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Gurdon and the Ghost Orb

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Research Paper: First Draft

Research Seminar

Dr. Bethany Hicks

When describing the town of Gurdon, Arkansas there is always one legend that is brought up, The Gurdon Light. Throughout this paper we will be looking into the beginnings of Gurdon, what made it possible for a legend that is over 70 years old to still be told, and the court case that is the basis of this legend.

The first known people to live in present day Clark County were the Caddo Indians. They would hunt and roam these parts but never claim any land. Later, there were the Spanish who traveled throughout what is presently known as Arkadelphia and Gurdon as early as 1541. De Soto stopped at the salt wells in Arkadelphia, with his men. From there he went from the Ouachita River to the Red River. It was at the mouth of the Red River that De Soto died.¹

During the War of 1812 Captain Dick Tate was fighting alongside General Andrew Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. It was in the course of the war that Captain Tate travelled up the Ouachita River from New Orleans and found the land beautiful and vowed to come back when he could. He would later travel back and settle there with his family, but not until the war had ended.²

The town of Gurdon, as we now know it, was originally founded near the year 1818 by the Tate family. Captain Tate had travelled through the Western half of America to find again the wilderness that he wanted to make his home. With the company of his negro slave, Abe, Tate started on his mission in 1816. The duo travelled on the rivers through America to get back the

¹ Helen Tarpley, Zela Taylor, and Joyce Taylor, Gurdon Centennial Album, 1880-1980 (S.I.: S.n., 1981), 4.

² Sesser, David. "Gurdon (Clark County) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas." Gurdon (Clark County) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas. March 12, 2012. Accessed November 01, 2013.
<http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=849>.

land. They eventually made it to land Tate had admired but not before travelling on the Mississippi into Tennessee where some of Tate's family ended up settling.³

Once finding the land, Tate and Abe went to build a keel boat so that his family would be able to come. His family would include, his brothers, Anderson George; his older sister, Sarah; nephew Robert; and others, totaling eighty. "The keel boat was loaded with livestock, cattle, horses, tools, implements, seeds for the first sowing, household goods, and family treasures, such as a n old walnut chest brought from Ireland."⁴ Upon landing the boat, Tate went in search for the perfect place to build his log cabin. It was in Gurdon, Arkansas that he deemed fit. By 1819 the cabin was finished, marking the first house to be built in Gurdon. Anderson and Robert Tate Sr., later became the landowners of where the family was located. The men went to Washington, Arkansas and purchased it directly from the Government Land Office.⁵

Years later the Tate house was a frequent stop for pioneers. It was a good place to stop for the travelers before they continued onward.it was popular for people to stop in Gurdon on their way to Camden. It was there that the Tate family, as well as others would go and get their supplies. The men would normally way until fall so that they could go by ox wagon. They would trade what they had in exchange for what they needed. It was in this period of time that there was no line of credit. A traveler would either have goods to trade or money to buy what they needed, if they didn't have either they did without.⁶

During these early years of Gurdon, not much of great importance happened here. There was though two criminal activities that did take place. The James boys, who were on the run

³ Tarpley, 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ Ibid., 6.

from the police, buried their loot at 200 Walnut Street. The other criminal instance is when thieves stole horses and headed west. They were stopped by citizens and shot on the spot and buried there.⁷

Gurdon however, is more notably established in the later part of the 19th century. The Gurdon Lumber Company was founded not long before the railroad came through Clark County. The mill was not far north of town. “From the beginning it provided a payroll for hundreds of citizens.”⁸It was around 1874 that Gurdon became better known. Before this time, Gurdon had been of no importance, but in that year, Cairo and Fulton Railroad reached Clark County. The railroad’s name would later be changed to St. Louis, Iron Mountain & Southern, even later it would change to Missouri-Pacific Railroad. From that point on more family moved to Gurdon and made permanent settlements there.⁹

Even before the Gurdon was a part of Clark County the townsfolk were getting everything ready for what would eventually be Gurdon. They had established a post office in 1876. The first schoolhouse that was built between 1878 and 1879. It was there that the first church of Gurdon was organized. It was a Methodist church that was started in 1880. The Baptists and Presbyterians soon followed on 1886 and 1890 respectably. Additional buildings soon followed, the first newspaper in 1886 and the public library in 1895.¹⁰

Once the railroad was up and running it didn’t take long for the townspeople to get moving on becoming an official town. Up until 1880, Gurdon was becoming established but

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Newberry, Farrar, and Allen B. Syler. *Through the Eyes of Farrar Newberry: Clark County, Arkansas*. Arkadelphia, AR: Clark County Historical Association, 2002.

