

THURSTON U. VAUGHN AND THE ORPHANAGE SCANDALS: "THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY"

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In the nineteenth century, which was absent any public welfare system, brotherhoods were organized not only for fraternal and social purposes but out of a Christian and social mandate to care for the helpless, the indigent, the sick, and widows and orphans. The Odd Fellows was one of those organizations, founded in 1819 in Baltimore and establishing the Greenville Mountain Lodge Chapter in 1847 in a building at the corner of Main and Washington Streets. Its members were young and eager to serve the Order's high social ideals.

By 1904, the South Carolina chapters decided to follow those across America in establishing an orphanage or, as they first envisioned it, a home for the widows and orphans of South Carolina's Odd Fellows. Property was acquired on what is today Tanglewood Drive, off of the Old Easley Bridge Road.

Heading the search for a live-in superintendent were C. J. Pride, J. J. McSwain, H. J. Southern, and T. M. Bennett. They required an educated man who could possibly double as a teacher, as well as a good businessman and practical farmer who could manage the horses, cattle, and hogs they envisioned placing on the 71 acres of the "Old Carpan Place." Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the property was once a Greenville showplace known as the "Mammoth Vineyards." Also they asked that this paragon have no children who might present more mouths to feed and "cause trouble among the inmates."

They settled on 26-year-old Thurston U. Vaughn, a young man just four-feet-six-inches tall and weighing 90 pounds. Vaughn was one of the eight children of John Marion Vaughn and Mary Jane Cannada of O'Neil Township. He had attended, but not graduated from, Furman University when he began teaching at Locust Hill School in Tigerville.

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There he met the children of patriarch W. P. Z. F. Neves, including their daughter Ella Eugenia, whom he married in 1904, a year before his hiring as orphanage superintendent.



The Superintendent's House on Tanglewood Drive

Under Vaughn's supervision, the orphanage reached a total of 50 "inmates" within the next few years. They received an excellent education - so superior to public schools, it was said, that several of the neighbor families sent their children to attend classes at the orphanage as well. The orphans worked hard at the farming chores as well as in the orphanage's cannery and sawmill. It was not surprising that, under the heavy burden of work demanded by the orphanage, many of the young boys ran away. What was surprising, though, was that none of the orphans came from Greenville or the surrounding area but arrived from homes mainly in York and Aiken Counties.

Among the children in the orphanage at its founding, or arriving shortly thereafter, were several of the reportedly 24 children of Odd Fellow William W. Jackson of Graniteville and his two wives. In 1912, Etta Georgia Jackson, then nearly 18 and no longer living at the orphanage, brought scandalous charges against Vaughn, claiming that he raped her repeatedly since she was 13 and even performed an abortion to be rid of her child. Four other girls came forward, not only backing up her story, but claiming that Vaughn had raped them, too.

Being immediately dismissed from the orphanage and membership in the Odd Fellows, Vaughn hired A. H. Dean as a defense attorney. Later and very curiously, the firm of McCullough, Martin and Blythe was hired by the Odd Fellows to provide Vaughn's defense. Odd Fellows J. J. McSwain and O. K. Mauldin assisted the prosecutor, Proctor Aldrich Bonham. Just 27 years old in 1912, Bonham was the son of Milledge Lipscomb Bonham, the Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court, and the grandson of Milledge Luke Bonham, who governed South Carolina between 1862 and 1864. He was also the great nephew of Alamo hero James Butler Bonham.

During his incarceration in the spring of 1912, Vaughn is said to have "sawed his way out" of the Greenville County Jail and remained missing for several months. In retrospect, we see that his jailer, Sheriff Hendrix Rector, was related to Vaughn. Vaughn's sister, Queen Ann, had actually married a Rector. We know that the Sheriff's brother was permitted to come and go and even sleep in the jail when necessary. It is probable that Vaughn had at least one relative and one accomplice to his escape.

Indeed, Vaughn was very well-liked and attended church regularly, teaching Sunday School even during his escape to Baltimore, where he later claimed he had also enrolled in medical school. Perhaps because of his short stature, and aided by his considerable intellect, Vaughn was able to charm and control people easily with his mind. He could never overpower them through physical strength alone, but he was persuasive and charming, and in short order his very life would depend on how well his mind could manipulate those around him.

After Vaughn's recapture and return to South Carolina, the State took no chances on a recurrence and kept him in the State Prison in Columbia. *The Greenville News* delicately described his crimes as not only "criminal assault upon the person of a girl under 14 years of age, but [he] is accused of living in adultery with her and administering to her certain treatment which brought about relief from the embarrassing physical condition in which she found herself. Details in the charges preferred against Vaughn cannot be published at this time, and perhaps can never be published. Common propriety forbids it." But they did anyway.

At this time, from his jail cell Vaughn threatened to write his own

"tell-all" version of events but, if he ever did so, the papers were never found. Several observers reported that he regularly and copiously corresponded with his attorneys during his incarceration. Were they indeed hired by the Odd Fellows, and were they afraid of what he might say?

