



# The Devil's Stairs

By Kelly Coffey

A number of supernatural incidents have been reported for over a century at a location in Ashe County, which was the site of tragic occurrences. In 1914, the Norfolk and Western Railways Company constructed a rail line from Abingdon, Virginia to Todd, North Carolina. Upon reaching Buffalo Creek where Hwy 194 crosses it today (not far from the town of Jefferson), workers had to dynamite a rock embankment to make way for the tracks.<sup>1</sup> In the process, a black laborer set the dynamite, lit the fuse, and promptly fell on the rock. Before he could get up and get away, the dynamite exploded beneath him. Thereafter, workers picked up parts of the man all over the surrounding woods. When the blasting was finished, it left four large terraces or steps in the rock formation that soon acquired the name the Devil's Stairs.

Within a year after this tragedy, a woman carried her infant to the rock outcropping over the creek and dropped it into the water below.



*Unfortunately for preservationists, within the past two decades DOT built a new, larger bridge at the site and blasted part of the stairs away. However, a vestige of the rock feature can still be seen when foliage doesn't hamper the view.*

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently a bridge for pedestrians and horses had existed across the creek for many years previous.





*Buffalo Creek flowing beneath the Hwy 194 bridge in front of the stairs on the left.*

Following these two fatal incidents, a number of paranormal activities were experienced at the site. Many claim to have heard the ghost of the dynamite man singing spirituals along the railroad route. The infanticide led to reports of hearing a baby cry at the site. Lyn Goss heard it, then he saw a ghostly woman dressed in white coming toward him out of the woods. He ran as hard as he could until reaching Oak Grove Baptist Church.

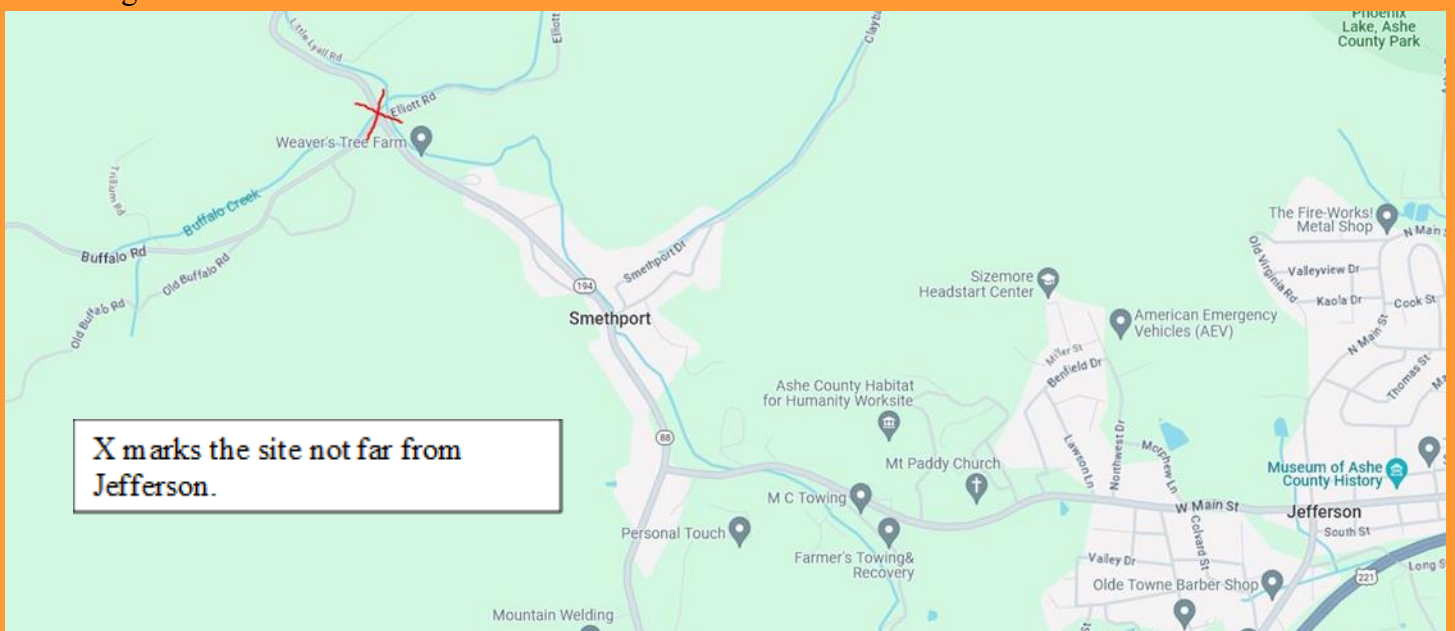
But the relationship of the paranormal activity to the deaths is not always apparent, unless one speculates that some sort of general, negative

energy was unleashed by the occurrences.