⁹ Wendy Bradley. *Richter, Clark County, Arkansas: Past and Present* (Arkadelphia, AR: Clark County Historical Association, 1992), 274.

¹⁰ Newberry.

thirty-three citizens of Gurdon signed a petition that requested the Clark County Court to incorporate them in the county.¹¹ During that year Gurdon voted on its first mayor, Col. Dan Joslyn. An important name on the petition was that of Robert S. Tate, one of the founding family members of Gurdon before it was officially a town.

It was during this time that Gurdon received its name. “The origin of the name ‘Gurdon’ is attributed to three different people: a Mr. Gurdon who led a group of six families from old Rome (Clark County) in 1868 due to conflicts in Rome to a site southwest of present Gurdon, the place being called ‘Gurdon’ since, at the time there was already a Gorden, Ark; a Gurdon Cunningham who was a road surveyor; still others claim it was named after a railroad official.”¹²

The murder that would take place in this small town nearly 60 years after the formation of it, was in part because of the Cairo and Fulton Railroad. Gurdon has always been referred to as a railroad town, and it was on the tracks that our murder took place. Had no train tracks been made there, would there have not been a murder? Some will argue that yes, that is the case. With this murder, comes a legend. This legend is over 60 years old, and has been a ghost story for college students to tell each other. The legend is of the Gurdon Light, and there many that will spend their weekends going to see the supposed ghost light.

Fifty-seven years after the formation of the, now called, Missouri-Pacific Railroad in Clark County William McClain was murdered. The legend goes that a railroad worker was working late at time when a train was coming and he fell into it. The foreman’s head was severed and now the light is from his lantern that the dead foreman carries as he tries to find his severed head. The other popular legend goes that there was a fight on a train one night between the

¹¹ Richter, 274.

¹² May, Joe. "Gurdon History: A Tale of Two Cities." The Gurdon Times, August 14, 1990.

conductor and a worker onboard. The worker ended up pushing the conductor out of the train causing his head to come clean off. The conductor now goes around looking for the worker that killed him. While both of these stories can be fun to tell around a campfire, neither of them hold much truth. Yes, there was a man who died on by the tracks. Besides that though, the fables hold little to no truth.¹³

Though, from the tales, Gurdon has gained media coverage. NBC's "Unsolved Mysteries" had a special on the Gurdon Light in 1994. There have also been books written about the phenomena such as *Haunted Place in the American South* by Alan Brown. From these two works Gurdon has gained more popularity and people are coming into the town just to go and see the light.

William McClain was working on the Norman Branch section of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad on the night of December 10th, 1931. It was there that he was brutally murdered by one of his workers Louis McBride. Mrs. McClain also called the sheriff to tell him that her husband was not home yet. This was uncommon for him seeing as he normally returned home around 5pm.¹⁴ She became worried and asked Duke to see what had happened. It is then that McBride was found having left work early and was seen around Gurdon acting suspiciously. Because of his behavior, he was brought into the Sheriff's office. It is there that he confessed to the murder of his boss and told Sheriff Duke where the body was located. After learning about the murder, Sheriff Duke moved McBride to the jail in Arkadelphia, so that he would not be bothered. Once McBride was placed in Arkadelphia, Duke went to find the body.¹⁵

¹³ Wendy Richter, "Clark County's "Unsolved Mystery": The Gurdon Light," Clark County Historical Journal, 2001, 127-128.

¹⁴ State of Arkansas v. Louie McBride (Clark County Circuit Court February 2, 1932).

