

Submitted by Mae Bruce

Incidents in Boonville History

Written by Charles van Ravenswaay

Departing the field of immediate Boonville history, Mr. van Ravenswaay, using early church minute books as sources, presents the Missouri frontier church – its quick “Revival” period, its straight virility, its becoming effete.

He offers, in presenting the cyclic trend of religion, the anticipation of a religious revival as history rebounds from “the gay and godless twenties.”

Many years ago there was a ramshackle, grey farm house high on the peak of a bluff above Overton landing. It is said – by a very ancient man who had it direct from his grandfather – that it had been built by an old river captain who wanted to spend his declining years near the water. Certainly he could not have chosen a more inaccessible place, for the only path to it led from the main road to the south through worn out tobacco fields full of brambles and thickets.

Some years before the time of which I am speaking, the house had been bought by a very old man and his wife who had but recently come into the country. They determined to keep Tavern in the old house, and to advertise their purpose, they set a sign on the highway, and hung another from a beam of their front veranda. After a few years the freshly painted signs faded to the same color as the house and the old couple.

On cold, wintry nights when the wind swept up from the river and struggled mightily to push the building off the edge of the bluff, the warped sign in front would flap on its rod, and its unoiled joints would shriek in the blasts of the wind. During the summer the house seemed even more alien to its surroundings, than it did in the winter. Its bleached walls reflected the blinding sun of day and looked for all the world like a pile of bones. As the sun went down the last red glow lit up the many windows so that the place looked like a raging furnace, and under the cold, summer moonlight the old house seemed like the specter of a vulture, perched on its crag.

How a Traveler Sought Haven

One evening in late autumn, just as the last leaves were being flicked off the trees and cold, sudden winds were introducing winter, a traveler left a steamboat at Overton, and pulling his hat far down over his face to prevent it from being blown off in the sudden gusts, drew his long, brown cape about his body, shifted his well filled pack of goods over his shoulder, and started walking down the road. He soon found the daylight was fading, and, not pleased at the prospect of a night spent on the lonely road, looked about for a lodging place. Unlike most parts of the country, even in these early days, there was not a cabin or barn in sight. Just as he was settling himself to an all-night walk, he discovered the half-rotted, faded Tavern sign of the old couple.

He turned off the main road onto the path, as the sign directed, and quickening his footsteps in anticipation of a hot toddy, some very welcome supper and a comfortable bed, he managed to reach the old house before it became too dark to see the path he was following. For perhaps a full

moment he paused, examining the old house and the splendid view from the yard over the wide bottom lands, the Missouri river, and the row of white bluffs on the other side. The wind swept about him sharply, fluttering his cape behind him.

The house was totally dark except for a patch of light coming through a grimy window in a wing of the old structure. The stranger shivered slightly and, grasping his pack more firmly, went to the main door under the creaking sign. Taking his cane he beat a lively tattoo on the sagging panels. The sound echoed through the house and multiplied a dozen times, coming back hollow and dull. As he listened to the sound die away he heard footsteps approaching – the slop-slop steps of one who does not lift up his feet, of one who is bent and old and sickly. Again there was a moment of silence, then the rattle of bolts being slid back, chains being let down. The door was opened a crack, and a querulous voice demanded to know who was there and what his business could be with two very old and very poor people at such a time.

How He Found Meager Shelter

The stranger, angered by the poverty of the place, and the obvious discomfort in store for him, answered the questions in a none-too-pleasant tone. His reply seemed to satisfy the inmate of the house for the door was opened and the same voice invited him to enter. At this invitation a door at the back of the hall opened, throwing a dim patch of light into the hall, and toward this open door the old man, for so he appeared to be, led the way.

The little room from which the light came proved to be the kitchen and sitting room of the old couple, and as the pair entered from the hallway, the old woman was found down on her knees, attempting by the use of bellows and a few sticks, to encourage a grey pile of ashes to burst into flame. Her persistence met with some success, and as the fire was starting to blaze she hurried about to find a supper for the visitor.

“Be you traveling fer?” the old woman asked, emptying some hot cracklings into a dish.

