

## ***The Spook of Clark's Fork Hollow***

July 1, 1985. This account based on interviews with residents in the Clark's Fork community, Cooper Co., Missouri. CvR.

The following story was written by Charles van Ravenswaay, and by his account, was never published. In 1985, he sent a copy of this story to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection 23 Ellis Library, University of Missouri-Columbia Columbia, Missouri 65201-5149

Spook Hollow  
Submitted by Charles van Ravenswaay  
Boonville, MO  
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**Note:** *The following account of a Missouri "spook" has been pieced together from interviews and correspondence with men and women who themselves, or their neighbors, saw the things which they describe. In order to spare them any possible embarrassment fictitious names are used but in all other respects the story is reported as they have told it.*

Tales of the supernatural are a rich part of Missouri's folk-lore heritage and although the clatter and bustle of modern living have almost drowned out the memory of this background, nearly every town has its haunted house and its stories of mysterious lights and ghostly appearances. From Central Missouri comes the tale of how the tormented soul of a child murdered in a tavern on the Boon's Lick Trail was finally quieted by a "Christian burial"; in Potosi a ghostly bride appears at the window of an old house – an eternal vigil for the bride-groom killed on his wedding day; and in Boonville a headless horseman prances on the roof of the Brant house (why, no one seems to remember). Motorists entering St. Louis on rainy evenings are cautioned against befriending a certain hitchhiker, a wet and ashen-faced woman for she dramatically proves to be the ghost of an accident victim.

In contrast with these tales which have been told and retold so often their origins are obscure, it is the account of a strange light seen during the period from 1880 until about 1900 in an isolated valley some eight or ten miles south of Boonville. The whimsical and human manifestations of this "Spook", as the phenomena came to be somewhat jokingly called, were familiar to the entire community, and its annual appearances during October and November, were exciting local events. Although the families living in the valley found it hard to believe the proof of their own eyes, they were convinced – and still are – that this thing was no Will O' the Wisp (which has also been seen in the valley), St. Anthony's Fire, or any other natural phenomena. Because of the ridicule of outsiders they have seldom spoken of their experiences to others and the story of Spook Hollow is scarcely known outside that beautiful and entirely "normal-looking" Missouri Valley.

The story of the Spook really begins more than a hundred years ago when a man by the name of Story settled in the valley and chose a site near the spring for his home. Here he built a cabin of hewn logs carefully notched at the corners, and with an open "dog-trot," or "turkey-run" as it is sometimes called between the two rooms. In a clearing near his cabin Story raised a small patch of "truck" sufficient for his needs.

According to tradition, Story was something of a mystery to the families who came to settle in the valley for he shunned his neighbors and spent his time with his dogs, hunting the fall and winter, and fishing in the creek during the summer. One day a neighbor stopped by the cabin and found the place deserted. The coals were dead on the hearth and the half-starved dogs were fighting over a few scraps of

food. Story's gun was on its beackets above the fireplace; everything else was in its place as though he had just stepped outside for a stick of wood or a drink at the spring and hadn't come back. Obviously Story had been gone for many days.

No trace of Story was ever found. Some thought, considering his oddities, that he had taken a notion to "go out West" and had just "picked up and left." Others, noting that he had left his gun and his dogs, were sure he had been murdered and there was the usual gossip of buried gold as a motive. Still others believed – but this all happened so long ago there is only a vague tradition to vouch for it – that since he was not a Christian and because he had spurned the Church and its good works, he had sold his soul to the Devil. Whatever the reason, Story was gone and after a time his little farm was sold. Various families occupied the cabin, until about 1910 when it was abandoned. Now it is a sagging, misshapen ruin.

Of course Story's disappearances and the Spook may have no connection at all but because they are the only unusual things that have ever happened in the valley, it is natural they should have been linked together. Certainly the Spook did do many things characteristic of Story and, aside from that, it has many very human qualities. There was nothing routine about its actions; it was versatile; it had whims and it seemed to have a good time – often at the expense of the valley families.

