

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty

River Mortis

Happy Halloween, river fans – or should I say “shiver” fans? Here’s a fearsome foursome of true-life terror tales that unfolded within screaming distance of the Blackstone River. They range from the mysterious to the macabre. Please hold on to your sanity as the management is not responsible for any loss or damage. (“Blood on the Blackstone” will return next issue.)

Who Goes There?

Moments before midnight on May 2, 1854, Mr. Brian Sheridan and his friend Connor McLaughlin crossed paths with the Grim Reaper himself.

The two men were walking back to Woonsocket after enjoying a late supper at the home of Sheridan’s sister, who lived in Blackstone village. It should have been an easy, uneventful journey, even at that dark hour. Like most folks of the time, they were accustomed to traveling on foot at night and probably carried a lantern to light the way. On a balmy spring eve, the trip should have taken 15 or 20 minutes.

But not that night. The pair crossed the river at Block (Monument) Square near the Union House hotel, then followed the cart path towards Waterford village and Woonsocket beyond. They walked at an unhurried pace, indifferent to the shadowy barns and decrepit sheds lining the roadway. The moment they started past the Norfolk County Railroad depot, though, something terrible began to happen.

Sheridan grew visibly agitated, glancing nervously over his shoulder. Suddenly he stopped dead. “Look!” he gasped, clutching his friend’s arm. “What man is that following us?”

McLaughlin whirled, no doubt expecting a thief or some other rogue. But the road behind them was deserted. “There is nobody there,” McLaughlin whispered.

Sheridan’s eyes gleamed in the lantern light. He jabbed a finger at the darkness. “But there he is!” he insisted. “Don’t you see him?”

“No,” replied McLaughlin, his voice hollow in the night. “It is your imagination. Come along.”

A moment or two crept by, but finally Sheridan relented. He and McLaughlin proceeded in uneasy silence. "Thereupon they walked a few rods, reported the Woonsocket *Patriot*, "when Mr. Sheridan staggered and fell to the earth. His companion spoke to him, but there was no answer; and on stooping to assist him, he discovered that the unfortunate man was lifeless or nearly so. He gasped only two or three times and was a corpse!"

No earthly cause for Brian Sheridan's death was ever reported. His decease was all the more puzzling because "before leaving his sister's house at Blackstone, he partook of a hearty supper ... and was apparently in robust health."

Alas, the *Patriot's* editor was not fond of mysteries. In the safety of daylight, he offered this theory to dismiss the weird events of that eerie night: "He probably died in a fit, and the imaginary person whom he thought followed him, was doubtless a fantasm of the brain."

Doubtless?

Only midnight knows for sure.

Another Dead Soldier

On the morning of November 20, 1872, as a late autumn storm rattled the Blackstone Valley, an open wagon rumbled into Waterford village. The somber, horse-drawn conveyance was a government hire, sent to retrieve the body of a Civil War veteran.

The corpse was John C. McCann. He had served his country honorably as a three-year member of the Massachusetts regiments. After the South fell, McCann made his way back to Waterford, anxious to resume life along the Blackstone River with his wife and two daughters.

But peacetime had hardly been peaceful for John McCann. The war had ended yet he seemed tainted by it, his soul diseased. In the end, he suffered a more horrible death than any he might have received on the field of battle. At first, his family could barely comprehend his grisly demise, let alone speak of it.

The storm howled as the wagon pulled up to the late soldier's residence. McCann's few friends went out to meet it but were appalled when they saw it was an open wagon. They flatly refused to load the coffin into it, demanding that a proper hearse be brought instead. The Army representatives refused the extra expense, despite pleas from McCann's widow that she hadn't the money to pay for one herself.

John McCann died bankrupt, you see. A year earlier, his assets had totaled at least \$900, but by the following November the money was dissipated, much like the man

himself. Poor widow McCann had no alternative but to settle for a bare-bones government funeral. Thus, no hearse.

And where had all McCann's money gone? Permit me to say that it was spirited away, for spirits were indeed the cause of John McCann's destruction. Lest I offend noble ghosts everywhere, it should be clarified that these particular spirits were not of the variety that haunts graveyards. Rather, they filled graveyards with intemperate men and women.

Yes, John McCann consigned his health and wealth to a bottle. In fact, he was drunk on the night he died. Drunk when he –

The horrifying details of McCann's death were general knowledge, but not fit for general discussion, especially at his funeral. As rain and snow slicked the wagon's empty bed, Mrs. McCann persisted in begging the Army men for a hearse. But the officers were unmoved. Finally, a private citizen ordered that a private hearse be hired, at his own expense, to bear away the body of John McCann.

