Pictures

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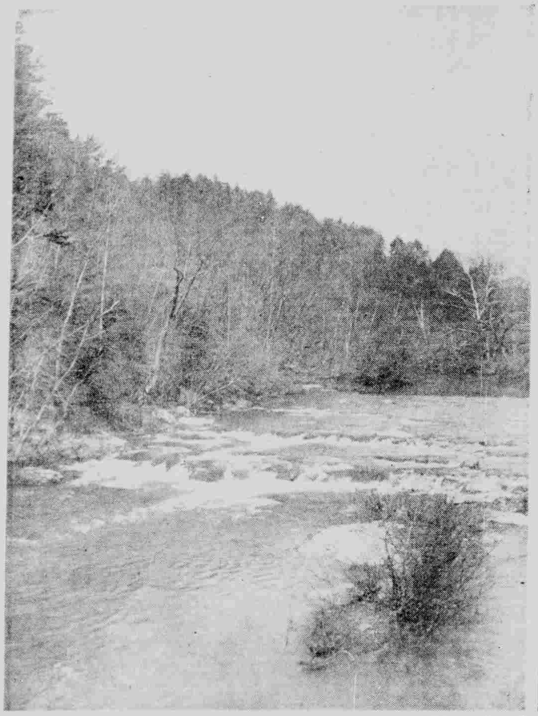
Happy Valley Folks Still Sing About Tom Dula and Laurie Foster

But Nobody Knows For Certain What Anne Melton Wanted to Say That Night She Died Screaming



This here's Yadkin river up whar hit ain't so big. Hit were right along here that Tom Dula used to go a-sparkin with Laurie Foster fore somebody done away with Laurie with a ten-cent knife.

By ROBERT MENZIES.

Folks all up and down Happy Valley was mighty stirred up whin somebody put out the word that Laurie Foster had up and disappeared.

Fur Laurie were a uncommon purty gal. Her hair were black and her hands was soft and her eyes was sassy. They was plenty of hell to Laurie Foster and the young bucks figgered she were a right nice arm full.

Lived up on her pappy's farm in the State of Wilkes betwixt Lenoir and Wilkesboro. Worked right hard, Laurie did, fur ole man Foster won't much good at providin, and folks say he won't worth shootin after his old woman died. Laurie had to do all the house work and cook fur her pap and brothers, and they was powerful eaters.

This here Laurie Foster were bout the best horse rider in all the Valley and she showed up some of the young bucks purty bad whin she'd git to jumpin fences on that peppery mare of her'n. They say she were more like a man than a man was his self whin hit come to things what took plenty of spunk to do.

Yessiree Bob, she was right smart of a woman and ole man Foster complained he couldn't take a step 'thout stumblin over some feller what had come to make eyes at Laurie. But Laurie didn't care a hoot fur none of 'em, not till Tom Dula come along, fresh home from the Civil War.

This Tom Dula were a cutter if ever they was one. Good lookin'! They done stopped turnin out men as well set up as Tom were. Strong as a span of mules and mighty free and easy like. Handy with a gun, Tom were, and he'd take no lip from nobody, be hit Gov'nor Zeb Vance his self.

Fur Tom had been a fightin fool in ole Zeb's regiment at Gettysburg. He were there whin Pickett's bloody charge were made, whin 800 Southern fellers went into that flamin hell. And Tom were one of the 80 what come back alive.

Yep, Gov'nor Zeb thought right smart of Tom. And so did all the folks he fit with through the war.

They say Tom were purty free with his courtin whin he come back to the Valley. Couldn't blame the feller much. What with women aplenty and men as scarse as they was.

But ever'body thought he were aimin to marry La[illegible]ie Foster, what with them bein so thick and all. So folks won't much surprised whin Tom took on kinda bad whin he heard Laurie was a-missin.

The main gatherin place in them days were Calv Cowles' store, what sit right smack on Yadkin river—twixt hit and the road frum Lenoir to Wilkesboro. Whin word come in to the fellers hangin aroun the store chewin terbaccer and pitchin horse shoes and sich, nobody paid no attention much. Folks figgered Laurie'd jist got sick and tired of ole man Foster's pesterin and had gone off fur a spell. Ever'body know'd Laurie could look out fur herself.

But then one day a feller what taught the young'uns of the rich folks in the Valley—Bob Cummings his name were—come in the store with startlin news. Said as how he'd found some blood stains and signs of scufflin up in the clearin near Ed Bates' place.

