

Two Ghost Stories from Fred Eiler

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 31, 2012)

I am pleased to bring you two Ghost Stories from my friend Fred Eiler. Enjoy!

Fred introduced the stories, "The first couple of years of my teaching career were spent at Norwood School near Oliver Springs. It was the late sixties and the Foxfire books were all the rage, so I asked my Language Arts class to record a ghost story from their neck of the woods. There were many good ones, but one in particular struck my imagination and I've never forgotten it."

"A friendly, outgoing young lady named Rebecca lived in the beautiful, remote valley called "the Cove," just north of Oliver Springs on the Morgan County line. She explained that the children from this rural area liked to walk to town and visit some of the big, old houses for really nice treats. But she pointed out that there was one particular place that they never visited, and always ran to get past as fast as they could. If they dared to pause there, they sometimes heard the moans or cries of a baby in pain.

"Their families explained that long ago a toddler had fallen of the porch of the Wiley house on the cliff above and died on the rocks of Indian Creek far below. My first son was about that age at that time and I could imagine the grief of the stricken family.

"One Fall night my wife and I had taken some students from the Cove home after a football game and I told her the story. Although she begged me not to stop at the haunted place, I couldn't resist seeing it in the light of the Harvest Moon.

"At first it was totally silent, but soon a breeze produced a moaning sound along the creek, and then the wind in the hemlocks made a crying noise. I knew perfectly well what was creating the sound effects, but the thought of the dying child filled me with dread.

"When my teaching career took me to Clinton High School in 1970, I had the pleasure of meeting Snyder E. Roberts, who was teaching history there. I asked him about the 'Ghost of Indian Creek,' and he replied 'Which one?'

"He explained that there was more than one ghost story for that hollow. I told him it was about the baby that fell to its death on the rocks below. He replied, 'Oh yes, that is a true story!'

"He said the child was the son of Joseph Estabrook, former President of the East Tennessee College, now the University of Tennessee, at Knoxville, who had moved to Winters' Gap, now Oliver Springs, to establish the Great Salt Works. I told him I knew of President Estabrook because he had a building named after him at the University, but that I had never heard of the Salt Works. He promised to bring me his research on the period to peruse at my leisure.

"I learned that the presence of salt in this area was probably known by the Indians before the arrival of the first white settlers. An area known as the 'Sand Field' above Moses Winters' mill pond was drilled for salt by James Galbraith and William Rector as early as 1831. Joseph Estabrook was born in Lebanon, New Hampshire, on December 7, 1794, according to Snyder Robert's *Story of Oliver Springs, Vol IV*. UT Libraries website gives the date as Dec.8, 1792.

"He graduated from Dartmouth College in 1815 and enrolled in Princeton to become a minister, but because of a throat condition was forced to follow teaching. He taught Latin and Greek at Amherst.

"In 1823 he married Nancy Dickinson, a relative of the poet Emily Dickinson. After a stint as President of a school for young ladies in Staunton, Virginia, he came to Knoxville and served as President of East Tennessee University from 1834 to 1849.

"His wife Nancy's brother was Perez Dickinson, a wealthy Knoxville businessman. With his and others' backing, Dr. Estabrook entered into a contract with Moses C. Winters effective May 16, 1851 for the use of 195 acres of land for the salt works.

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Part of the contract called for Moses C. to vacate his home on the leased property, and Dr. Estabrook lived there with his extensive library, his new bride, and soon a son and heir, Joseph Jr.

"Dr. Estabrook first wife had died and in 1853 he married Angelina M. Wiley, the daughter of the wealthy coal magnate Henry H. Wiley. It was in her father's home on the bluff above Indian Creek that their only child fell to his death at only 13 months of age.

"Joseph Jr. was buried in an empty lot on Walker Avenue, and when Dr. Estabrook died on May 18, 1855, he was buried next to his son. His fabulous library became a part of the estate sale, along with the wealth of salt works equipment. When the Oliver Springs Cemetery was opened in 1888, their bodies were moved there and are commemorated by a large tombstone.

"The names and events in the lives of these important characters in Oliver Springs may have been forgotten, but the memory of this precious child lingers on in legend to remind us of the fragility of human life.

A second Ghost Story from Fred:

"Among the ghost stories my students assembled many years ago as a class project, one stood out because of the close proximity of the setting to the school. The late Reverend Terry Moore was one of my students then, before going on to a great football career at Clinton High School, the University of Tennessee, and then as a pro.

"He lived in the Crab Orchard stone ranch house directly across the street from Norwood School. He explained that his house sat on the spot where Richard Oliver, namesake for Oliver Springs, had built his thirty-five room mansion and inn.

"Richard Oliver died intestate in 1861, and the ensuing Civil War left the land uncultivated, the slaves scattered to the four winds, and taxes unpaid on 3,559 acres in Anderson County alone. The mansion had served alternately for North and South [during the Civil War], including as a hospital for wounded soldiers, as evidenced by the blood stains recalled by later visitors.

"The house was sold by the Chancery Court to W. A. Cobbe of New York City in 1867. He was sued by a partner in the Morgan County German Settlement Company, George F. Gerding, who won a settlement of \$69,825, which he levied on Cobbe's Anderson County holdings. Cobbe released them to Gerding in 1872. Gerding lived in the Mansion until his death in 1884, and his daughter, Charlotte Gerding Triplett Lewis lived there until it burned under mysterious circumstances during the Coal Miner's War in 1892.

"Charlotte then had an elaborate three-story Victorian mansion, complete with cupola, built on the site. Charlotte had three children by her first husband, Robert S. Triplett Sr. After his death she moved into the Richard Oliver Mansion then occupied by her father. Her son Robert S. Triplett Jr. was killed in the Spanish-American war of 1898.

"She was known to wander her new Victorian mansion calling out to her lost son, and she even prepared a séance room with a chair and table high in the cupola which she called 'the garrett.' This home was torn down by Terry's parents, Ruth and Allen Moore, to build their home about 1960.

"Terry said he never encountered Ribbie's spirit in the new house, but he often wondered if the spirits of Richard Oliver and his wife wandered around after the desecration of their family cemetery on the hill

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just north of the Norwood Schools. I doubted that graves of such important people in local history would be destroyed, but Snyder E. Roberts later confirmed the loss.

"As stated in his *Story of Oliver Springs, Vol. IV.*, he explained that the area population was vastly pro-Union during the Civil War, and afterwards local slave holders were often blamed for the loss of life and destruction caused by the war. Sometimes they were sued in court for damages incurred, and some left the area in face of the strong resentment. Maybe one day these old resentments will be forgotten and transgressions forgiven, and the spirits of those who wander can rest in peace.

I hope you enjoyed these two Ghost Stories...enjoy Halloween 2012!



Grave marker for Richard Oliver , for whom Oliver Springs is named - photo by Fred Eiler