

The Chevrie Story

March in Arkansas is a time when winter begins to loosen its grip and spring, after a few jonquils and crocuses are the flowers of the hour. A green haze becomes faintly perceptible among the bare limbs of the hardwood trees. The nights are still cool and home still needs a fire at night to be comfortable. The pungent smell of wood smoke mixes with the clean, fresh air of spring.

Before the weather becomes too fine and the chore takes all their time, the farmers along the waterways of Randolph County cut timber and clear land for cultivation. The logs are floated down the Eleven Point, Current, and Spring Rivers to the Black River south of Pocahontas. The cash thus earned helps buy seeds and other necessities. In the early days of the county, farmers frequently earned enough money through lumber sales to pay for their farms.

The majority of people in Randolph County in 1901 were farmers but there were merchants, millers, laborers and a few professionals in Pocahontas. The lowest of the social classes was the white trash who occupied a row of houseboats on the Black River, earning a meager living by selling catfish, bass, mussels and eel caught in the green, slow-moving water. George Chevrie was a fisherman. He was born in Indiana, the son of French -Canadian immigrants. He came to Arkansas and spent several years moving around the state trying to find an occupation that would break him and his family out of the poverty that gripped them. He moved to Pocahontas from Corning and tried to find decent work but failed. Out of desperation he turned to the lowly occupation of fisherman, made his home on the muddy banks of the Black River and dreamed of the day when opportunity would come his way.

Chevrie, with his wife and five children lived on a houseboat; barge actually, with a shack cobbled together on the deck. Shortly after dawn following a sleepless night of worry, he stood on the deck glumly watching the logs drift slowly down stream. His breath came in small clouds of steam in the chilly morning air. He kept his hands in the pockets of a greasy and threadbare overcoat that someone had given him a few years before. This time of year, despite the pleasant weather, was disastrous for him. Until the farmers ceased cutting timber and returned to the fields, he could not string the trot lines that he used to catch fish. Each day that the log rafts continued to drift by was another day of lost wages. Sometimes he considered leaving the river to find work in the bottoms, share cropping in the cotton fields or going up into the hills to earn fifty cents a day from some cattle man. But his kind wasn't welcomed among decent folk. Even at the best of times the

few fish he caught that had not been spoiled by snapping turtles or otters would bring in barely enough money to feed his family. He worked a few odd jobs around town and the clothes that some of the kinder folks donated helped keep the children dressed, although shabbily. Thank God that spring was here. The kids could go without shoes now until frost.



He was jolted from his gloomy musing by a sudden jolt that nearly threw him to his knees. One of the two ropes that held his boat stationary among the cypress trees snapped and the barge skewed about further into the river. His wife called out from the shack, "What was that, George?" He ran around to the upstream side of the houseboat. The corner of a raft of red oak logs had collided with the barge and was slowly pivoting around the contact point to come up alongside. George leaned over the railing to survey the damage. The logs had been moving too slowly to penetrate the barge but the rusty metal was badly dented.

"Damn!" he said beneath his breath. He didn't have money for food for his kids; how was he going to fix the boat?

He called to his wife, "Ella, honey, bring me some rope. Some god dam sod buster's raft just hit us."

The rope was soon in coming. He secured the front of the raft to the barge, tied one end of the rope to the aft of the barge and leaped out onto the raft. When the raft finally came alongside the barge with a thud, he secured the other end also. There was a piece of rough-cut board nailed to the raft. On it was crudely painted in red barn paint the name *Eddie Lynxweiler* but neither George nor anyone else in his family could read. He didn't know who owned these logs but whoever it was would pay to fix the damage to the boat. If no one claimed the logs in a reasonable length of time Chevrie would sell them. There

was enough timber here to more than pay for the damage and maybe make up for lost wages. After rechecking the knots, he went into the shack for a breakfast of flour fried in bacon grease, fish, and river water.

Throughout the rest of the day, logs continued to come down the river. A few began to snag on the Lynxweiler raft and a log jam began to form. Some concerned folks had tried to bring it to George's attention but were only met with harsh words and soon John Z. Morris, the town marshal, was notified of a problem developing on the river around George Chevie's houseboat. John decided to stop at George's houseboat during the evening rounds.

"Hello," John called from the river bank.

"Hello on the boat. Anybody to home?" He looked up the river. A wedge almost a hundred yards long of entangled logs had backed up behind Lynxweiler's anchored raft.

The door on the shack slowly opened. "What do you want?" came Chevie's surly voice.

"George? George, this is John Norris, from the sheriff's office," the marshal called. "Some folks been by the office. They're kinda worried 'bout the log Jam."