According to the *Patriot's* Blackstone correspondent, Dr. William M. Kimball, "No service was held, no bearers appointed, and when the undertaker arrived no person was present to render assistance. A stranger passing by volunteered his services, and the remains of the unfortunate man were driven away, followed by the disconsolate family to their last resting place.

The "private citizen" who summoned the hearse was never named. Was it one of the neighbors? Someone who had close ties with the McCann family? Or maybe someone who looked on in horror as John McCann died. For we do know that at least one neighbor had been present on that frightful night.

By all accounts, McCann started raving at 2 a.m. Thanksgiving morning. He leaped from his bed, gibbering to his wife that "a crowd were coming to murder him." Recognizing the paranoiac symptoms of *delirium tremens*, or "DT's," Mrs. McCann tried to soothe her husband, to make him understand that it was all an alcohol-induced delusion.

But it was all in vain. He pushed her away, rifling through the house until he laid his hands on three very ominous items: a carving knife, a pocket knife and a straight-edge steel razor.

That's when the screaming began.

The neighbors were jolted awake, scrambling to the windows to see what was the matter. The more intrepid ventured outdoors, braving the icy night and the horrors it bred.

By the time anyone got to the McCann's house, ol' John had slit his own throat. Laid it right open, he did, regardless that his wife struggled desperately to stop him. The life was still draining out of him when the first neighbor burst through the blood-spattered door.

"My God, John! What's happened?" the neighbor cried.

And John McCann raised his eyes as best he could. Maybe he even smiled some. "I been doing a little butchering," he replied.

Those were John McCann's last words. As the *Patriot* told it, "He soon fell dead upon the floor."

Dr. Kimball, who wrote the *Patriot* article (and who may well have been the anonymous "private citizen"), was a thoughtful man, and so he included a kind of epitaph in his account. "Here is a lesson which the community may well ponder, They cannot afford to pass it by unheeded. Mr. McCann was a man of average intelligence and kind feelings ... He had made an enemy which was worse than poverty or sickness, and the cause of both – an enemy which drained him of all he possessed, and resulted in the destruction of his life.

"The poor man died," wrote Dr. Kimball, "and surely was not responsible for the deed he committed while insane."

Cold Comfort

It's one of life's little ironies that the most unspeakable crimes are the ones people most often speak of.

On Tuesday morning, January 24, 1837, some boys were ice-skating a short distance downstream from Pawtucket Falls, not far from the old Slater Mill.

It must have been a devilishly cold winter for that stretch of river to have iced over. Once the Blackstone tumbles past the falls, it empties into tidewater, mingling with brine. The constant current and daily tidal action should have discouraged freezing. That the surface was thick enough to skate upon gives some idea of just how cold it was.

As the boys fanned out across the river, one abruptly halted and doubled back. He had caught a glimpse of something dark and angular protruding from the ice. He approached and saw that it was some kind of wooden box or crate, partially embedded in the frozen surface. And, from what he could determine, still sealed on all sides.

He hollered for his friends. They hurried over, intrigued by the excitement in his voice. Unanimously the boys decided to pry the box free and carry it back to shore. They

wasted no time on guessing games about its contents. To their bleary, wind-stung eyes, the real treasure was the box itself. The wood – what a merry bonfire it would make!

Immediately they set about liberating it. With a stiff winter breeze mocking them, they kicked and chopped at the ice, working so doggedly that an onlooker might have mistaken their steamy breath for pipe smoke. They tried rocking the box from side to side, alternately pushing and pulling whilst haranguing each other to push or pull *harder*. Finally, they felt some give. A minute or two later came a loud crack, signaling victory. The river's glacial grip was broken.

Shivering, the boys hauled their booty onto the riverbank and began smashing it into kindling. But after a few solid whacks, the lid of the box popped open, revealing a sight more chilling than a dozen Januarys.

“When the cover was knocked off, they observed the corpse of a little babe,” reported the *Pawtucket Chronicle*.

The terrified lads left the body by the river and dashed home, spreading news of their gruesome find. Spectators rushed to the riverbank, first a few, then a flock.

“Multitudes hurried in breathless haste to see it,” the *Chronicle* noted. “There were the young and old, male and female – all animated by an itching curiosity to see the little child; to lay their hands on its glossy black hair, its marble cheeks and its innocent forehead.”

