

Dead Man's Hollow

By Barbara Glakas

Frances Darlington Simpson Onacewicz (1914-1998) was the daughter of Joseph J. Darlington, a prominent Washington lawyer who once owned a summer home and estate in the town of Herndon from the 1890s up until the year he died in 1920. The grand house continued to be used by the Darlington family for several years after his death.

Frances spent many summers at her grandfather's Herndon home in her youth. In 1963 she wrote a cookbook which included not only recipes, but also anecdotes from her time in Herndon. The book is entitled "Virginia Country Life and Cooking."

One of the tales she told in her book was that of Dead Man's Hollow. She recalled:

"Herndon is not without its ghost. Several years after my grandfather bought the Herndon place, a man was brutally murdered close to a small winding creek between Herndon and the Leesburg Pike.

"This is not just another murder, it seems, unsolved and forgotten for people crossing the creek reported a hideous feeling of being pursued and touched by the cold, clammy hand of DEATH.

"These reports continued over the years until finally the creek became known as Dead Man's Hollow. Nobody seems to know who the murdered man was or exactly how he met his dreadful fate but every time one passes over the bridge, one briefly but invariably feels through the mist, something reaching and clutching, a momentary but spine-chilling encounter with the DEAD. It is said that the restless spirit of the dead man searches and searches for his murderer.

"In a brief but blood curdling experience and my youngest son tells me with great conviction that even on a hot summers day at noon, whenever he and his friends hurry past Dead Man's Hollow, they too feel a paralyzing chill as the restless Ghost reaches for his murderer with the icy fingers of the DEAD!"

Frances's story was not the only one we have heard about legend of the ghost at Dead Man's Hollow. Another long-time Herndon resident who grew up in Herndon recalled hearing about Dead Man's Hollow, saying that it was located along Dranesville Road, between Wiehle Avenue and Hiddenbrook Drive. When talking about Dead Man's Hollow, most refer to the bridge there, where the Folly Lick stream branch crosses Dranesville Road.

Folly Lick stream branch currently crosses underneath Dranesville Road and the word "bridge" may now be loosely used because - at this current time - this section of roadway that crosses over

Folly Lick simply has guard rails on each side, barely leaving the remnants of what may have once been an actual bridge.

In 1987 a local writer named Marlene S. Veach interviewed a life-long Herndon resident, Virginia Greear (1893-1991). At the time Mrs. Greear was considered to be a walking encyclopedia of Herndon history. When asked if she had ever heard about the ghost of Dead Man's Hollow, the 94-year-old Greear said no. However, she did recall some grim events that occurred after the turn of the century that were supposedly associated with the bridge on Dranesville Road between the entrances to the Hiddenbrook and the Dranesville Estates of Weatherburn Farms developments.

Here is what Virginia Greear (1893-1991) recalled, according to Marlene Veach:

“It seems, she said, there was a huckster named Wilson from Loudoun County who sold or bartered produce with the local citizenry, then went on to the marketplace in the District of Columbia. One dark night, he returned from the city and as he crossed the bridge over Folly Lick Run on Dranesville Road, he was waylaid by a man who, it is felt, had been observing the huckster's movements and knew his nighttime schedule. The assailant seized this opportune moment and killed Wilson for his purse filled with market profits, then fled upstream into Loudoun County.

“When the victim was discovered, a posse was formed with the bloodhound of Sterling resident, Joseph Moffett, leading the chase. The bloodhound scrambled in and out of the water, following the zig-zag escape trail, until the murderer was tracked to his hiding place. Legend tells us that the pursuit was so hot, steam actually emanated from the terrified killer's hiding place. As the story is generally told, the posse dragged this man named Craven, also a Loudoun resident, from the haystack outside Leesburg and took him to the town jail where he was imprisoned to await trial.

“At this point, Billy Moffett, Herndon resident and grandson of Joseph Moffett, owner of the bloodhound in the story, contends that although the murderer was found in a haystack, he was not apprehended overnight, but was captured after a period of days had passed.

“In any case, conventional justice was not to prevail. A huge mob attacked the Leesburg jail and, according to an observation attributed to Col. E. B. White of Civil War fame, he had not seen ‘a group of men so determined as this mob’ who dragged Craven from his cell and hung him from a tree this side of Leesburg. Moffett was told that as the mob dragged Craven along to his place of execution, he pointed to his battered shoes and bloody feet and said, ‘I know what you have in mind so don't take me very far.’

“But Virginia simply hadn't heard of a ghost. She chuckled wryly again to hear that when newcomers retold this story it recent years, they'd added one at Halloween parties

or takes around campfire. The ghost of a huckster returning to the bridge to find his purse? The ghost of the alleged killer, lynched by a mob, retracing his steps to Dead Man's Hollow to relive, undo that terrible night?

“No, Virginia simply hadn't heard of a soul who might 'know' of a ghost to give Herndon its 'Legend of Deadman's Hollow.' Instead, she remembers a true tale of greed violence and revenge – probably unknown or forgotten by most residents of the pleasant community near the bridge. Her memories are of real, flesh and blood people, events that transport the listener to another time, give witness to historical events.”

The story that Greear told was indeed true, as the incident about the killing of William H. Wilson and the subsequent hunt for, and lynching of, the alleged assailant, Charles Craven, was widely reported in the *Washington Post* in July and August of 1902.

Could Frances Darlington's story and Virginia Greear's story be the same one? Frances Darlington said the murder occurred “several years” after her grandfather purchased his Herndon estate; he purchased it in 1893. Virginia said that a man named Craven was the one who was accused of murdering a man named Wilson for his money, which we know now occurred in 1902.

Virginia seemed to allude that the story of the lynched robber and the story of the ghost of Dead Man's Hollow may have been two stories that were conflated into one over time. Given that the two stories about the murder share some similar details, and occurred in similar places, we believe that the conflation may likely be the explanation, with a ghost later added into the story for good measure.

About this column: “Remembering Herndon's History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon's past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon's History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society's website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.