¹⁵ "Negro Man Kills Section Foreman," Southern Standard (Amity), December 10, 1931.

Once the body was found and McBride was behind bars, the officers had reason to believe that there was an accomplice to the crime, George Brewer. Brewer worked on the same section as McClain and McBride, and he was McBride's uncle. Brewer worked the morning before and went home but was later arrested for the murder. However, there was no evidence that Brewer had anything to do with the crime.¹⁶

After being questioned McBride told the sheriff that he killed McClain because he became angered after McClain accused him of being the reason that there was a train accident a few days prior. "McBride said that while working with McClain he became angered, and struck him over the head with the spike maul, and that McClain ran, the negro giving chase, and hitting him continually until he finally struck him down and beat him to death over the road."¹⁷ A coroner's inquest was held by Coroner Alva Harris. Harris declared that McClain was murdered. For that reason, McBride and Brewer were help to the grand jury.

There were a great many of people that came to look for McClain's body. Once found, the officers saw that there had been a terrible struggle. There was a blood trail for a forth a mile, the distance McClain tried to run to get away from McBride. There were signs that once he was left for dead, McClain got up and tried to leave the woods, but soon died.

A trial took place February 2nd 1932. It was, "of the Clark County Circuit Court, before the Hon. Dexter Bush, Judge of said Court... the State being represented by Mr. Millard Alford, Prosecuting Attorney, the defendant by Mr. R.W. Huie and Mr. W.E. Haynie."¹⁸ Alford asked

¹⁶ "Negro Man Kills Section Foreman"

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ State of Arkansas v. Louie McBride (Clark County Circuit Court February 2, 1932).

the marshal of the town, John Sheppard about the events surrounding the murder. Sheppard discussed when he found McBride and how he drove McBride to Arkadelphia and on the ride McBride talked about where the murder weapon was located. The time of which McBride was picked up was evening. There were many other witnesses, but none were especially important to the case, especially since McBride had already confessed to the murder.

The defense motioned for a new trial on February 4th, 1932. The reasons for this were, “First the verdict of the jury was contrary to the evidence. Second, the court erred in the remanding the defendant to an Insane Asylum, and not instructing the jury, after the testimony was in, to find the defendant insane and not guilty.”¹⁹

The jury didn’t take long to decide the fate of Mr. McBride, he was found guilty and sentenced to execution on July 8th, 1932. It was a Friday at 7pm. The witnesses included the brother of William McClain. It was the first death by electrocution for the penitentiary that year.²⁰

It was not until after late after the men’s deaths that the light started to be seen. It wasn’t until the 50s though that college students started to go and visit it regularly, though. There are many different ways that people try to disprove the theory of the Gurdon Light being McClain’s ghost. The two most known of these being that the light is from car headlights and the light is from “peizeoelectrical effect.”²¹

The headlight theory is a straight forward way of looking at the cause of the light. This theory can be disproved though because of the fact that the highway that the car lights would be

¹⁹ Motion for new trial (Clark Circuit Court February 4, 1932).

²⁰ Southern Standard (Arkadelphia). "Louis McBride Does in the Electric Chair." July 14, 1932.

²¹ Rowlett, Lara. "Light Remains a Big Mystery to Locals." Daily Shifting Herald (Arkadelphia), May 17, 1988.

on was not finished until 1957. For that reason it is not possible for the light to have been from car headlights. Mike Clingan, a former student of Henderson State University and a former graduate student at the University of South Carolina thinks that there are other matters that prove it isn't headlights. He discovered the track is 4 miles away from the interstate and there are hills in between the two. This is disputed however, by Dr. Charles Leming who used to be a professor of physics at Henderson. Dr. Leming explains that a photographer has taken pictures of the light and that it had the same characteristics of car headlights. .²²

The piezoelectrical effect state, "that a group of crystals, especially quartz since it is common in these areas, are put under intense pressure from the fault lines such as the New Madrid Fault which runs through the area. When these crystals are squeezed together, they develop an electrical charge giving off sparks."²³

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

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