The sight of the hapless newborn set off a “righteous indignation” among the onlookers. Many expressed a conviction that the little sufferer was the offspring of an illicit union and was “cruelly murdered by the parents for the purpose of concealing the only evidence of their guilt. Thus to hide the proof of lust beneath the most heinous crime of infanticide!”

The body was handed over to the proper authorities soon thereafter. No doubt several theories regarding motive, means and opportunity – the very recipe for murder – were privately aired in the hours that followed. However, no official word was released until a jury of inquest held later in the day had completed its investigation.

According to the *Chronicle*:

“A coroner's inquest was held: the circumstances of finding the infant in the river, the appearances in proof of the child being born alive, and some trifling et cetera, as for instance, the testimony of a physician, induced the Jury to believe, and to declare their belief, that the infant was hurried out of existence by violent means.”

But by whom? What human filth could have administered such an atrocity? Was it the work of one depraved mind or had there been an accomplice? Unanswered questions taunted the populace well into the night.

The next morning, an Englishman, name unknown, came forward to claim the corpse. He did not confess to murder; by his own account, no murder had occurred. He revealed that a blasphemous crime had indeed been committed, a crime of almost equal barbarity. But not murder.

The baby, the Englishman explained, belonged to him. He was the “lawful father.” According to the Chronicle, “He states that his wife gave birth to the child, which lived about two hours, and, as she was alarmingly sick, he was obliged to do the best he could to have the child buried.”

Unable to leave his wife’s side, the father in his desperation hired two men, “two cold-hearted brutes,” to attend to his baby’s interment.

But rather than carry out the father’s sad instructions, the derelict pair callously pocketed the money and “threw the box containing the corpse into the river.”

The Englishman was evidently taken at his word.

“The gentleman lives in this town,” observed the Chronicle, and is represented to be highly respectable.

The final note in this ignominious episode of Blackstone River history belonged to the Chronicle’s editor. Overwhelmed with disgust, he wrote: “They who could thus dishonor the dead and violate orders of an afflicted father, cannot possess the ordinary hearts of men. They are a disgrace to humanity.”

Siren Song

Does an ancient evil lurk in the Blackstone River? A sinister presence that lulls troubled women away from the safety of land into a fatal, watery embrace?

Human history is brimming with legends of fiendish water spirits. In the Shetlands, for example, a creature called *shoopiltie* was said to appear beside ponds and lakes, often in the shape of a pony or a handsome young man. When an unwitting maiden drew near, the *shoopiltie* dragged her into the water and feasted on her blood.

Scandinavian folklore tells of the *necks*, supernatural shapeshifters who could assume the form of boats or dogs. Some *necks* had no shape at all, manifesting only as voices heard calling across the water, demanding that a human life be sacrificed to them once every year.

Nymphs were legendary beauties who lingered beside mountain streams and pools, hoping to entice human souls into the dark realms of their watery domain. Just as

dangerous were the *kawoka* or “child of the river.” This Japanese goblin reputedly haunted rivers and streams, feeding on the livers of its victims.

In the northern regions of England, a “green-haired, slack-jawed and green-toothed” hag named “Peg Powler” was said to prowl the depths of the River Tees. Peg had an insatiable appetite for children, greedily poaching them from the riverbank and nearby streams.

In Vietnamese folklore, a drowned man’s soul is condemned to the body of water where he died until he finds another unfortunate soul to take his place. Desperate to move on to the afterlife, these trapped spirits, or *ma qui*, would not hesitate to trick a living person into drowning.

Our world is full of ancient and forgotten beliefs. For more than a millennium, these traditions and folkways governed the lives of our human predecessors. Yet in a mere twinkling of years we have cast folklore aside, forsaking our age-old superstitions for the shiny reassurances of science and technology. Now we view the world from enlightened and ever-changing perspectives, constantly moving forward, or so we believe.

But each October, it seems, the human mind wearies of rationality. Something in the cool autumn air stirs old emotions, old doubts. We watch as the days grow shorter, the shadows longer. The shadows intimidate us and we ask ourselves why, while in our hearts we know the answer. Down deep, we’ve always known.

Partake of these five mysterious drownings. The stories – every one of them true -- are drawn word-for-word from the archives of Blackstone Valley newspapers. In all probability, the incidents are unrelated and it’s only my affection for legends and folklore that leads me to see a pattern.

You decide ...

