



Hopkins County Historical Society: FRONTIER JUSTICE, By J Harold Utley Hopkins County Historian. A little more than 3 miles north of Dixon, on the west side of U S41A is a historical marker with the title "Frontier Justice". There have been perhaps more newspaper articles, stories, legends and tall tales told about the story behind this marker than any other in western Kentucky. (ee.)

Some of the writers of these legends and tall tales are not very careful about their "facts". The dates of the events range more than thirty years, from the 1790s to the 1820s. At the risk of criticism and ridicule, I will try to present an accurate story of two brothers, perhaps the most cruel and bloodthirsty humans ever to live.

Before 1800, western Kentucky was sparsely populated. Some of the early settlers were outlaws fleeing punishment by hiding in the wilderness. There were also decent, God fearing citizens that came looking for a future.

It is believed that the Harps, Micajah (Big Harp, born about 1768) and Wiley (Little Harp, born about 1770) were brothers and natives of North Carolina. Their father was thought to have been a Tory who fought for the British at the Battle of King's Mountain and other battles in the area. After the Revolutionary War, the Tories were forced to flee to Mississippi. However, the Harp brothers fled into east Tennessee. About 1795, the brothers, accompanied by Susan Roberts and Betsy Roberts, settled in Knox County west of Knoxville. The Harps roamed the area about two years in the company of Creek and Cherokee Indians.

During this time, they came upon a young Methodist preacher named William Lambuth. They robbed him and during the robbery, they became convinced that he was a preacher and let him live. This is the only known instance the Harps let a victim live. The Harps also acquired a third woman, Sally Rice.

When the local residents began missing livestock and had buildings burned, their suspicions turned toward the Harps. The brothers and their women fled the area toward Cumberland Gap. Edward Tiel and a group of "Regulators" captured the Harps in the Cumberland Mountains. As the captors, with their prisoners, reached a point about five miles from Knoxville, the Harps escaped.

The Harps went to a "rowdy grogery" west of Knoxville. Here they met a man named Johnson from Jefferson County. A few days later his body, ripped open and filled with rocks, was found in the Holston River. The Hughes and Metcalfes, from the tavern, came forth and accused the Harps, who were nowhere to be found. The Hughes and Metcalfes were accused, tried and acquitted. However, they were forced to leave the area.

Apparently the Harps had previously arranged to meet the women in case of trouble. Shortly after the killing of Johnson, they met in Western Virginia near Cumberland Gap. In December 1798, the five entered Kentucky and traveled the Wilderness Road.

Their first victim in Kentucky was a peddler named Peyton. They killed him, took his horse and some of his goods. This occurred on the Cumberland River in what is now Knox County. The Harps and their women continued on this trail toward Crab Orchard and Stanton, in Lincoln County. Here they overtook two men from Maryland named Paca and Bates. They agreed to travel together and later to camp together overnight. The Harps maneuvered behind the men and shot them. Bates died instantly. Paca, badly wounded, attempted to rise. Big Harp, using his tomahawk, completed killing Paca by splitting his head open. They took everything the men had, gold and silver, and Continental coins.

They continued on the Wilderness Road to a tavern kept by John Farris, in what is now Rockcastle County, near Crab Orchard. Along the way, they were joined by Stephen Langford, from Virginia, who was on his way to visit kinfolks at Crab Orchard and to possibly make this his home.

The next morning, Langford bought breakfast for the Harps and foolishly displayed his money. He and the Harps left together that morning. A few days later, Langford's body was discovered. The body was taken to Farris' tavern where it was identified. Suspicion fell on the Harps and they were caught near Crab Orchard. The captives were taken to Stanford and placed in jail.

On January 5, 1799, the five prisoners were taken to Danville to await trial in April before the District Court. On March 16, 1799, the Harp brothers escaped jail, leaving behind their three women and two newborn infants. The three women remained in jail and on April 8, 1799, Sally Harp gave birth to a daughter. The women were tried in the April term of District Court and found not guilty.

Again the Harps and their women had made plans in advance in case of trouble. The Harps had made good their escape and departed to parts unknown. The acquitted women had expressed a desire to return to Knoxville. The good citizens of Danville took up a collection of clothes and money to help them on their way.

The women had traveled less than thirty miles when they changed directions toward the Green River. They traded the mare for a canoe and started down river. They traveled down river for a distance of over two hundred miles to a prearranged meeting place near Diamond Island at the mouth of Highland Creek in what is now Henderson County.

Governor James Garrard issued a memorandum authorizing Josh Ballenger to capture the Harps. Ballenger and his regulators began their chase of the Harps. Near the headwaters of Rolling Fork, a branch of Salt River, they suddenly came upon the Harps. In the confusion, the Harps again escaped. Henry Skaggs, one of the original "Long Hunters" suggested they go to his farm and get his dogs to follow the Harps' trail. Lost time and darkness caused most of the men to leave the chase. Skaggs went to a nearby "log rolling" to try to recruit new men. The men felt the trail was too cold and continued their "log rolling".