"So what?"

"Suppose you could see your way clear to cut Eddie Lynxweiler's raft loose?"

Chevie stepped out onto the deck of the houseboat. "Lynxweiler, eh? So that's who it belongs to. Shore, I'll cut it loose, soon as he pays me for the damage."

Norris thought quickly, trying to avoid saying anything that might sound confrontational. Finally he called to Chevie, "Say, George, there's no reason for us to shout at each other like this. Bring your boat over and fetch me. It's been a coon's age since I saw Etta and the kids."

Chevie looked warily, suspiciously at Norris for a long minute.

Morris continued. "You got anything fish? Kate said I should bring some fish home one of these days."

Chevie nodded slowly and said, "I caught a couple of cats this morning. They's still alive, on stringers."

"Sounds fine," called Norris. "Come on over and get me."

Chevie turned and cautiously stepped into a skiff tied to the barge. He picked up a long pole lying on the deck of the barge, untied the skiff and pushed off. The little boat wobbled

slightly and Chevie dipped the pole into the water to steady the boat and to slow it. After he had gotten control, he pushed the pole into the water until it bit into the river bottom mud and pushed back, driving the boat forward toward the shore. He continued punting the boat along until it fetched up on the bank. Norris stepped into the boat and offered his hand. The two men shook hands and Chevie finally smiled. "Good to see you again, John."

"Same here."

Morris turned, pushed off from shore with a booted foot and quickly sat down in the unsteady boat, Chevie poled the boat out into the river toward the barge. "You know, it ain't easy living like this," he said suddenly, "When me and Ella first got married, I promised her Ma and Pa that I'd make something of myself. We came to Arkansas cause we heerd that there was promise here, opportunity. Opportunity," he repeated almost idly.

Norris nodded sympathetically. "It never is easy," he said. "A wife and kids makes a tolerable burden. All a man can do is be a man and stick to it and have some faith."

As they approached the barge, Chevie dragged the pole in the water to slow them and when they were close enough, held out the pole to stop the boat before it hit the barge. He leapt out and secured the skiff in place and helped Norris on board. Etta and the children were on the deck waiting.

Morris touched the brim of his hat. "Evenin' Mrs. Chevie," he said politely.

"How de do, marshal" she replied. "Are Katie and the children doing well?"

"Right well, thank'ee kindly. George says that ya'll might have enough catfish to make a mess."

"Why, we shorely do. I'll just send the children to fetch them for you. Ethel, you and Josie go get them fish your Pa caught this morning and clean them for the marshal." The two oldest girls turned to go.

"That won't be necessary, Miss Chevie," said Morris, if the girls will bring the fish, I'll clean 'em myself when I get home."

"If you are sure... "

Norris nodded and turned to Chevie. "What happened here?" he asked and indicated the logs in the water. Chevie told the marshal what had happened and showed him the damage done to the barge. He went on to explain the difficulties in earning a living on the river, particularly at this time of year. Morris

nodded as he listened, understanding the man's dilemma. Chevrie concluded his narration, "What would you have done, John? And answer me like a man, not like the marshal."

"I don't know, George. Maybe I would have done what you did. Maybe I would have gone to the sheriff or the marshal and sued for damages. But, George, this situation is getting out of hand. If we don't stop this log jam pretty quick, no one will take your side in court no matter how right you are. You're not the only one on the river, you know." Chevrie remained sullenly quiet. Morris was prevented from speaking further by the return of Chevrie's daughters. The girls' bare feet slapped against the metal deck of the barge. They were helping each other carry two large catfish on a stringer. "Why, George, them's a couple of beauts."

"It takes more than a couple of catfish a day to make a go on the river," said Chevrie sadly.

Morris didn't know what to say. "Yes, well.... how much do I owe you?"

"Let's see," said Chevrie. He took the stringer and hefted the fish, estimating their weight. "Fifteen—no, twenty cents." Morris reached into his pocket and took out a silver quarter and handed it to Chevrie. "I can't change..." he began, embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it," said Morris. "Next time the kids go to town, give 'em a penny apiece from me."

Chevrie smiled weakly. "Thank'ee kindly," he said. "When a man's got nothin' but his pride..." Morris cut him off. "You have a fine family. And it was good to see you all again, but I have got to be gettin' home to Katie. Miz Chevrie, it was nice seein' you and the children again."

"Must you leave, marshal?" she asked politely. "Stay the night. The kids can sleep on pallets."

"Sorry, I can't. Katie's expecting me home, but ya'll come home with me."