The Odd Fellows' South Carolina Grand Master was worried. In a lengthy public plea to his brothers published by *The Greenville News*, James H. Craig would "beg you, brothers, to be loyal in this trying time." When he pleads, "please remember, brethren, that there have been traitors in every organization" and invokes Benedict Arnold, we begin to wonder if his plea for silence is intended to cover wrongdoers other than T. U. Vaughn. As events unfolded, this was something to keep in mind.

The newspaper which had claimed "common propriety forbids" reporting the details of Vaughn's offenses nevertheless provided lengthy, graphic reports of Vaughn's trial. Those who read *The Greenville News* learned perhaps more than those able to pack the aging courthouse. According to their accounts, "the prosecutrix," a Lillian Gish-type little country orphan girl who had been raped and degraded and implicitly blamed for "the embarrassing condition in which she found herself," was quite equal to providing emotional, graphic testimony which even Judge Purdy later admitted was incredible, in parts. However, this was her day in the spotlight after a miserable orphanage existence and before what would be expected to be an even more unremarkable future, and she made the most of it. Four other girls supported her testimony and indicated that they, too, had been violated, although their charges were not prosecuted separately.

After a day of testimony by the orphans and their physicians, Vaughn's attorneys advised him to confess and throw himself on the mercy of the court and jury in hopes of avoiding the death penalty.

The next day, Vaughn's elaborate confession, exposition of contrition, and pleas for mercy took hours and were reported nearly verbatim by *The Greenville News*. They epitomize the mind control which he had always used to manipulate the more powerful as well as the totally helpless and gullible people in his world. "You all have mothers . . . you all have wives . . . you all have children. Every night

my little girl prays 'please bring my Papa home to us'." (His only child, Ruth, was two at the time.) He even made his accuser sit by his feet and look into his eyes, while he confessed. The jury was unmoved by the chapters and verses of his day-long confession and sentenced him, without clemency, to die within the month in South Carolina's recently-installed electric chair.

Vaughn's attorneys then launched appeals on specious grounds. First, they argued that since they had used up the last, critical four of their peremptory jury challenges, that four jurors had cause to be prejudiced. Second, they pleaded that since Vaughn committed the crimes when hanging was the penalty, he had the right to be hanged rather than electrocuted. All these arguments were ultimately rejected by the South Carolina Supreme Court, but not until 1915.

After the trial, Ella Neves Vaughn's family quietly made arrangements for a divorce and a new life for her and her daughter, Ruth, who was born at the orphanage. Ruth later became a reporter for *The Greenville News* and a music teacher at Greenville Women's College. While at the school, a stranger presented her with the only portrait of her father and the words, "This is your father, he was framed and he was murdered."

Meanwhile, in prison, Vaughn began to appear increasingly more insane, and succeeded in convincing all of the public and most of his doctors of his condition. Since an insane person could not be executed, he asked, through his attorneys, for a juried insanity trial - confident of his ability to deceive at least 12 Greenville citizens. Solicitor Bonham, who would be in charge of such a precedent-setting event, feared that Vaughn might be able to persuade such a group and decided against it. Bonham gave Vaughn the benefit of the doubt and remanded him to the State Asylum in Columbia, to remain until such time as he would recover his comprehension and could be re-sentenced to execution.

In the Asylum, Vaughn continued to display all the trappings and symptoms of insanity, as he interpreted it. He became confident, from news he picked up, that the Odd Fellows had lost interest in prosecuting him. Although he continued to say that the Odd Fellows were after him: it is unlikely that he was, in fact, insane. While performing duties as a hospital inmate-helper, he continued to read the newspapers daily, line by

line, for any news of rekindled interest in himself, any clues that he might need to plan an escape.

Deciding to "take out insurance" for his personal safety, Vaughn befriended Sandal Beamguard, an unmarried nurse from Clover, South Carolina. With her, he cultivated a romantic relationship, which he calculated he would need should escape become necessary. Sandal's younger sister, Elizabeth Beamguard, was the telephone operator at the Asylum and the unknowing link between Vaughn, the Odd Fellows and the outside world. She received the frequent solicitous queries of Governor Robert Archer Cooper, himself an Odd Fellow, who befriended her, at least in part, to keep tabs on T. U. Vaughn.

The Odd Fellows (through the governor, via Elizabeth) received reports that Vaughn seemed sane. Not realizing that Vaughn read the newspapers in minute detail each day, they informed the newspapers of their intent to bring him back to Greenville and have him executed. Why? Were they afraid he would indeed "tell all" and implicate them? Nevertheless, believing him sane and capable of telling convincing stories, they published their intent to extricate him from the asylum and stand him before a Greenville judge for reaffirmation of his death sentence.

One September morning in 1919, the morning after the publication of the Odd Fellows' intent to bring him back to Greenville for re-sentencing, Vaughn's bed in the asylum was found to contain a dummy. Further investigation showed a park bench pushed against a ten-foot high asylum wall, later called the "escape route." Since Vaughn was four feet, six inches tall, escape by this route seems unlikely. In addition, keys were also missing. If Sandal was an accomplice, she was silent and remained employed by the hospital for another six months following Vaughn's disappearance.

