



Here and There

By Ann Carroll

Pocahontas Star Herald, February 21, 2008

My family recently enjoyed the Imperial Dinner Theatre's presentation, "Presumption of Guilt — Cheverie vs. The Court of Public Opinion," as written and directed by Kelly Grooms. Grooms also played the part of defense attorney in the production.

It's all about a lynching that actually occurred in Pocahontas in the spring of 1901. It's difficult to believe that local men, some of them whose names are well known by local natives today, were so moved by the killing of the town marshal that they took the law into their own hands and hung a citizen.

Growing up in Pocahontas in the 1920s, I heard from time to time of the tragic event, and even read of it in the writings of Captain Bolen's Randolph Herald of the time. After interest was raised again several years ago, Virgil Pace, former sheriff's deputy here, who was later a KPOC announcer, gave me a photo of George Cheverie hanging from the Red Bridge over Marr Creek. (Yes, that bridge never was called anything but the "Red" Bridge -just because it was painted red.) Someone at the Imperial's production the other night came to me and asked, "Just where was the Red Bridge?" My answer was, well you know there is a little concrete bridge over Hwy. 67, built in 1934 leading from the 67 Bypass to the "Y". The Red Bridge was just above (or West) over Marr's Creek. The Red Bridge carried traffic from town on Bettis Street directly to Starr Street. The two bridges were parallel.

I spent most of an afternoon once with Mrs. John Shivley (formerly Mrs. N.A. Childs Sr.), as I knew she was the only living person who was an eye witness to many events of that

tragic day in the history of our town. Mr. and Mrs. Nelson Arthur Childs Sr., and their four sons, Omer, Lester, Harry and N.A. Jr. (Babe), moved here from Poplar Bluff. Mr. Childs was to be one of Pocahontas' jewelers and watch repairmen for almost a lifetime. Mrs. Childs-Shivley told me that when they moved here rental property was scarce, so they moved into a houseboat on Black River, tied just below the George Cheveries' houseboat, where the unfortunate event occurred.

The Cheveries had several small children and the family had moved here not long before from Illinois. Cheverie made his living by commercial fishing and by taking loose logs from the river. At that time, woodcutters north of Pocahontas would get their logs to local mills by marking them, tying them together and floating them downstream. The problem with this method was that frequently a log or two would break loose from those tied together, and by the law of the river, those loose logs could be confiscated by anyone on the river and then sold by a "finders - keepers rule".

Mrs. Childs-Shivley recalled that early on the fateful day Cheverie had caught several logs and tied them to his boat. Later, a woodsman came by and claimed the logs Cheverie had tied up, and accused Cheverie of stealing them from a tied bundle that the man was floating downstream.

The woodsman went uptown and summoned Marshal John Norris. By the time the lawman arrived, N.A. Childs Sr., who was down river by boat, had returned to the scene. Mr. Childs was one of the key witnesses in investigations after the tragedies of that day, as

he had witnessed some of the action and had heard some of the words exchanged between Cheverie and Officer Norris.

I've read much of Mr. Childs' testimony which is on record in Randolph County Courthouse. He and his wife stated that Marshal Norris told Cheverie to come with him uptown to answer to charges against him. Cheverie refused and told his wife to bring him his gun.

Norris started toward the porch of Cheverie's houseboat, which was reached by walking on a plank from the river bank.

Cheverie warned Norris, "You take one step on that plank and I'll shoot!"

Norris stepped onto the plank and Cheverie shot him in the head, killing him.

Cheverie was placed in the local jail, a small log structure that could have been on the old courthouse lawn, or might have been on Marr Street at Pyburn, where the City Jail once stood. Presumably, Sheriff Wiley Russell was summoned to jail Cheverie after the death of Norris.

As word of the shooting of their marshal, a married man with children, reached citizens of Pocahontas, feelings were running high by evening. It is believed that a mob had formed, and around midnight over a dozen men arrived at the jail with a battering ram with which to break into the jail.

The angry mob broke the jail door down, removed Cheverie, and dragged or carried him the 3-to-4 blocks down Bettis Street to the Red Bridge and hung the defenseless man to the superstructure of the bridge. If the sheriff tried to control the mob and save Cheverie's life, it had no effect.

Another tragedy occurred as a result of the night of terror. Approximately a dozen men had manned the battering ram used to open the jail door. One man was on the end of the ram opposite the door. The men ran with such force with the log, and hit the door, that the log bounced back, hitting the man who was at the end of the pole. The blow ruptured the stomach

of the man at the end of the ram, and no local doctor was prepared to care for the unfortunate fellow. He was taken to Hoxie and placed on a train and taken to a St. Louis hospital, where he died.

Cheverie's body was allowed to hang long enough the following day that an itinerant photographer, passing through town, took the photo still held by several local persons today. A story told in my husband's family is that his grandparents Mr. and Mrs. W. T. Stubblefield, resided in a home on Marr at Convent Street at the time of the lynching. As was Mr. Stubblefield's custom, he rode a horse from his home that morning after the hanging, up to Starr Street headed for uptown, and when he started across the Red Bridge his horse shied and wouldn't cross. Mr. Stubblefield looked up to see what had spooked the horse, and there Cheverie hung. Mr. S. had not heard of events of the night before.

Another tale told locally: A well known local man, Mack Jordan, told that his stepmother, on the day after the hanging, was walking on Starr Street to town. As most women did in those days, she had an umbrella over her head to protect her from the sun, and was apparently paying little attention to where she was walking on the Red Bridge. Her umbrella had suddenly hit something. She stopped and looked upward. Her umbrella had collided with the feet of the unfortunate George Cheverie as he hung from the superstructure of the bridge.

Almost immediately after the lynching, the Knights of Pythias (K.P.), which was an active fraternity here at the time, was accused of having been responsible for the tragedy. The brotherhood vehemently denied the accusation, and privately held an inquest to see whether its members had actually participated in the hanging.

Before the death of Pocahontas native Tell T. White, he informed me of much about the K.P. inquest, and he gave me a list of names of the men who sprang Cheverie loose

and lynched him. I recognized three or four of the names, one of whom was at one time a county judge here. I've misplaced the list, unfortunately. Mr. White knew about the inquest because his father Solomon (Uncle Sol) White was head of the investigation held by the K.P., and had informed his son of the proceedings.

It was decided from the inquiry that the K.P. was not responsible for the lynching of Cheverie.

Mrs. Childs-Shivley, residing adjacent to Cheverie's widow and children, had great sympathy for the family. They had few friends, no relatives, no income, and might have even been hated by some local citizens. As time passed, Mrs. C-S organized local women in approaching local merchants, organizations and individuals and obtained rriohayi food and clothing for the family. Eventually, a purse was raised to buy tickets to move the family by train to relatives in Illinois.

I'm sure the miserable family was relieved to shake the dust of Pocahontas from their feet and return to a place that had less fear for them. Their husband and father had murdered a man, but the citizens of the town had not allowed the law to take its course.

As to the production written and directed hv Kelly Grooms, Kelly wrote the play quite well from the information available locally. The local angle on the presentation made it much more interesting for us and the remainder of the audience. I found interesting the contrast of the 1901 viewpoints, traditions and outlooks of how people thought then, and those aspects in our life today.

Something about Officer Norris: My mother's sister Edith Martin, wed Charles K. Jones of Pocahontas in the 1920s. He was a nephew of Officer Norris. There is a prominent marker in front of Pocahontas City Hall on which there are names and dates of deaths of local law officials who have given their lives while serving our city as lawmen. Will the name of Marshal John Norris ever be there?