"That's very kind, John," said Chevrie, "but it'll be gettin' dark soon and the fish'll be biting. I can't afford to miss any opportunities. "

"Maybe some other time then," said Morris. Now that the farewell rituals were concluded, Morris gingerly stepped into Chevrie's skiff, followed by Chevrie. Morris was amazed by the man's confidence on the water. By the time Chevrie had reached the shore, the sun had set and the air was turning cool.

"George, I hope that we can get this situation worked out,"

said Morris. Chevrie remained silent.

"George, why don't you think on it? I'll send word to Eddie. I'm sure you and him can come to some agreement, but you gotta cut that raft loose. I'll stop by tomorrow."

"Suit yerself, John," said Chevrie and pushed off. After Chevrie had gone, Morris stooped and released the catfish into the water and watched as they swam away. He thrust his hands into his pockets and turned to finish his rounds. He never gave another thought to Chevrie as he went about his business and finally went home to his wife, Katie.

The next day, the first day of spring, John went to work at the sheriff's office as usual and built a small fire to knock off the chill that had settled during the night and to make coffee. He was still encouraging a small fire with a poke when Eddie Lynxweiler came to the office. He looked worried. "Hullo, marshal," he said.

"Eddie," replied John. "Howdy, howdy." He set the poker down and closed the stove. "How can I help you?"

"I heerd about the problem with George Chevrie," Eddie said. "I went to talk to him but he wasn't in any mood to be reasonable. Said he wanted fifty dollars 'fore he'd cut my raft loose. Shoot! That whole houseboat ain't worth fifty dollars."

"What!" demanded Norris. "Hasn't he cut that raft loose yet?" He sighed and calmly asked, "Did it sound like he'd been drinking?"

"Can't say, John."

"Well, looks like I'd better go talk to the man. You wait here and tell Sheriff Russell where I went."

Norris gathered his hat and strolled east on Pyburn Street the short distance from the sheriff's office to George Chevrie's houseboat. As he approached the river, he could see the log jam stretching nearly a quarter mile up the river and reaching nearly from bank to bank at its widest point. As he surveyed the situation he felt his wrath as a pressure behind his eyes and throbbing in his temples. No matter what happened now, they were going to have to dynamite to break up the log jam. His anger forced him to walk faster, clenching and unclenching his fists. The logs were so jammed together that, with care, John could pick a path from the river bank to the houseboat. His anger was lessened somewhat as he cautiously negotiated a path on the slippery logs. When he arrived at the barge, George Chevrie stepped through the door, a shotgun gripped firmly in his hands. His worried wife stood in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. A filthy child clung to her skirt.

"What you want, marshal?" Chevrie asked.

"Dammit all to hell, George," yelled Morris, his anger rising anew. "I thought you was going to cut that raft loose."

"Never said I was," replied Chevrie. "You get that son of a bitch who owns this raft to pay for the damage and I'll cut it loose."

"You said you wanted fifty dollars?" asked John.

"That's right."

"Hell's bells! That can't be more than five dollars worth of damage done. Nothin' a little paint won't fix."

"You heard me. Now get going. You don't have anything to say to me and I don't want to hurt you, marshal."

"Now, George..." his wife began nervously.

Norris scowled as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a knife.

"I don't kear how you and Eddie settle this," he said, but we got to get this river opened up again." He moved forward with his knife in hand to the ropes that secured the raft.

"You stop right now," said Chevrie angrily, and brandished the shotgun. Morris ignored him and began to cut through one of the ropes. Chevrie thumbed back the hammer. The click of the gun seemed loud in the warm air.

"I said stop!" shrilled Chevrie, his voice thin and desperate. The rope parted. In a second of time that seemed to last an eternity, Chevrie raised the gun and fired. The sound of the blast rolled up and down the smooth water and echoed off the muddy banks. The lead shot ripped into Norris' chest and abdomen, flinging him back. His knife flew from his hand and splashed into the water. Sitting on the edge of the raft, Norris raised his hand and felt his met bloody shirt. He fell backward into the murky water, the air in his lungs rising to the surface in tiny bubbles.

In a community as small as Pocahontas there is so much energy spent in discussing the picayune and unimportant that, when a major event occurs, there is a certain amount of delayed reaction as the people mentally shift gears to grasp the situation. The shocking news of John Norris' murder spread as quickly as word of mouth would allow.

"Have you heard....?"

"I don't believe it!"

"Young John Norris?"

"His poor wife and children!"

"Did you hear?"

"That scum Chevrie...."

"Trash!"

"Sheriff Russell's got him locked up now."

