

The following is taken from "True Ghost Stories Haunted Heartland from the American Midwest"; by Beth Scott & Michael Norman; Barnes and Noble, Inc.; 1992; ISBN 0-88029-614-3

Aunt Eternity's Curse

Boonville, on the crest of the Missouri River Bluffs, was founded by Kentucky and Virginia settlers in the early years of the nineteenth century. Many of the homes here were made of brick, replete with generous rooms and wide halls. But none was as fine as that built by Howard Thornton Muir. His mansion was said to have been one of the most magnificent private homes in all Missouri.

A wealthy Virginian, Muir spared no expense in the construction of his mansion. The walls were made of hand-patted plaster, highlighted with rosettes and mosaics; fine woodwork and wainscoting decorated every room; and a sweeping staircase of polished mahogany connected the upper and lower floors.

The Muir family held a prominent social position in the Boonville community for many years. An invitation to dine at their home or to join them for a country drive in their beautiful coach pulled by a span of high-stepping horses were both highly coveted.

But tragedy struck the Muir mansion without warning. Young Nancy Muir awakened one morning with a chill and raging fever. She had never before been ill. Her father, much alarmed, summoned the finest physician in Boonville. He gave her quinine.

When Nancy did not improve, Muir called in a specialist from St. Louis who prescribed various medicines that he said "would cleanse the system and lower the fever." They did not. The young woman slipped into delirium. The desperate father then consulted a local doctor who offered a brew made of ginger and wild berries. Still, Nancy did not respond. She languished in bed and grew weaker and more frail until she died.

Howard Muir was distraught. He loved his daughter more than life itself and, as the days passed, he sat in silence, brooding upon her death. It had seemed so senseless. The more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that someone had caused her death. Had someone, perhaps one of his slaves, placed a curse upon poor Nancy?

As the empty, endless days passed, Muir became obsessed with trying to find out who had bewitched his daughter. One night, while rocking in the darkened living room, he called to mind each of his slaves who lived in the row of huts, little more than mud shanties, at the rear of the estate.

It wasn't Charity, the mulatto, he thought, who beneath her playful sauciness was obedient and loving. Nor was it Tobiath, the gentle, crippled woman with a heart of gold. At it couldn't have been Jethro, her husband, who told the day's news to the horses as he curried them.

Suddenly, the baleful face of Aunt Eternity loomed before him – old Aunt Eternity, the ancient slave feared by all the rest. Aunt Eternity never spoke – she thundered, her voice alone frightening all who heard it. Some said she was that way because she'd lost all her kith and kin and was sour on life. She lived alone in the hut on one end of the row and, in so far as possible, ruled her peers with an iron hand.

With a start, Muir recalled the night a year ago when, Aunt Eternity had stolen a guest's imported silk scarf from the foyer during a dinner party. Nancy had caught her leaving the house with it while the family and guests were dining. Later that night Muir had demoted the old slave from front parlor duty to scullery maid, putting her under the supervision of the trusted Hezekiah whose bright, watchful eyes missed nothing.

Howard Muir, his mind warped with grief, was now certain that Aunt Eternity was guilty of bewitching his daughter. He rose and walked to the rear of the house. Taking down a house whip from a peg in the rear entry, he strode out into the night. Fog filled what swale between the main house and the slaves' huts, but Muir's steps never slowed. He knew exactly where he was going.

An oil lamp flickered through the dull-paned window of Aunt Eternity's hut, and by the lamp light the old slave nodded in the single wooden chair, a Bible open in her lap.

Muir stepped to the door, pushed it open. It rasped on its rusty hinges. He raised the whip before the old woman could raise a hand. In the pain of dying, old Aunt Eternity screamed out a terrible curse upon the Muir family of the present generation and for all generations to come.

With a few years, Aunt Eternity's curse was fulfilled. The Muirs lost their large fortune, and every member of the family died a sudden death. The mansion, uncared for, soon decayed. The front veranda collapsed, torn from the house by a succession of storms; the window glass fell out of the wooden frames rotten; and loose shutters banged eerily in the wind. It was a gloomy, empty place.

But was it really empty? There were reports later from individuals who claimed that they observed strange lights burning in the dilapidated mansion, glowing through the broken windows of one room, then another. And on certain summer evenings when the air was warm and still, neighbors saw the airy figure of a maiden standing under the great oak tree and singing an old love song. They said that the solitary figure bore a striking resemblance to Nancy Muir, perhaps the only member of the family to elude the wrath of Aunt Eternity's curse.

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