WOONSOCKET, July 1840. “*Death by Suicide.* – Miss Sarah Coggshall was found drowned in the river near Bernon Mills ... She was discovered in the water and recognized by one of the workmen in the mill, who immediately went to her boarding house and gave the information.

“On entering her lodging room, it was found that she was absent, having left sometime in the night without shoes, shawl or bonnet. What cause operated on her mind to lead her into the execution of the deed is unknown. She was 23 years of age and had borne a good reputation.”

LONSDALE, March 1864. “*Death by Drowning.* – On the evening of Saturday last ... a few of our citizens who live near the ‘Mile Pond,’ were startled by the screaming of some persons apparently struggling in the water. They immediately ran to render assistance, but owing to the darkness of the night, some time elapsed before they could find the object of their search. When the body was taken from the water, it was ... identified as that of Mrs. John Barrington, whose husband and son are both in the army.

“How she got so far out of her way is a mystery to all. She left a friend’s house a few minutes before her death, and in opposition to all advice, persisted in going home that way. That she was laboring under some mental aberration is the general belief, as the many preparations she was making to visit her son precludes the supposition that she committed suicide. The verdict of the coroner’s inquest was accidental drowning.”

WOONSOCKET, March 1871. (March 17) “*Woman Missing.* – Mrs. Nancy Smith, of this town, left her residence, in Social Village, on Saturday morning last, since which time no tidings have been heard of her. It is feared that she committed suicide, and faithful and diligent search has been made for her body, but without success. It is possible that she may have wandered off to parts unknown, in which case her daughters, living here, will be grateful for any information.”

(March 31) “*The Missing Woman.* – There are yet no tidings of Mrs. Nancy C. Smith, who left her home so mysteriously three weeks ago. The reward of one hundred dollars, offered by the Social Manufacturing Company, has failed to elicit anything concerning her. POSTSCRIPT: Mrs. Smith’s body was found yesterday, in the river, near Manville.”

PAWTUCKET January 1988 – April 1991 “*Police still seek leads in Cole case.* – Jan 6., 1988: As chilling winds whip temperatures to 20 below zero, Christine Cole leaves her Pawtucket home in the afternoon to go to a nearby grocery store to buy milk for her mother. Christine, who celebrated her 10th birthday two days before, never returns. On February 28, her body washes up on the shore of Conimicut Point in Warwick ...

“For weeks after her disappearance, hundreds of tips poured into the Pawtucket police station about Christine’s possible whereabouts. Nely Saraiva, owner of Saint’s Market, a neighborhood corner store where Christine had stopped to buy a gallon of milk, told police that the girl appeared to be worried.

“Christine’s body washed up ... downstream from where the Blackstone and Seekonk Rivers flow into Narragansett Bay. A man walking along the beach found the body, fully clothed with a coat belt still tied around the waist – the way her mother saw her when she last left home.

“Police believed Christine’s body was trapped in ice on the Blackstone River before a current carried it downstream to Conimicut Point. Weeks before the body was found, a Narragansett Indian psychic told police she felt Christine was dead and that her body could be found ‘in the water’ near the Blackstone River ...

“The case was ruled an unexplained death ... Although there is still no evidence to indicate foul play, police believe that Christine did not voluntarily enter the river. She was known to be afraid of the water and would not go near it alone ... Also, Christine’s trip to the grocery store would not have taken her near the river ...”

WOONSOCKET October/November, 1992. (October 27) “Investigation yields few clues in death of woman found in Blackstone River. – The death of a 30-year-old woman whose body turned up in the Blackstone River Saturday has the medical examiner and the police baffled. No one knows when Jistine E. Akriminski left her house Friday, where she entered the Blackstone River or how she drowned ... Mrs. Akriminski – a woman police said ‘rarely left the apartment’ – was last seen about 6:30 p.m. Friday .l..”

(November 28) “Drowning probe hits dead end. – Police have all but closed the books on the drowning of [Jestine Akriminski] on October 25th. The woman was last seen by relatives on the afternoon of Oct. 23. Police said they believe the woman stopped by local stores that afternoon. Several people said they saw a woman matching the victim’s description walking along the riverbank near South Main Street (*almost a mile from her home – JD*)

“At the state medical examiner’s office, a blood alcohol level reading was taken, and showed the woman was intoxicated. [Police] said that was unusual for her, and that she was not known for drinking. “Whether the drowning was accidental or suicide, we don’t really know.”

NEXT: BLOOD ON THE BLACKSTONE

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