### **Headless People**

The story is told of a man traveling home by horseback. Upon reaching the Devil's Stairs, he found the road blocked by a coffin with a body in it. His horse refused to walk past it. He was forced to spend the night nearby. The next morning, the coffin was not to be seen. Years later, according to Lula Hamby, Jim Pullman saw the same thing, "He showed up at my sister Rosie's, and she said you coulda rung water out of his clothes- he was that scared and running so hard."

Lula's husband Charles and a man named Blaine Eller "went to check on the town's electric plant on a hill above the Stairs." Blaine heard someone walking behind them and when he turned around, he saw a man without a head. According to *The Charlotte Observer*, "Dozens of people have seen headless people strolling late at night near the bridge."



### Unwelcomed Riders

An even more frightful experience which occurred sometime in the 1910s was told by W.T. Dollar, a tobacco products salesman. One night as he was passing the Devil's Stairs he felt something land on the back of his horse behind him. The horse became unruly until they arrived at Oak Grove Baptist Church, whereupon the horse stopped, and the thing slid off the horse. He rode on to his house, which wasn't far away. After dismounting, Dollar saw that the horse had white stains on its flanks that had the appearance of someone's legs. A Dr. Wilcox had a similar experience on horseback during the same time period.



*Bridge over Buffalo Creek. The rock formation is across the creek on the left.*

A more modern version of this experience- equally as chilling- is told by Deputy Sheriff Frank Parsons. He said a dispatcher for the Jefferson police was on her way to work at night. As she passed the bridge, she heard her back door open, then close. Terrified that something was in the backseat, she turned her head and saw nothing. "She was white as a sheet when she reached the station," said Parsons.

One source says that in the 1800s (prior to the blasting that created the stairs) a woman hung herself at the site. Thus began the legend of something jumping behind riders on horseback. According to this version, "Those who had the nerve to look back saw a misty old woman with wild eyes."

W.T. Dollar's son (name not given) owned a Model T Ford in the 1930s. One night he and several other young men<sup>2</sup> were assembled beside Buffalo Creek near the bridge, just hanging out. Suddenly, below the bridge, they saw a lady dressed in white "come out of nowhere" and then disappear. It scared them so much that they all jumped in the car. Model Ts had to be cranked from the outside in order to start, but they all refused to get out of the car. Mr. Dollar was forced to do it himself, then they drove away.

Also during the 1930s, two men were driving to Oak Grove Baptist Church. After passing the Devil's Stairs, they saw a man hitchhiking. They picked him up, drove on, but when they looked in the backseat, he was gone. In another incident, a man drove by the site at 3 o'clock in the morning and saw two hitchhikers in front of him. He slowed down, but they disappeared before his eyes.

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<sup>2</sup> Thad Porter, Ed Porter, and Slim Elliott are named, but he implies others were present.