With the aid of Major James Blain, Skaggs went to the home of Colonel Daniel Trabue, a Revolutionary War soldier, who lived about three miles west of what is now Columbia in Adair County. Ironically while the discussion was going on, John Trabue, thirteen-year-old son of Daniel, was killed by the Harps.

On April 22, 1799, Governor Garrard issued a proclamation offering a three hundred dollar reward for the capture of Micajah (Big) Harp and the same sum for the capture of Wiley (Little) Harp. Before the proclamation could be circulated, reports reached people that the Harps had killed a man named Dooley, near what is now Edmonton in Metcalfe County, and a man named Stump on the Barren River, about eight miles below Bowling Green. It will never be known if other murders were committed on their way down river to their rendezvous with their women.

An outlaw and river pirate by the name of Samuel mason had been operating near Diamond Island and Highland Creek in what is now Henderson County for several years terrorizing local residents.

A Captain Young, from Mercer County, had organized a group of regulators and was determined to rid western Kentucky of all outlaws including the Harp brothers. Captain Young and his regulators were successful in driving the criminals from Kentucky across the river to Cave-in-Rock, Illinois.

With Mason's outlaws driven away from Diamond Island to Cave-in-Rock, the Harp women continued down river to Cave-in-Rock to join the Harps. It is believed that two of the women returned to the Diamond Island-Red Banks (Henderson) area where they remained.

While at Cave-in-Rock, the Harps committed a murder that was designed to amuse Mason's pirates. A man that had been taken prisoner was stripped naked and tied on a horse. The man and horse were taken to the top of the bluff above the cave. The horse was blindfolded and prodded to cause it o jump. The man and horse fell to their deaths on the rocks at the edge of the river. This act was apparently too cruel even for Mason and his pirates. They forced the Harps to leave Cave-in-Rock.

The Harps apparently left western Kentucky in May, 1799, and traveled through Tennessee to Knoxville, leaving dead bodies along their way. They went into what is now Russell County, Kentucky to visit "old Mr Roberts", father of Susan and Betsy. These two women were claimed as wives of Big Harp.

From here, the Harps headed west, south of Green River, toward Russellville. While rumor had the Harps headed south into west Tennessee, they actually had returned to the Red Banks (Henderson) area. They had rented a log cabin on Canoe Creek, about eight miles south of Red Banks.

John Slover lived about one mile from the cabin rented by the Harps. One day Slover was hunting near Robertson's Lick, and after killing a bear, was leisurely returning home when he

heard the snap of a gun that failed to fire. Quickly turning in the direction of the sound, he saw his two new neighbors. Slover spurred his horse and escaped. He reported the incident to General Samuel Hopkins who was living at Red Banks. He ventured the opinion that the two men were the Harp brothers.

A few days later, a man named Trowbridge had been to Robertson's Lick to obtain salt. He was supposed to carry salt to a farm on the Ohio River near the mouth of Highland Creek. Trowbridge never returned. The mystery was solved a few months later when one of the Harp women let the facts be known.

When General Hopkins and a posse went to the Harp cabin, Slover did not recognize the Harps and they were able to escape. The next day the Harps joined the women and traveled south about fifteen miles to the cabin of James Tompkins, on Deer Creek, not far from Steuben's Lick. The Harps passed themselves as Methodist preachers. Mr Tompkins invited them to supper and Big Harp said a long grace before the meal. The Harps asked Tompkins why he had no venison. He explained that he had no gunpowder to kill game. Big Harp generously gave Tompkins a cup full of gunpowder.

The Harps left Tompkins' cabin and traveled to the cabin of Squire Silas McBee, apparently planning to kill McBee because of his activity in fighting outlaws, Luckily McBee had half dozen or so dogs trained to hunt bear and deer. After a fierce fight with the dogs, the Harps withdrew.

From McBee's cabin they traveled about four miles to the cabin of Moses Stegall. Stegall was not home. The cabin was occupied by Mrs Stegall, her child, and a Major William Love. Love was a surveyor who had come to see Stegall on business.

As was the custom at the time, the Harps were invited to spend the night. The Harp brothers and Love were to sleep in the loft of the cabin. During the night, one of the Harps killed Major love, supposedly for snoring and keeping them awake. The next morning, they killed Mrs Stegall and her child and set fire to the cabin. The cabin site is roughly on the Hopkins-Webster County line and east of KY Hwy 630.

As the Harps left Stegall's cabin, they took Major Love's horse and one belonging to Stegall. They hid along the road thinking that when Squire McBee saw smoke from the burning cabin he

would come to investigate and they would have a chance to kill him.

Two men named Hodgens and Gilmore were returning from Robertson's Lick with their winter supply of salt. The Harps took them captive and accused them of the murders and fires. When told they would appear before Squire McBee, they willingly submitted to arrest. While traveling to McBee's home, Big Harp shot Gilmore in the head, killing him instantly. Hodgens, seeing this, ran for his life. He was caught by Little Harp, who killed him with his own gun.