This clearin were right on top of a ridge and the rep'tation of the place won't none too good. They'd been a coupla shootin scrapes up there, after some young rascals had liquored up too much. Great sparkin place, too. Nope, the place didn't have no good name a-tall.

Folks didn't cotton much to this here Bob Cummings, the tutor feller. Where he come frum, nobody know'd. Won't much of a hand at mixin' with the folks, though ever'body were kinder proud to have him in the Valley 'count of his book larnin.

But be who he were, he brung news what stirred up people considerable. Folks got busy. Drug the river for miles and scoured the countryside, lookin' for Laurie's body. They say hit were a sight to be seen, with people burnin torches and carryin lanterns, a-lookin all over them hills of a night, hopin to find pore Laurie.

Yit, hit didn't seem like they could do no good a-tall. Not till after a long time whin ole Colonel Dave Horton, a magistrate in the Valley, were comin home frum court in Wilkesboro one day.

He were ridin through the woods, not fur frum home, whin his brown mare what was named Ball got to actin up powerful strange, pawin the ground and snortin and buckin so he might nigh throw'd Colonel Dave out'n the saddle.

"Whoa, fool," Colonel Dave hollered.

Got off'n his hoss, Colonel Dave did, and hitched the critter to a tree. Then he got to pokin round in the ground with that gold-headed cane of his'n. Found a soft spot by a tree and started diggin.

Yep, he found pore Laurie's body. Leastways, he thought hit must be her body, fur in all that hot weather—hit were right in the middle of summer in 1866—the corpse were purty fur gone.

Colonel Dave rid in to Calv Cowles' store and spread the word around. Then he got on Ball agin and rid 20 miles to Wilkesboro and fetched back Sheriff W. G. Hix.

They say Sheriff Hix were a mighty fine feller but he didn't know nothin much about bein a sheriff. Couldn't seem to git up much steam and let folks run over him too much.

But he done what he could, and Lord knows they won't much support fur him, with more niggers than white folks in office them days right after the war.

Got wind of how Laurie had been purty thick with a bunch of Bushwhackers what had hid out at Fort Hamby in the Valley durin' the war. These was a bunch of fellers what had deserted from both the Yankee and Confederate armies.

But he couldn't find out nothin' a-tall frum them and ever time he would ask one of 'em a question he'd answer back, right smart and sassy like,

"Do which?"

And then the whole passel of 'em would cackle fit to kill.

Whin Sheriff Hix made out to do some inquirin amongst the young bucks what had been callin on Laurie, he run into trouble shore nuff. The fellers had jist got back frum the war, most of 'em leastways, and they won't particular bout havin him snootin aroun. They was some right tough numbers amongst 'em and Lordy mercy, eff'n the Sheriff were going to put the suspicion on ever man what had called on Laurie, he'd have to see might nigh ever young feller in the Valley.

Things rocked along and folks got plum disgusted with the Sheriff's slow-poke ways. He finally lit out fur Louisiana, sayin' he believed they was a fellow down there what might-have don it, seein as how he'd left the Valley since the killin.

Men around Calv Cowles' store would spit terbaccer juice over the railin and try to figger out just who the killer mout be.

"Take that feller Cummings," one of 'em would say, "he were mighty durned thick with Laurie his self, and him with his sneakin ways. Eff'n he haint the guilty man, he's shore missin a mighty good chance to be."

What folks got to wonderin 'bout more'n more were why in the devil so many young fellers was leavin the Valley so sudden like. Let's see, they was Shep Keaton and John Dula, cousins to Tom, both of 'em and then Tom Dula his self up and left, long with Jack Keaton.

But whin Bob Cummings left the Valley, folks were plumb certain he was the man—no question about hit a-tall. This little tutor had been jealous or somethin of Laurie and he'd jist nachilly kilt her, that's all there was to it.

So the men folks loungin around Calv Cowles' store one day was right smart supprised at what they seen comin down the road from the d'rection of Lenoir.

Strike them all dead if hit won't Tom Dula and his tombstone buddy, Jack Keaton. They was ridin on a horse apiece and both of 'em were hog-tied with heavy rope. And ridin with them, not tied up a-tall were that little old tutor, Bob Cummings, and another feller namd Jack Adkins.

"Whar in tarnation you-uns come from?" somebody asked.

"Over Tennessee way," Jack Adkins tells 'em.

"What you got them boys tied up fur?"

"Fur a-killin Laurie Foster, that's what," Jack Adkins tells 'em.