“Far.” The stranger answered, throwing his cape over a chair, his hat on top of it, and revealing a prosperous looking individual in a fine suit of broadcloth and wearing a heavy gold chain across his waist front.

“Be you a merchant man?” the old man asked, peering sharply at the watch chain.

“Yes,” the stranger answered.

Such an effort at conversation seemed to exhaust the group. The preparation of the meal was concluded in silence; it was eaten in the same way.

How the Wind Moaned The Dark Night Long

“Now I should like to go to bed,” the visitor announced, standing up, and laying his cape over his arm.

“Oh I have a pretty room – such a cozy chamber to sleep in on cold, wintry nights,” the old woman rattled, taking a light from the mantle shelf, and opening the hall door. “Such a pretty room to sleep in a long . . . long . . . time.”

“Good,” the man said following her, “I am very tired.” The door closed behind them.

The old man stood in the firelight rubbing his hands softly together. Behind him the wind rattled the loose panes and made the rush wick of the oil lamp smoulder. His eyes glistened as he stared into the fire. In a few minutes the door opened softly behind him and the old woman slipped into the room and glided beside her husband.

“He’s rich . . . very rich,” she murmured.

“Very rich,” he echoed.

“I should like to be rich,” she said. “I should like to be rich and wear a black crepe dress and have a carriage with lights, to go visiting in.”

“We could be rich . . . It would be so easy for us to be rich,” he said slowly, slipping a long knife from the summer table.

“So easy . . .” she murmured.

And that night the stranger was murdered as he slept in his bed, the wind rattling every pane in the house and making the sign on the veranda to shriek. The old couple hauled and twisted and pushed until they forced the body into an old wash tub, and together they managed – with a surprising show of strength – to carry the tub out the front door. A sudden draft slammed the door behind them.

For a moment they stood at the top of the steps, with their burden between them, the moonlight falling through the branches of the trees upon them. As they stood there a small pool of blood dripped from a hole in the tub, onto the steps. Then down the steps they hurried – two scarecrows carrying a corpse in a tub – the wind whipping their clothes about them, swirling leaves against their faces, and rattling the bare limbs of the old trees above their heads. Down through the garden they swayed, down straight to the edge of the bluff above the river, and with a mighty swing, threw their burden out over the cliff, and dropping quickly to their knees, crawled to the very edge to watch the tub hit the water far below.

How Bad Fortune Came After Good

In the weeks that followed, the neighborhood was surprised at the sudden wealth of the old couple. The old woman appeared at church in a new black crepe dress, and soon after her husband bought her a fine coach with oil lamps backed by silver reflectors. Slaves were bought, the old house was painted, flower beds laid out, and the overgrown lane leading from the house to the main road was widened. Everything the old man touched seemed to turn to gold. His investments multiplied, his crops doubled those of his neighbors, his good fortune became a byword. The homes of the local aristocracy that had been closed to them before their sudden

prosperity were now opened to them and the old woman in her black dress, her husband beside her, riding from house to house, became a familiar sight on the roads around Overton Landing.

At the moment when the fortunes of the old couple seemed to be at their peak, the old woman contracted a strange malady which completely puzzled the physicians called to treat her. They bled her and thumped her and purged her – gave her quinine, calomel, whiskey, and rock candy, and declared their skill was exhausted. She grew thinner and bluer and more horrible day by day and after three weeks of slow distegration she called the neighbor ladies who were attending her close by her bedside and told them that she and her husband had murdered a strange traveling merchant and robbed his corpse.

“My black crepe dress and my carriage,” she said, gasping for breath, “was my reward for the deed . . .” She lay back on her pillow, eyes closed. The women above her cast frightened disturbed glances at one another. “She’s out of her head,” one whispered. The others nodded. A few minutes later the old woman died.

Waxing Rich, the Old Man Takes Another Wife

Of course the neighborhood discussed the dying woman’s story, but the spectacle of wealth has always subdued many gossiping tongues to a whisper, and the discussions never got beyond the parlor and saloon stage.