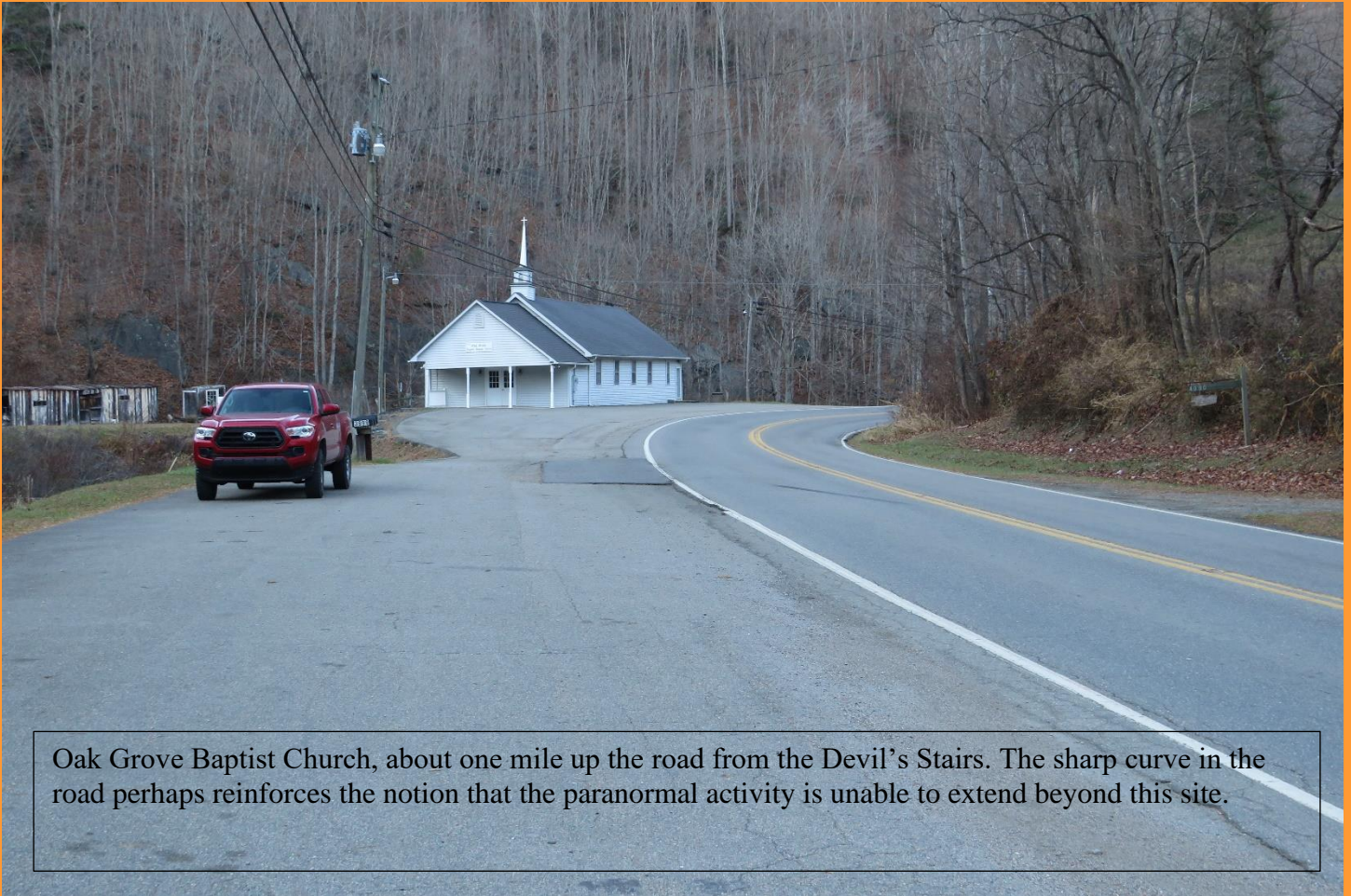
In the 1930s, a fourth death added to the legend. A man was driving his car too fast, was unable to make a curve just before the site, ran off the road into the creek, and died instantly. Motorists who pass the location have seen the man in their rearview mirror sitting in the backseat, but when they turn their head around, he is gone. Upon reaching Oak Grove Baptist Church, the man in the mirror disappears also.

### **Observations & Analysis**

My purpose in retelling and synthesizing these creepy stories centered on a single location is for entertainment and to preserve a folk tradition that helps give character to the region in which we live. I am neither trying to prove their credibility, nor debunk them. However, I offer the following observations:

- None of those who died at the site are named. But many who experienced something paranormal are identified. Specificity as to name, time, place, etc. make incidents seem more credible than vague descriptions.
- Oak Grove Baptist Church is apparently a boundary where the paranormal incidents end. The implication being that a holy site overpowers whatever evil entity that has been manifested.
- The incident where the police dispatcher hears her car door open and close can be explained. Most bridges are not level with the road at both ends, so that one hears a bump when crossing onto a bridge and a similar knock when exiting. Also, the road noise changes to more of a whooshing sound while on a bridge. Thus, the dispatcher mistook the first bump as the sound of the door opening, the whooshing sound as evidence that the door was open, and the knock upon exiting as the sound of the door closing. But nothing similar can explain whatever jumped behind riders on horseback, so maybe something really did enter her car.

- There is nothing spooky about the site that, in isolation, would generate such legends. For example, it's not in a remote location or in a dark forest. One doesn't feel chilled or threatened when visiting or driving through the site. This characteristic gives credence to the story that the legends originated with events at the rock formation, rather than there being something inherently evil about the site itself.



Oak Grove Baptist Church, about one mile up the road from the Devil's Stairs. The sharp curve in the road perhaps reinforces the notion that the paranormal activity is unable to extend beyond this site.

Sources:

McNeill, Robert E., "Legends from the Devil's Stairs" *North Carolina Folklore Journal* Vol. 26 Issue 3, Nov 1978, p149-156.

Vaughan, John, *The Charlotte Observer*, October 31 1991.