

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Halloween Article"

Carroll County Times article for 31 October 1993

By Joe Getty

Historical references to Halloween are scattered in the archives of Carroll County history. The parades for costumed children that are held today have long traditions in our communities. The assorted pranks and tricks played on neighbors are stored in our collective memories and occasionally recorded in newspaper clippings of the past.

Newspapers articles from the turn-of-the-century also document other Halloween customs such as trick-or-treating and parties held in the homes. Pumpkin pie, gingerbread, cider, apples and homemade candy were popular refreshments at Halloween parties. Local businesses also sponsored seasonal events such as the annual pumpkin contest held at Wampler's Furniture.

As a cultural tradition, Halloween evolved over many centuries from pre-Christian rituals combined with religious celebrations. All Hallow's Eve was the vigil of Hallowmas, which in many countries was celebrated by lighting bonfires at night to fend off ghosts and witches on the evening before the Feast of All Saints Day. Although much altered today, Halloween has persisted as a secular custom in our national and local folklore.

Belief in witches and supernatural spirits were part of the Pennsylvania German culture brought into this area by the settlers. A Westminster attorney once recalled his introduction to local customs regarding witchcraft in the following description of an encounter with a potential client:

"One Henry Magin came to a lawyer's office in Westminster, and wrathfully demanded that a suit be brought against Alice Carr for defamation of his character. The cause of action was that there had suddenly appeared, nailed high on a number of trees along the roadside leading to the water mill conducted by Magin, new chestnut shingles on which were rudely lettered the accusatory words: 'Hen Magin is a Hex.' The client was grievously affronted. He explained to the perplexed counsel that 'hex' was the German word for witch; solemnly declared the charge untrue; and asserted that he defied his defamer to prove the statement. The case was declined on various grounds, which left the party much incensed that he could not obtain a vindication at law."

That encounter was described by Judge Francis Neal Parke in a article entitled "Witchcraft in Maryland" that was published in the December 1936 edition of the Maryland Historical Magazine. Judge Parke was born in Westminster in 1871 and admitted to the bar in 1893. He was appointed Chief Judge of the Fifth Judicial Circuit in 1924 and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1941. He returned to private practice until his death in 1955.

Judge Parke's research focused on how the courts of colonial Maryland dealt with issues of alleged witchcraft. The earliest cases involved the hanging of women assumed to be witches while aboard ships travelling from England to the colonies in 1654 and 1658. Of the first hanging, Parke states, "These early voyagers gave a graphic description of the tragedy. Their vivid narratives are proof of the then prevailing belief, as neither the sailors, the captain, a merchant of a great city, nor the gentleman present, who represented a cross section of society, entertained a doubt that Mary Lee was a witch. Their accounts are of things of common knowledge."

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Five cases before the colonial courts of alleged witchcraft were examined in detail by Parke. The first four cases occurred between 1665 and 1686, and the fifth was in 1712. These cases involved the prosecution of four women and one man. In general, the charges were practicing the black arts upon their victims to cause their bodies to be wasted, consumed and pined.

The Maryland courts adhered to the statute of James I that imposed the death penalty when the victim was "killed, destroyed, wasted, consumed, pined or lame in his or her body or any part thereof." The results in the five cases involved one death penalty for which the defendant was executed, one death penalty for which there was a reprieve, two acquittals and one case where the charges were dropped.

From the historical perspective of the Salem, Massachusetts, witchcraft trials, Parke concludes that: "A review of the judicial and historical material now available does not indicate that there ever was a period of maniacal prosecution [in Maryland]. . . In view of the almost universal belief of the times in witchcraft and its malign consequences, the statute would seem to have been enforced with moderation and restraint."

In addition to Judge Parke's research and writing about witchcraft, there have been other interpretations about this theme in local historical literature. One example is a play, "Three and Thirty Angels" performed by the Westminster Players in April 1936. The play was written by the Rev. M. S. Reifsnyder, rector of Baust Reformed Church.

The play explored themes of witchcraft from Rev. Reifsnyder's own boyhood experiences when he was raised in a Pennsylvania German family in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. The plot deals with two neighbors who are engaged in a bitter dispute over a boundary line. Believing that his neighbor has stolen limestone, Farmer Gicker hires a witch doctor to put the "curse of the weight" and the "curse of the stars" on Farmer Moyer. According to the lexicon of witchcraft, Farmer Moyer must carry the limestone on his shoulders forever and sit motionless until he has counted all the stars in the sky.