The Harps continued in hiding, waiting for a chance to kill McBee. However, John Pyles and four men from Christian County discovered the fire. They proceeded to McBee's home to tell him of their discovery. McBee, who knew nothing of the fire, went by a short trail to the home of William Grissom. By luck, McBee escaped the Harps.

McBee, Grissom and Grissom's family, well armed, rode to the Stegall cabin. Here they discovered the partially burned corpses of Mrs Stegall and Major Love. When they returned to McBee's residence, Moses Stegall rode up. They decided to organize a posse and Stegall rode to Robertson's Lick for volunteers.

From Stegall's cabin the Harps traveled diagonally across what is now Hopkins County, through what is now Madisonville, to Free Henry Ford and crossed Pond River into what is now Muhlenberg County. They camped for the night under an overhang, sometimes called a cave, near a hill that is now called Harp's House.

The posse, composed of Moses Stegall, John Leiper, Matthew Christian, Neville Lindsey, Silas McBee, William Grissom and James Tompkins, began their pursuit of the Harps. The posse had no difficulty tracking the Harps to Pond River.

Unknown to the posse, the Harps had crossed and were camped on the Muhlenberg County side of the river. The posse elected to camp on the Hopkins County side. During the night a light rain fell that was to play an important role in the events of the next day.

The next morning the posse forded Pond River and found two dead dogs that had belonged to

Hodgens and Gilmore, on the trail, killed by the Harps. Members of the posse believed that the dogs had been killed only a very short time as their bodies had not swollen from the hot August weather. Squire McBee proposed that the four most expert members of the posse dismount and proceed quietly on foot as rapidly as possible. Leiper, Stegall, Christian and Lindsey would proceed on foot, while McBee, Grissom and Tompkins would follow with the horses.

Unfortunately, a local resident, George Smith, was with the Harps when the posse caught up to the Harps. The posse shot Smith. In the confusion that followed, Big Harp mounted a horse he had taken from Stegall's residence and rode away. Little Harp, on foot, escaped in to the woods.

Members of the posse searched the area and found the Harp's camp with only one of the women present. She told the posse Big Harp had been there and had put his women on horses and left. She pointed out the direction to the posse. In their haste, the posse lost the trail and returned to the camp, accusing the woman of lying about the direction.

Again the posse left on the trail and about two miles from the camp, caught up with Big Harp. They ordered him to stop but he abandoned the women and children and dashed away alone. Leiper fired a shot at Big Harp but missed. He was unable to reload his gun because of a swollen ramrod, from the rain the night before. James Tompkins, believing that Leiper was a better shot, gave his gun, loaded with powder given to him by Big Harp, to Leiper to continue pursuit.

Big Harp, seeing Leiper closing in on him, thinking Leiper's gun was empty, stopped to prime his gun. Leiper took dead aim and fired. The ball struck Big harp in the spine. However, he did not quit. He leveled his gun at Leiper and pulled the trigger but the gun only snapped. Big Harp drew his tomahawk from his belt and waved it to keep away the pursuers. He mounted his horse and rode away. Leiper's horse ran away with Big Harp.

Matthew Christian chased down the runaway horse and returned him to Leiper. They followed the trail through a canebrake and caught up with Big Harp, not more than a half mile away. Big Harp was weak from the loss of blood an they pulled him from his horse.

Big Harp, stretched out on the ground, dying, begged for a drink of water. Leiper took one of

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Harp's shoes and got him a drink. Stegall, with the knife he had exhibited to Big Harp, cut off the outlaw's head. The head was placed in a saddlebag and carried to the cross-roads about a half mile from Robertson's Lick and placed it on a tree where it remained as a warning to other outlaws. This is the fate of outlaws when caught and "Frontier Justice" is administered.

The Harp women and children were taken to Henderson and jailed. Later they were taken to Russellville for trial. The three women were found not guilty and freed. Sally Rice Harp returned to the Knoxville area with her father. Betsy Roberts Harp married and lived for a while near Russellville and then moved to Tennessee. Susan Roberts Harp remained a single woman and raised her daughter.

Little Harp went to Natchez, Mississippi where without Big Harp, it was too rough for him. He came back up the "Trace" and reunited with Samuel Mason.

Little Harp was using the name John Setton in Mississippi. Little Harp, accompanied by James May, killed Mason to collect the reward offered. When they turned in the head of Mason to authorities they were arrested and John Setton was recognized as Little Harp.

Both Harp and May were tried in Circuit Court in Greenville, Mississippi in January 1804, and found guilty of robbery. They received identical sentences: hung by the neck until dead, dead, dead. The head of one was placed on a pole on the north side of Greenville and the other on a pole on the west side.

Thus ended an era of crime in Western Kentucky, the like which had never occurred before, nor since. Hanging and the severing of the head may seem cruel and unusual but in the words of Archie Bunker, "Capital punishment is a well known detergent to crime".

(For additional reading on the Harps see "The Outlaws of Cave-in-Rock" by Otto Rothert, "Cavern of Crime" by Judy McGee and "Satan's Ferrymen" by W D Snively, Jr and Louanna Furb

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