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The Harpes, Two Outlaws of Pioneer Days in Henderson

Sunday Evening Journal Henderson

The story of the Harpes is more than that of mere criminals. They were arch-criminals apparently loving murder for its own sake. Any account of the barbarities they committed in Kentucky and Tennessee would be looked upon as wild fiction if the statements therein were not verified by court records and contemporary newspaper notices, or were they not carefully checked with the sketches of early writers who gathered the facts from men and women who lived at the time the crimes were committed.

It should be borne in mind that the exploits of outlaws in pioneer times greatly affected settlement of the new country. Dread of highwaymen brought peaceful frontiersmen together and thus built up communities and helped to hasten the establishment of law and order. The lives of early outlaws are therefore a part of the history of the country. The historian who passes them over as mere blood-and-thunder tales misses entirely one of the high lights in the great adventure of the settling of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.

The atrocities of the two Harpes—Big Harpe and Little Harpe—at the close of the eighteenth century, have rarely been equaled in

Their joint career as murderers were clouded in such mystery, and their outrages were so heartless, that Collins, the Kentucky historian, referred to them as the "most brutal monsters of the human race."

Their joint career as murderers covered a period of only two years, but it was terrible while it lasted. At that time, 1798-99, Kentucky and Tennessee were sparsely settled. The then-called West was well nigh a wilderness.

Among its pioneer population were men who, as fugitives from justice, had deliberately sought safety away from the eastern states. The Ohio and Mississippi rivers were infested with pirates; the early rivermen themselves were a rough and violent type. Isolation led the well-meaning to be generous and confiding to those whom he had tested; but to a great degree might was right, and strangers looked askance at each other and prepared for the worst. Yet such a rude and hardy people as this was gripped with horror at the unmeaning and unprovoked atrocities of the Harpes.

It is difficult in these days of well-ordered government to realize the mysterious terror and excitement that began near Knoxville in 1798 and swept through the wilderness to the borders of the Mississippi and across the Ohio into Illinois as some sudden, creeping fire breaks out in the underbrush, and grows steadily in intensity and rage until it sweeps forests before it. All this was, in a measure, realized in the breasts of human beings as the crimes of the Harpes increased.

The Harpes were believed to be brothers. They were natives of North Carolina. Micajah, known as Big Harpe, was born about 1768, and Wiley, known as Little Harpe, was born about 1770. Their father was said to have been a Tory soldier.

The Tories who, after the Revolution still sympathized with the King of England and continued to live in the "old settlements" were, in most sections, ostracized by their neighbors. It was to this ostracized class that the parents of the Harpes belonged; and thus it was in an environment of ha-

tried that the two sons grew up.

About 1795 the young Harpes left North Carolina for Tennessee accompanied by Susan Roberts and Betsy Roberts. Big Harpe claimed both women as his wives. Shortly after their arrival near Knoxville Little Harpe married Sallie Rice, daughter of a preacher.

From cheating and trickery at horse racing the two men drifted to horse and hog stealing. Their downright criminality soon asserted itself when they set fire to houses and barns. After having been arrested several times—escaping each time before being placed in jail—they decided to leave East Tennessee. Before going they killed a man named Johnson. They ripped open his body, filled it with stones and threw it into the Holstein river. Despite this caution the stones became loosened. The corpse rose to the surface and was discovered a few days later. This killing of Johnson seems to have been their first murder. It was followed by many others, but the true number will never be known. Travelers vanished and left no trace, but the Harpes moved with great celerity.

We next hear of them and their women on the Wilderness Road in Kentucky. Three more victims were on their list by the time they arrived at the tavern of John Farris near Crab Orchard. No one of the tavern suspected who the new arrivals were. There they met Stephen Langford of Virginia, who had come alone. Langford decided it would be safer to travel with companions through the wilderness than to go unaccompanied. A few days later—December 14, 1798—men driving cattle over the road leading to the Farris tavern accidentally discovered the body of a man concealed behind a log. It was identified as that of Langford. Suspicion fell on the Harpes. They were pursued and captured, and placed in the Stanford jail. On January 4, 1799, the two men and women appeared before the judges of the Lincoln County Court of Quarter Sessions. They were held for murder, and their case was transferred to the Danville District Court.

The next day a strong guard

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took the prisoners to Danville, ten miles away, to await trial in April. On March 16 both Big Harpe and Little Harpe escaped, leaving their three women and three jail-born infants behind.

The jailer evidently had felt there was some likelihood that his charges would escape for his account shows he bought, on January 20, 1799, "Two horse locks to chain the men's feet to the ground, 12 shillings, and one bolt, 3 shillings;" on February 13, "One lock for front jail door, 18 shillings;" and on February 27, "Three pounds of nails for the use of jail, 6 shillings."

Such was the state of affairs when, on April 15, the trial of the women began. Five days were devoted to hearing evidence, and the trial ended in the acquittal of the women. They declared that, above all things, they desired to return to Knoxville and there start life anew. It was believed that

they had obtained a happy release from their barbarous masters, and therefore a collection of clothes and money was taken among the citizens of Danville, and an old mare given, to help them on their way to Tennessee.

