

Gurdon Light a popular attraction to area, especially on Halloween

By Wendy Richter

For the Siftings

According to witnesses, on many nights a mysterious glow appears along the path of the old railroad track about four miles north of Gurdon, not far from Interstate 30. The light sways back and forth across where the train traveled, one to three feet above the ground. Sometimes it appears to be a "yellowish white" "orange-red" or even a "bluish white." And, it appears in all kinds of weather. This phenomenon—commonly known as the Gurdon Light—has been the source of much discussion and speculation since the 1930s. Local legend says that the murder of railroad section foreman Will McClain explains the light's source. It is probably southwest Arkansas's best-known ghost story.

For decades, many have visited the area to see the Gurdon Light. It has been an "unsolved mystery" from the time it first appeared in the 1930s. Since the 1950s, area young people have made witnessing the light a tradition. Through the years—particularly around Halloween—students have made the dark trip down the railroad tracks in hopes of seeing the mysterious light. The more mischievous young people hide and scare others walking along the trail. Some even hide behind tombstones in the old cemetery nearby to jump out and scare those walking by.

Some people claim to have been chased by the light. Also, the light has appeared behind individuals who walked far enough down the track/trail. And, some area residents report having seen more than a simple light—they actually saw what they believe to be a man's ghost!

The media transformed this local legend into a

national mystery when NBC aired a segment about the Gurdon Light on its "Unsolved Mysteries" series in 1994. Several local people were interviewed, including Dr. Charles Leming of Henderson State University. Leming researched the phenomenon for years, not coming to any final conclusions. Several plausible explanations exist, but none can be proven. One of the most common is that the Gurdon Light emanates from automobile headlights on Interstate 30. And, that might be an acceptable explanation, if not for the fact that the light began to be seen in the 1930s, long before the interstate highway system was constructed. Swamp gas is another possibility. But, since the light appears in all types of weather and retains its shape, it makes the phenomenon somewhat inconsistent with the swamp gas theory. However, local legend focuses on one event—a murder—to explain the Gurdon Light.

The murder took place in the immediate vicinity of the railroad tracks in December of 1931. Shortly after that time, area residents began to see the light nearby. The Dec. 10, 1931, *Southern Standard* reported the murder:

"Will McClain, section foreman on the Norman Branch of the Missouri-Pacific Railroad, four miles north of Gurdon, was killed Friday afternoon by Louis McBride, 38 years old, and a member of the crew working under McClain. There were no eye witnesses to the tragedy, but the man after the murder, came into Gurdon before quitting time, and acted so suspiciously that he was arrested, and when McClain did not go home that night the Sheriff's office was notified, and McBride was brought to Arkadelphia and placed in jail. After considerable

questioning, McBride finally confessed to the murder, and told where the body could be found, as well as the spike maul with which he committed the deed. In relating the details of the crime McBride said that while working with McClain he became angered, and struck him over the head with the spike maul, and that McClain ran, McBride giving chase, and hitting him continually until he finally struck him down and beat him to death over the head. The killing took place about a quarter of a mile from where the attack began.

"There is a rumor to the effect that McBride became angered because McClain accused him of causing the wreck of a freight train the day before, below Beirne.

"An uncle of McBride, also a member of the section crew, who left the work the morning before the murder and went home, was later arrested and placed in jail. His name is George Brewer.

"A coroner's inquest was held at Gurdon by Coroner Alva Harris, attended by J.H. Lookadoo of Arkadelphia, deputy prosecuting attorney, and Sheriff Duke. The verdict of the jury was that Will McClain was murdered. McBride and Brewer were ordered held to the grand jury.

"Officers who visited the scene of the crime said there were signs of a terrific struggle. There was a trail of blood nearly a quarter mile long, indicating that the section foreman was near the railroad when attacked and had run from his assailant. Near the point where McClain is believed

to have died were other signs of a struggle. It was also indicated that after he was left for dead, he rallied and tried to leave the woods. The back of his head had been struck four severe blows."

Throughout the struggle, McClain never let the lantern slip from his grasp. According to local legend, the Gurdon Light is the railroad lantern swinging from the hand of the deceased man's ghost as he walks through the area.

Louis McBride was found guilty of the crime. The *Southern Standard* of July 14, 1932, reported his execution in the electric chair:

For the murder of a railroad section foreman, Louis McBride, 38 year old of Gurdon, Clark County, paid with his life in the electric chair at the penitentiary about 7 Friday. McBride was strapped in the chair before witnesses were allowed to enter the death chamber, a precaution Warden S.L. Todhunter took because the prisoner had been unruly several times. McBride calmly walked to the chair, resigned to his fate, Mr. Todhunter said. This was the first electrocution in the penitentiary walls this year.

For additional information about the Gurdon Light and other Clark County ghost stories, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum at the train depot (www.clarkcountyhistory.org or 230-1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245-5332).

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