By the spring of 1920, Sandal joined Vaughn in Port Tampa, Florida, where they were married. Assuming the name T. E. Earle, Vaughn convinced the Tampa School Board to make him assistant superintendent of schools. When Sandal expressed concern that he might be recognized, Vaughn replied that the Odd Fellows had more pressing concerns and were "too busy to fool with him."

On October 25, 1920, the body of Sandal's sister, Elizabeth Beamguard, was dragged from the Columbia Canal, where it emptied into the Congaree river near her home at Clover. A few hours earlier, Elizabeth had been seen in animated conversation with a man on the banks of the Congaree. A "suicide note" was found, detailing her disappointment in love. The Beamguard family, which is now represented on the Tampa Tribune as well as in the town of Clover, reports family tradition says that Elizabeth was pregnant by Governor Cooper, who had refused to marry her, and that her "suicide" was anything but. Four days after the pregnant Elizabeth's death, Cooper was re-elected governor without opposition.

In the spring of 1921, Vaughn again assured Sandal that the Odd Fellows had probably forgotten all about them. Days later, recognized on the streets of Tampa by a Greenville native who just "happened" to be there, he and Sandal were arrested and jailed. Word was sent to Governor Cooper, who relayed the capture to the other Odd Fellows. A sheriff from Richland County was dispatched to bring Vaughn back to Greenville for re-sentencing.

In Tampa, the newspapers and wire service reported that Sandal's jailers asked her to poison her husband. In an effort to persuade her to comply, she herself was drugged. Sandal refused to poison her husband. After she told all she knew about Vaughn, she was released, saying to her husband as she departed, "Good bye, my dear; I will see you in heaven."

Following incredible tales of suicide attempts by Vaughn - he was reported to have tried to drown himself in the toilet bowl - he is inexplicably removed from his straitjacket and placed in a cell on "murderers row" with two convicted murderers. Coincidentally, it was "shaving day" and a straightedge razor was being passed among the prisoners, without supervision. So it is shocking, but not surprising, when his cell mates tell the guards that Vaughn had finally succeeded in "committing suicide" by nearly severing his own head with the used razor - a medically impossible way.

If this was not suicide, it was murder. But who was responsible? Did Sandal and Vaughn know about her sister's unfortunate affair and death, and did the governor know whether there were any witnesses or

not? Or, as an Odd Fellow, had the governor been involved in something else, something more sinister, which Vaughn knew about and was threatening to write about in his "tell-all"? If the Odd Fellows thought he was sane enough to hang, they must also know that his "tell-all" memoirs would be coming from the mind of a sane man. So just who would benefit by the murder of Vaughn, rather than his inevitable execution?

One might think this unfortunate period in Greenville and Odd Fellows history would end with the death of Vaughn; but the orphanage, under a series of superintendents and matrons, continued on into the 1920s, muddling through a series of petty lawsuits regarding finances. During Prohibition, which was enforced within the city limits of Greenville, the lights of big cars were seen arriving in groups out at the orphanage late at night. Richard Watson, an Odd Fellow, was mayor and titular head of the home. Little girls saw what was happening, but even decades later they were divided among themselves about whether to tell what they had seen of "that trashy business."

At this point in the research on this paper, the author received a telephone call from one of those little girls who had decided, over her family's objections, to tell what she knew. Now 88 years of age, she related: "It wasn't the Depression that closed that orphanage. It was those dead babies." According to her, after years of Prohibition partying at the home, the bodies of babies were dug up on the grounds. Upon their discovery, a Mr. W., another Odd Fellow serving as superintendent, was said to have committed suicide by hanging himself, leaving his widow to wail piteously and ceaselessly from her pew at the Pendleton Street Baptist Church. Despite a diligent search, no independent evidence or death certificates have been discovered to support her story; nor would her older sister talk about "that trashy business."

By 1927, pictures of the orphanage no longer appeared in the internationally-published Odd Fellows Book of Homes. South Carolina, which once led the country in numbers of Odd Fellows lodges, today has none. The last mention of the Odd Fellows Orphans Home appears in the 1930 City Directory.

In the mid 1950s, after decades of being subdivided and rented to

farmers, peddlers and other marginal elements, the land and its two remaining residences were bought by the Carter family. The larger building, "the old Carpan place," had been considered too haunted by the sounds of crying babies, heavy footsteps and the image of a headless man, to ever attract tenants. According to local residents, potential tenants fled in terror, without even spending the night. The former manse of "Mammoth Vineyards" was razed by the Carter Land Development Company in 1955. The smaller residence was sold to City Councilman Marshall Cason and his large family, and the rest of the 78 acres was developed into tract housing.

The saga of the Odd Fellows Orphanage still did not lie at rest. In 1957, Odd Fellow Richard Watson, mayor of Greenville during those partying years at the orphanage in the 1920s, fatally shot himself. In addition, organic remains were found in jars on the land of the orphanage as late as the 1960s. The truth about the death of T. U. Vaughn and of what occurred out at the Odd Fellows Home in the 1920s remains open to future revelations and research.