The jailer accompanied the three mothers to the edge of town to point out the road that led to Knoxville. It was learned later, however, that they had traveled less than thirty miles when they changed their course drifted down Green and Ohio Rivers to Diamond Island and Cave-in-Rock, and a few months thereafter joined their husbands near Henderson.

An organized hunt had been in progress since the two Harpes broke out of the Danville jail. It is probable that many joined the pursuing parties not because the Harpes were murderers, but chiefly because of their brutal conduct toward the three young women. No one suspected that these women had planned, should they be liberated, to meet their husbands in the lower Green River country.

Immediately after their escape the two Harpes resumed their work. On April 22, 1799, the

Governor of Kentucky issued a proclamation offering a reward for the capture of either or both. Reports of killings in Kentucky were followed by others from southern Illinois then from east Tennessee, then again from Kentucky. Among their victims was one of their own children. Declaring that Little Harpe's crying infant would some day be the means of pursuers detecting their presence, Big Harpe slung the baby by the heels against a tree and literally burst its head to pieces. During the first year of their unrestrained ferocity they had committed at least twenty murders. The whole of Ken-

tucky and Tennessee had become terrorized by the possibility of from their barbarous masters, and the appearance of the Harpes at any hour in any locality.

The people of the lower Green River country, like settlers elsewhere, were on the lookout for them. In the early part of August, 1799, two suspicious newcomers were discovered prowling around some of the backwoods settlements in southern Henderson County. These strangers might be the Harpes. No one knew. The Harpes, aware that they were being hunted—and at times seen and watched—had taken the precaution never to move in the open with their women. The fact that no woman had been seen with them led the watchers to conclude that the suspects were not the widely sought murderers.

One day the Harpes left Henderson county and started toward

the hiding place of their women and children—twenty or more miles away. They rode good horses, and were well armed and fairly well dressed.

That evening they arrived at the home of James Tompkins in what is now Webster County. They represented themselves as Methodist preachers. Their equipment aroused no suspicion, for the country was almost an unbroken wilderness and preachers, as well as most other pioneers, often traveled well armed. Tompkins invited them to supper, and Big Harpe, to ward off suspicion, said

a long grace at table. After supper they bade their host farewell, saying they had an engagement elsewhere.

Late that night, Aug. 20, they reached the house of Moses Stegall—about five miles east of what later became the town of Dixon. Stegall was absent, but his wife and their only child, a boy of four

months, were at home and, a few hours before, had admitted Major William Love, a surveyor, who had come to see Stegall on business. Mrs. Stegall, expressing an opinion that her husband would return that night, invited him to remain. He had climbed up a ladder outside the house to the loft above and was in bed when the new arrivals entered the cabin. He came down and met the two men. In the conversation that followed the murderers themselves inquired about the Harpes, and, according to rumor, the two outlaws were then prowling around in the neighborhood.

Mrs. Stegall, having only the spave bed in the loft, was obliged to assign it to the three men. After Major Love had fallen asleep, one of the Harpes took an axe which he always carried in his belt and, with a single blow, dashed out the brains of the sleeping

man. The two villains then went down to Mrs. Stegall's room. She, knowing nothing to the contrary, presumed Major Love was still asleep. Reprimanding her for assigning them to a bed with a man whose snoring kept them awake, they murdered her and her baby. Leaving the three bodies in the house, they set it afire.

The next morning five men returning from a salt lick found the Stegall house a smoldering ruin. Surroundings indicated that the disaster was still unknown in the neighborhood. The men proceeded to the home of Squire Silas McBee to notify him of their discovery. While they were discussing the subject with Squire McBee, Moses Stegall rode up, and for the first time heard what had happened to his family.

Then began the hunt for the Harpes. Mounted and equipped and provisioned for a few days,

Squire McBee's troop of seven men started on their expedition against the murderers. They found and followed the trail until night. Early the next morning after traveling only a few miles, they detected the Harpes standing on a distant hillside. Big Harpe was holding his horse. Little Harpe had no horse. The pursuers at once started for the hill. In the meantime Big Harpe mounted and darted off in one direction, Little Harpe ran in another—and both were out of sight. In their efforts to find traces of the Harpes the pursuers discovered the Harpe camp. They found no one there except Little Harpe's woman. When questioned threateningly she said she did not know in what direction Little Harpe had fled, but that Big Harpe had just been there, hurriedly placed each of his women on a good horse, and had ridden away with them. She was left under the care of one of the men, and the chase was resumed.

A few miles farther on, Big Harpe and his two women were seen on a ridge a short distance ahead. Realizing his danger he put spurs to his horse and dashed off alone, leaving his women behind. They made no attempt to follow him, but calmly awaited their captors, two of whom took them in charge.