No one knows when the Spook was first seen. When the Houston family moved into the farm home above the Story spring in 1882, the Spook was already a tradition in the valley, and during the Houston's twenty year residence in the community, they saw it many times. This family describes the Spook as a ball of dazzling white light which never increased or diminished in size, and which is apparently was never affected by climatic conditions, for it was seen on moonlight nights as well as during rain and snow storms. It always appeared over the northern rim of the valley, sometimes skimming along the tops of the trees and at other times moving about thirty inches above the ground, varying its speed from that of a slow walk to perhaps as fast as twenty miles an hour. Often it would remain at one place for an hour or two before moving on. During its tour of the valley, the Spook always went to the Story cabin where it made a slow circuit of the house, pausing for a few minutes at each of the four sides. Then it would go to the spring, pause again there, and move down the valley and out of sight.

The Wilson's who lived in the cabin during the 1880's had two dogs, Shep and Bruno. These dogs would run down the road towards the light when they saw it coming down the valley, and when they got within twenty or thirty feet of it they would a start barking and backing away as it came near them. When they reached the fence around the cabin they would slip under the gate and bark again but as the light moved into the yard they would duck under the house and keep still.

The Houston family on the adjoining farm also had a dog, which would run down the road to meet the light. Once it got too close and the dog's bark of greeting changed to a terrified howl. The animal seemed to attract the Spook and it swerved towards the dog, which backed whining up the hill toward the Houston home. At the fence the dog turned and ran under the house. The Spook remained at the gate. The Houston family who had been watching, went out into the yard to examine the light and approached within some twenty feet of it. They noticed that although the light was so bright they could hardly look directly at it; there was no heat to it. Even more surprising was the discovery that behind the light was a V-shaped shadow so black that even the light did not penetrate it, and beneath the shadow were two pair of legs clad in ragged buckskin trousers and moccasins. From the shadow could be heard the voices of a man and a boy arguing, but, although the Houston's listened intently, they could not understand what the voices were saying.

The shadow and the voices and the buckskin trousers were sufficient proof that here was a super-ghost, but its fondness for coon-hunting gave it a human quality which made the community less fearful of it when they might otherwise have been. The hunts were really spectacular. The Spook would tear through the underbrush and over the dry leaves like a whirlwind, urging on its dogs with an unearthly cry which sounded something like "HEEEeeeeeeee-eee," beginning very high and fading slowly away.

“Even now after many years, “Mr. J. E. Houston writes” when I try to imitate it, I feel the same shiver that went over me as a boy when I heard it in the woods those clear October nights.” Finally the hounds could be heard barking at a treed coon. Then would come the sound of axes; the tree would fall with a crash, and while the listeners waited for the yelp of the hounds pouncing on the coon and the sound of gunshots – the usually finale of the hunt – there was only silence. No trace of any tree felled during these hunts was ever found.

On an October night, so bright with moonlight it seemed like day, the Houston family watched the light come to the base of a giant Burr-oak tree that stood near the bottom of their hill. Within a second the light flared up against the trunk, mounting like a flame until the entire tree, covered with dry leaves, was an immense bonfire that sent sparks flying high into the air. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the fire died away. In the morning the Houston’s examined the tree and found it unharmed; not a leaf was even scorched.

There were other strange occurrences too; such as the time the Spook was seen driving a pack of about a hundred hogs through the woods. The grunts of the pigs, the rustling of the dry leaves, and the shrill “Sooeey,” and “Hee” of the Spook driving them, made a considerable noise. Mr. Houston feared something might have happened to his hogs, and wondering if the Spook had taken up hog-rustling along with everything else, went out to investigate his pens, but found everything in order and his hogs sleeping quietly.

At times the Spook seemed to take an almost childish pleasure in frightening the valley residents. Once when Charlie Luneburg was walking across the hill to see Lou Hopley with whom he was keeping company, the light appeared in his path and would not let him continue. On another night, when Sam Wilson was driving his family home from a revival meeting, the Spook appeared in the middle of the road and frightened the horses so they wouldn’t go ahead. Wilson stood up in the wagon, swearing first at the horses and then at the Spook, and whipping the animals with his long rawhide. That didn’t do any good and finally Mrs. Wilson began singing a hymn and the Spook immediately moved aside and let them pass.

Those living the valley during the appearances of the Spook remember other stories and, inevitably, other tales have developed which have no real basis in fact. Almost forty years have passed since the Spook was last seen and in those forty years the valley and the spring have changed very little. Who knows, old-timer queries, but what the Spook may return again one of these crisp November nights.