by the fireplace. "Well," says the traveler, "I come to tell you that old Kitty

Rollins is dead." The old cat jumped up and says "By God, I'll be king yet!" and out of the door he run.

A man once interrupted my lecture on Ozark folklore to ask how many people in the Ozark country really believe in ghosts and witches. I am unable to answer such a question, of course. Mr. H. L. Mencken, who lives in Baltimore, once announced his conviction that 92 percent of the people in Maryland believe in ghosts, and that 74 percent also believe in witchcraft. I have no idea how Mencken arrived at these figures, and I do not claim to know whether or not they are correct. I have some acquaintance with Maryland, however, both the cities and the rural districts, and I do not for a moment believe that people in Maryland are more superstitious than those who live in the backwoods sections of Missouri and Arkansas.

Sometimes one encounters an outspoken skeptic, even in the Ozarks. An old man in Morgan county, Missouri, said: "I have heard talk about a ghost around here for fifty years, but I never seen it. I would walk ten miles to see a ghost any time. But I don't believe there is no such thing. The people here aint got much sense. One of my neighbors thinks a man who has been dead four years comes and steals cream out of his springhouse every night!"

There is a rather general idea that departed spirits, when they return to earth, prefer to appear in the dark of the moon. It is also believed that the dead, if they can't rest in their graves, are somehow inclined to loiter about redbuds, pawpaw trees, and haw bushes—though why they should be attracted to these particular plants nobody seems to know. Another common notion is that persons born on Hallowe'en are more likely to see ghosts and talk with them than are persons whose birthdays fall on other dates.

Some people say that a rider can often see a ghost, ordinarily invisible, by looking at it from between his horse's ears. "You just sight down the horse's nose like it was a rifle bar'l," a farmer told me. It is widely believed that dogs and horses see all the

ghosts that men do, and many more which are invisible to the human eye. So one may be sure that if there is a ghost anywhere about, the horse's head will be pointed at it. I used to try this trick, whenever my horse showed alarm without any apparent cause, but I was never able to see anything supernatural.

Several old-timers have told me that if one addresses a ghost with the words "in the name of God," the apparition will be powerless to do any harm. Other people think it's safer to cry out "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, what do you want?" If the thing is a witch or a demon it will vanish when the sacred names are pronounced; if it is simply a restless unhappy spirit it will return a civil answer in plain English and depart.

I have heard many stories of backwoods preachers who claim the power to quiet wandering spirits and drive ghosts or demons out of haunted houses, but I have never been able to trace one of these tales to its source. I know several Holy Roller preachers who say they are willing to attempt the exorcising of a specter, but I have never found one who would affirm that he had actually done so.

Some old folk pretend to lay a ghost by putting a stone on the dead person's grave. A very small pebble, or a handful of gravel, will do as well as a large stone. I have myself seen graves which were conspicuous because of the large number of pebbles which had been placed on them. And I have seen apparently intelligent adults—always half-jokingly, or with some humorous apology—toss little pebbles on such graves.

The Ozark hillman frequently entertains a wry humor in connection with his folk beliefs—humor of a sort not often encountered elsewhere. An old gentleman in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, talked freely about pioneer customs, folksongs, play parties, and even feuds, but when asked for local ghost stories he had nothing to contribute. "There's ghosts in Texas," he said soberly, "and maybe in Oklahoma, but not here." I waited

for a long moment, without any comment. "This country is just naturally *too rough* for ghosts," he said finally. And anybody who has visited Eureka Springs will understand exactly what the old gentleman meant.