The other men continued the chase. Each fired a shot at the fleeing outlaw, who again and again brandished his tomahawk in savage defiance. The wild ride continued through dense woods and over narrow trails for a few miles until the fugitive, slackening his pace, was overtaken. He had been mortally wounded by one of the shots. As he lay stretched upon the ground, he asked for water. A shoe was pulled off his foot and water was brought. Moses Stegall stepped forward. While reciting to Big Harpe how brutally he had murdered his wife and child, Stegall drew a knife, declaring he would cut off his enemy's head. Then he pointed a gun at Harpe's face. The dying outlaw, conscious of the threat, jerked his head from side to side, hoping to dodge the threatened bullet. "Very well," said Stegall, "I will not shoot you

in the head, for I want to save it as a trophy." Then aiming at his heart, he shot him in the left side. And Big Harpe died without another struggle or groan.

With the knife he had so coldly exhibited, Stegall cut off the outlaw's head. He placed it in one end of a bag, in the other end of which was a corresponding weight of provisions. The bag was slung across a horse, and the captors and their three captured women started on their return—some thirty-five miles—leaving the headless corpse to the wolves of Muhlenberg County. The head was taken to the cross roads near where the Harpes had committed their last crime. It was there placed in the fork of a tree as a warning to others. The spot ever since has been known as Harpe's Head, and the old road, now a modern highway, still bears the name of Harpe's Head road.

The captors, leaving the outlaw's head conspicuously displayed in the tree, rode on to Henderson, some twenty miles farther, and place the three women in jail. The prisoners were tried on September 4, 1799, before the Court of Quarter Sessions. They were found guilty of "being parties in the murder" and accordingly were ordered sent to Russellville to appear, in October, before the Logan District Court. That court found them "not guilty." After their release Little Harpe's wife returned to Tennessee. Big Harpe's women and two children continued to live in Logan County for many years.

Big Harpe was dead, and the women had again been spared through public sympathy. Little Harpe had vanished into the wilderness. No one knew where, how, or when he might reappear. All feared his return. It was not until five years later that they learned he had gone south, and under another name joined with Samuel Mason, the outlaw.

Samuel Mason stands out in pioneer history of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys as a highway robber and river pirate. He had been a useful Revolutionary soldier. The Harpes killed men, wo-

men and children to gratify a lust for murder. Mason took to robbery solely for the purpose of getting money. He was one of the shrewdest and most resourceful robbers; nevertheless he was trapped by the younger Harpe. About two years after Little Harpe made his last flight from Kentucky—after his brother had been killed—he joined Mason's band under the name of John Setton. Mason evidently did not recognize Setton as Little Harpe.

Mason's robberies had become so frequent and so serious on the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace that in 1802 the Governor of Mississippi offered a reward of \$1000 for the leader dead or alive. In January 1803, Mason and his band, including Little Harpe, who was still unrecognized under an alias, were captured near New Madrid, Missouri. After a preliminary trial before the Spanish authorities, the prisoners made their escape.

Soldiers and civilians again became man-hunters. One day two men appeared in Greenville, Mississippi (near Natchez), bringing with them a gruesome trophy—the head of Samuel Mason—and claimed the reward. The head was identified as that of Mason by a number of persons. The two heroes appeared before the judge to receive an order for the payment of the reward. They gave their names as John Setton and James May.

As the judge was in the act of making out a certificate, a traveler stepped into the court room and requested the arrest of the two men. He stated that he had alighted at the tavern, had repaired to the stable to see his horse attended to, and there saw the horses of the two men who had arrived just before him. He recognized the horses—principally because each had a peculiar blaze in the face—as belonging to parties who had robbed him and killed one of his companions on the Natchez Trace some two months before. And going into the court house he identified the two men.

This declaration indicated that the two men had committed at least one murder and robbery, and they were therefore held under

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arrest. No one knew May nor the man who called himself Setton. But suspicion was aroused that Setton was actually Harpe. A notice was put up at the Natchez landing stating that it was believed Little Harpe had been captured, and persons having any knowledge of his identity were requested to come to the Greenville jail and view the prisoner. One Kentucky boatman who had seen him in the Danville jail recognized him at once. Another asserted, "If he is Little Harpe he has a mole on his neck and two toes grown together on one foot." A Tennessee man declared "If he is Little Harpe, he has a scar under his left nipple where I cut him in a difficulty we had in Knoxville."

An examination showed every one of these identifying marks.

Escape was now the only hope for Harpe and May. They did break jail, but were recaptured. On January 13, 1804, they were tried, "found guilty of robbery," and sentenced to death; and on February 3 were hanged in what has been known ever since as "Gallows Field."

No attempt had been made to lynch the two condemned outlaws, but the lynch spirit evidently raged, for, after their legal execution on Gallows Field, their heads were placed on poles, one a short distance to the north and the other a short distance to the west of Old Greenville on the Natchez Trace.

The two headless bodies were buried together in one grave near the Old Trace. As time rolled on, the narrow Trace widened, as roads frequently do, and wore deeper into the slight elevation over which it led. Finally this widening and deepening process reached the fleshless bones in the solitary grave, and the two skeletons, protruding piece by piece from the road bank were dragged out by dogs and beasts. Thus the last vestige of Little Harpe disappeared on the very highway upon which he had committed many crimes.

The terrorizing influences of the names of the Harpes gradually vanished from the South and the West, but the deeds of these out-

laws and the horror they aroused have passed into the history of pioneer life.

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