The Westminster Players staged the production in the "Warehouse Theater" in Westminster. The cast was composed of local residents including Leroy Eckert, Joe Leahy, William Kesmodel, Elizabeth Bemiller, Evelyn Maus, Vernon Martin, Norman Graham and Roland Stonesifer.

Plays, historical articles, tales of trick-or-treating and stories of haunted places are just a few examples of the local traditions relating to Halloween in Carroll County.

Photo Caption: Judge Francis Neal Parke, who served as Fifth Circuit Judge in Carroll County from 1924 to 1941, published a study of legal cases involving witchcraft in colonial Maryland.

Sidebar:

A HAUNTED CARROLL COUNTY MILL

This article entitled "A Haunted Maryland Mill" appeared in the Oct. 1, 1888 edition of the "American Miller" magazine:

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A HAUNTED MARYLAND MILL

Not far from Westminster, Md. a beautiful stream makes its way between high hills and densely wooded valleys until it reaches a spot between two lofty summits. Across this valley many years ago was built a dam 30 feet high. Not far below is the old-fashioned mill, whose water wheel is never still, but turning ceaselessly, makes music for the old miller, who still plies his trade as though, almost within hearing, stream flour mills did not turn out 1,000 barrels of flour every day. Passing by the mill a few days ago, the Herald correspondent was startled by the silence of the old mill, and entered to inquire the cause. To his question as to whether he was going to give up the mill, the old man replied:

"Oh! No, but don't you know that this evening the August moon will be full?"

"Certainly, but why should the moon's getting full stop your mill?" asked the newspaper man.

"Well, sir, I will tell you," said the miller. "Many years ago, one of the most reckless and dare-devil fellows in this country laid a wager that he would on horseback ride down and capture a fox that had baffled hunters and hounds in every chase even if he were compelled to ride into the other world. On the morning following the full moon in August, 1840, the body of the young farmer, whose name I will not mention, for his children and grandchildren live not far from this place, and are among the most respected people in the community, was found on the banks of the dam. Just below him lay his horse, and young man, I tell you, you don't see such horses around here now--she as a beauty. Both were dead. How it all happened no one knew and for a year the mystery remained unsolved, but on the night of the full moon in August, 1841--I was running the mill, and about midnight a feeling of the desolateness of the place came over me. I had never been lonely before. The dog, which always slept on the porch, came to my door whining, and when I let him in he crawled under my bed. The noise of the rushing water and the turning of the wheel drowned all sounds from without, and although my nervousness continued, throughout the night until day dawned, I could not account for my condition. In the morning I was ashamed to speak to anyone of my experience, and in a few weeks it was forgotten.

"This same experience was repeated for five successive years before I began to associate it with the August full moon. Then when I began to feel the sensation of loneliness and fear, I went to the door of the mill and looked toward the dam. The night was a perfect one. Just overhead hung the full moon, and glistening like burnished silver under her rays I could follow with my eye for many hundred yards the winding course of the stream. While I was looking far up the west side of the stream, I saw a moving object, which rapidly drew near. As it appeared, I beheld a sight which filled me with horror and held me motionless. Both horse and rider were as white as the morning mist, but from their eyes fire seemed to flash, and in the man I recognized Jack (I had almost mentioned his name), who was found dead six years before. As they reached the breast of the dam, I saw just before the ghostly rider a fox running a zigzag course, as though seeking to avoid capture. Across the dam they flew until about midway: then I saw the rider lean forward, as with a muttered curse--and strange to say, I could distinctly hear his words--he swore that he would capture the animal if he had to follow it to the lower regions.

"Just then the fox leaped far out into the water, and horse and rider followed close upon him. As they sank beneath the water I lost consciousness and knew no more until in the morning a farmer came to the mill for flour. Since that night, there is not enough money in the world to keep me in this mill after nightfall at the time of the full moon in August. It is growing near sunset now, and if you will excuse me I

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must get ready to go, but if you would like you can spend the night in the mill and take a look at the ghostly horseman, and I hope you will enjoy his visit."

The invitation was declined, and the visitor passed the evening in calling on a number of farmers in the neighborhood, all of whom expressed belief in the miller's story, and a number told of belated travelers who had seen the phantom hunter.