Several years passed. The old man got older and richer. His farms extended in every direction, his slaves multiplied. He decided to marry again and chose for that purpose a plump, handsome, little woman who was interested in wearing pretty clothes. The marriage was consummated in St. Louis in great style and after a suitable wedding trip in the East the couple wrote that they were on their way home. All Overton Landing was excited at the news. It would be a great event. Some wags suggested that the “ol’ buzzard” ought to have a real reception, and the idea was caught up in enthusiasm. A ‘charivari’ it was decided, with drums, and horns, and dish pans.

When the couple approached their home in a new brougham coach that had been sent to the Landing to meet them, a wild, half drunken crowd overflowed the yard, and yelling and screaming and beating and tooting their noise instruments, rolled down the lane to meet them. With difficulty the coachman managed to maneuver the vehicle to the block before the front gate and let the furious old man out of the coach. No one noticed the timid, pretty little woman who followed him on the block, or saw her slip past him and the crowd, into the house. The coachman drove off, the little old man was left in the center of the hilarious mob, his stomplings and imprecations lost in the din.

The louder he screamed, the more noise the crowd made. And so busy were they making their noises that they did not notice a carriage with lighted lamps that came around the house and was directed by the coachman – who sat straggely stiff in his box – to the stone block on which the little old man raved. The carriage reached the crowd, stopped for a moment, and the crowd instinctively fell back, never pausing in their noise.

How The Old Man Took His Leave.

Suddenly those nearest the carriage stopped their clatter and, with drawn faces and staring eyes, shrank back. In a moment the whole crowd was still. Only the old man was left – raving and screaming as before at the now silent crowd around him. The carriage drew up at the block beside him. The coachman climbed from his box, opened the door, and waited stiffly for his master to enter. The old man turned to the carriage in amazement – and, as he stared at what he saw within, his body seemed to shrink perceptibly in size, his eyes seemed to become black hollows in his skull.

There, in the full brilliance of the lamps, was seated his dead wife in her “visiting” costume. Clothed in her black crepe dress, her hands folded primly in her lap, and her unseeing eyes staring before her, she waited. Mechanically the old man obeyed the unspoken summons, entered the carriage and sat down. The door was shut. The driver climbed back on his box and the cavalcade was off down the lane to the main road.

The crowd that had stood, frozen in amazement, suddenly came to life – and screaming as though the Devil himself were behind them, fled in every direction.

Behind them at the front door the wind tearing at the silly little whisps of white muslin and flowers with which someone had decorated the veranda, the bride stood, wringing her hands. A light streamed over her shoulders from the lamp in the hallway, and fell on the red spots still on the steps. Several panes rattled as the wind increased.

She stood there as the crowd poured by her and its last remnants disappeared into the night.

She was still standing there as the candles on the wedding cake burned down to the icing and flickered before burning themselves out.

How Overton Roads Are Haunted by Night.

Since that event, years ago, it is said, a great many people have reported meeting at night on one of the roads about Overton, “a funny old carriage, illuminated by two lamps and carrying an old couple in queer clothes.” The people of the region who know the story and have heard of the apparition all of their lives, shake their heads and say that an appearance of the ghostly cavalcade “going calling” bodes no good.

A short time ago a man who lives near Overton, told that a friend of his from St. Louis drove down late one Saturday night to spend the week-end with him. Just before reaching Overton, the St. Louis man was forced to crash into a ditch “to avoid running into an old carriage that suddenly appeared around the corner.”

When so much of the Overton bottom land was falling into the river several years ago, a relative of mine narrowly escaped from running into the river where the road had been washed away “because I saw before me an old carriage with big lights on it, and I thought the road was still safe. I don’t know where it went to . . . “

A few days ago I was in Overton, and while I was talking with a friend a man who had not lived there very long came up and asked “Who is that nut that has one of them old time carriages and

tears around the country at night in it?" No one said anything, so he continued, "I was coming home real late the other night and a carriage came whooping it up down the road. The lights was lit and there was two old people all dressed up in them funny clothes they used to wear a long time ago, sitting up inside. It nearly ran over me before I could get out of the way."

As to the truth of this story I have absolutely no proof. I have never seen a ghost myself. I have never seen the supposed apparition of Overton Landing, which some individuals would have me believe exists, but then I have never seen the Plymouth Rock, and I am assured on the most excellent authority, that that venerable stone exists.

www.mogenweb.org/cooper