And the folks had a powerful lot of questions to ask and Jack Adkins tole 'em to ask Bob Cummings, seein as how he were the man what mainly done hit. Bob Cummings tole 'em he didn't have nothin to say, but the [illegible] him till finally he tole 'em [illegible]

"It may interest you-all to know we're gonna have Anne Melton 'rested fur helpin' these fellers kill Laurie."

And the folks shook their heads and said,

"You don't mean to say!"

Fur this Anne Melton were the [illegible] woman in the whole Valley what everybody agreed were purtier than pore Laurie. Only trouble with the woman were that she had already got her a man and had done give him [illegible] three younguns. Only Tom Dula didn't give a dang fur [illegible] and kept going to see that Melton woman jist the same.

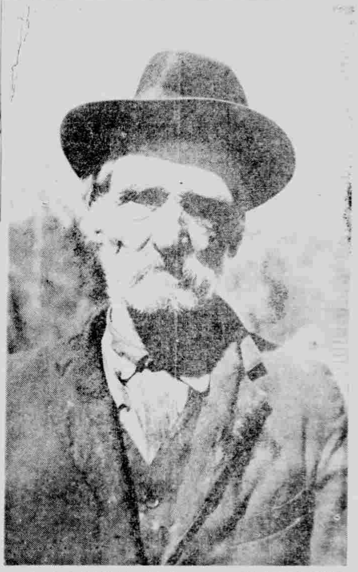
Folks [illegible] in front of the store [illegible] at Tom and he just [illegible] [illegible]

[illegible]

Tom [illegible] Bob Cummings [illegible] [illegible] the folks [illegible] Some[illegible] Tom [illegible] and lay down on a grassy bank by the

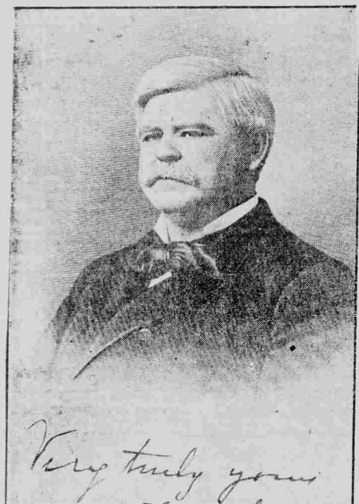
(Please Turn To Page Two) Third Column.

W. E. Horton what's a magistrate over in Wilkes is a-pointin to all that's left of Laurie Foster's grave. All they is to the grave is a couple stones out in a stubble field. Mister Horton's a descendant of ole Colonel Horton what found Laurie's body.



"Uncle Andy" Welch what lives over on Elk Creek is Wilkes County ain't fur frum bein a hundredt year old. He know'd Tom Dula and Laura Foster fore the killin. Uncle Andy got out'n his Sunday go-to-meetin hat whin this pitcher were took.

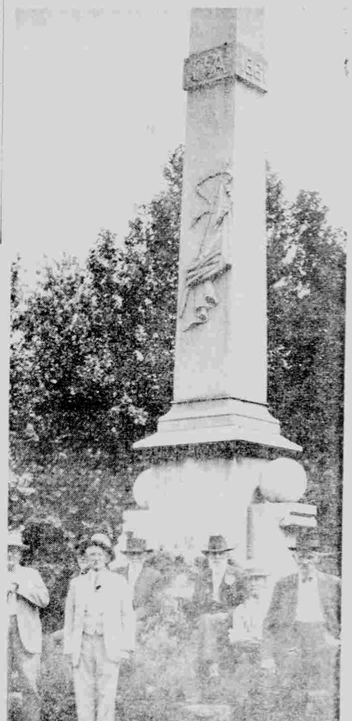
Right here by this here tree was where Colonel Horton's hoss named Ball got to buckin and a-rearin. Whin the Colonel got to pokin round with his cane, he found pore Laurie's shallow grave. Right next to this here tree, the grave were.



Zeb Vance was mighty cut up about Tom Dula and he done his durndest to get him free.

Whin Sheriff W. E. Wasson of Iredell County went to put the rope round Tom Dula's neck at the hangin, Tom says to him: "Sheriff, that there's a mighty nice clean rope. Maybe I'd best go wash my neck fust, so's you won't git that there rope all dirtied up."

In this here house Annie Melton died a-screamin the devil had come to carry her off to the bad place.



These here Confed'rate vets is standing afore the Confed'rate monument what's in the square at Lenoir. Tom Dula fit so well in the Civil War they put his name on the Roll of Honor what's inside this monument, no matter eff'n he was hanged fur murder.