

Tales and legends

By Liz McGarr

Being one of the first to be settled, North Carolina has more than its fair share of ghosts, haunted houses, legends and mysteries. The mountains, coast and Piedmont all have their peculiar tales.

In the area we call Down East, many tales to explain nature and other phenomena were passed down from the Scottish and English settlers. One of these deal with the not-so-favorite bird in North Carolina, the blue jay. Credited to the Reverend George W. Lay of eastern North Carolina, written sometime around 1913, this legend shows just why the blue jay has gotten such a bad reputation.

Most birds in the South will become quiet around midday and the blue jay or jay bird follows suit. There was a saying that the "jay bird is quiet because during that hour he goes to hell to carry down brimstone for the use of the devil."

Another legend tells of the cause of the honey bee's industriousness and the reason they avoid clover blossoms. A Z. Teeter is credited with getting this tale on paper circa 1920. "Honey bees always stay away from red-top clover blossoms. God gave them the choice of working on Sunday or of working the red-top clover blossoms. They chose to work on Sunday."

North Carolina citizens earned the nickname of "Tar Heels" during the Civil War. In the early part of the 19th century, North Carolina was known for the production of tar and turpentine.

The name "Tar Heel" was an insult at first, implying that North Carolina soldiers were ignorant and often barefoot with tar on their heels.

However, during a particularly fierce battle where troops from Virginia and South Carolina were driven back, the North Carolinians dug in their heels and held fast. The word got around that the "Tar Heels" had held their ground while others fled.

When General Robert E. Lee heard of the valiant actions of the North Carolina troops, he reportedly said, "God bless the Tar Heel boys." The

title "Tar Heel" has since been not an insulting term, but one of which North Carolinians boast.

A song was made up sometime after this:

"I'm a raw recruit in a brand new suit,
Nine hundred dollars bounty;
And I've come to here from a Tar Heel town
To fight for North Carolina."

One of North Carolina's most noted authors, Paul Green, was given the story of the Harnett Hag one rainy evening. Driving on a rainy night a few

miles beyond Buies Creek, his friend Malcolm related this tale:

A woman called Aunt Sarah McLean lived in the area; her next-door neighbor was a man named Baldy Ryalls. One night, while he was feeding his hogs, a snow-white deer came out of the woods and began to eat from the hogs' trough. Baldy ran back to the house, got his gun, and fired off several shots at the deer. Even though he was known for being a dead shot, Baldy didn't even put a scratch on the deer.

The next evening, the same thing happened. Baldy had brought his gun this time and it was loaded with buckshot. He still couldn't hit her and she went back to the woods as though nothing had happened.

Baldy was not about to be outdone by any old deer. That evening, he took a silver dollar, melted it down and made a silver bullet. The next evening, he went to feed his hogs prepared for the deer.

After slopping the hogs, he stood waiting with his gun loaded with the silver bullet. The deer appeared, snow-white and beautiful, from the woods, hopped into the pen and began to eat. Baldy let her have it with the silver bullet.

The deer lunged and then hobbled back into the woods. He hardly noticed whether or not he hit the deer, for as soon as he fired the gun, a loud wailing and screeching began in the house behind him. Some children came running up to Baldy, urging him to hurry and see what had happened to Grandma, for it was she who was screeching and yowling.

When Baldy ran into the house, he saw Aunt Sarah McLean, the children's grandmother, twisting and writhing in pain on the floor. She had been shot through the leg and blood was pouring out of the wound.

Turns out Grandma was a hag; a witch woman who could turn herself into all shapes and forms.

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