The news was such that it brought the people from their homes. Folks came into town from some of the closer outlying communities. They gathered in twos and threes in the yards of the citizens of Pocahontas to discuss the events, and they gathered in groups of a half dozen or more on the street corners. When they had thoroughly hashed over the details of the day's events they drifted to the courthouse square for news. The population of Pocahontas in 1901 was around a thousand and on that spring evening there were that many and more at the square. After the shock and dismay over the death of Morris had quieted a little, the talk turned to Chevrie.

"Doesn't deserve to live."

"Fancy city lawyers..."

"Hangin's too good for 'im."

The news of Morris' death and the mood of the town soon reached Little Rock. "*Town Marshal Shot!*" declared the Gazette "*John Norris Murdered at Pocahontas by James Chevrie. Prisoner May be Lynched Before Morning.*"



The crowd lingered around the courthouse long past sundown. There was an almost tangible change in the personality of the crowd as darkness settled in. Wives and children were sent home. Some of the men went home, too...but soon returned with lanterns. Folks that had come in from out of town made arrangements to stay at the home of friends or relatives. The men stayed behind to talk. To talk and to fume. To fume and to hate. In time a few jugs were produced and passed around.

Thoughts that may have died unspoken were given expression with the help of the whiskey. After midnight there were still four or five hundred men and youths gathered around the courthouse. The jail was a block north of the courthouse, on the corner of Marr and Pyburn Streets. Sheriff Russell was there that night with a couple of deputies. They could hear the crowd just down the street. They could hear the jeers of the few brave souls who came to the jail to yell threats and curses but these few could be sent scampering with a stern look and a harsh word from the sheriff. Those turned back from the jail returned to the square and merged with the brainless whole. Slowly, so slowly that a change in position could barely be perceived the crowd began to move toward the jail. But Sheriff Russell could see what was happening and was afraid. The sound of the crowd had changed over the last hour. It was no longer the murmur of conversation. It was loud now, and vicious. It was not a debate but a roar of hatred in the language of lust and revenge. Someone called for a rope and a rope was produced. The crowd oozed amoeba-like down the narrow street toward the jail. The sheriff saw, not the faces of people he knew, but eyes glittering in the light of dozens of coal oil lanterns and carbide lamps. They were so close that he could smell them. Their odor came through the windows and under the door, a smell of sweat and fear, whiskey and kerosene.

Sheriff Russell spoke quickly to his deputies. "Hurry, boys, we got trouble on our hands." He scooped up the keys and tossed them to one of the deputies. "John, you get George out of here, I don't care where, just get some where safe." Deputy John took the keys and a lantern and opened the door to the lock-up.

"Sheriff," Chevie called out. "Sheriff, don't you let them in here." At that moment the crowd arrived. It was impossible to distinguish what they were saying but it was altogether too clear what they wanted. Deputy John stood in the door way of the lock up, the keys in his hand, too afraid to move.

"Git in there and guard the prisoner," Russell ordered sharply. John nodded and ducked into the small room where Chevie's cell was located. Chevie was pressed against the bars. His face was pale and haggard, his eyes red and crusty. He reached beseechingly through the bars toward the deputy.

"Please don't let them have me, John...please." No sooner had he spoken than the front door to the jail was hit from the outside very hard. The mob had found a post maul and was trying to break through the door. The door was struck again and the screws which held the hinges in place were jarred loose.

The sheriff backed to the wall, his breathing rapid and shallow. A great knot of fear was stuck in his throat. His hands trembled. The crowd roared and again the door was struck and

flew inward. In an instant a half dozen men entered the jail and pinned the sheriff to the wall. A member of the mob cuffed the deputy, knocking him down, and thrust a revolver in his face. "Don't move," he snarled. Another half dozen men dashed into the lock-up where they saw Deputy John. John reached for his pistol but one of the group leveled a large bore shotgun at him. "Don't do it, Dep'ty. This Missoura mule has quite a kick."

A man snatched the keys from the deputy. After several wrong guesses the proper key was inserted into the lock and turned and the door swung open. Chevie was huddled in the corner of his cell farthest from the door. He had covered himself with his bed clothes and he was weeping. "Go away," he said. "Leave me alone." A man jerked the blanket from Chevie. "Come with us, y a son of a bitch." Two others grabbed him by the arms and roughly hauled him to his feet and out of the cell.

"Help me, deputy, help me!" he cried out. "For God sakes, Kizer, do something!" John Kizer saw the fear and desperation in Chevie's eyes but was powerless to aid him. He heard the sheriff speaking from the other room. "You men put that man back! Let the law take care of this," he said but was met only with bitter laughter. The intruders released the sheriff and withdrew.

The crowd cheered victoriously when George Chevie was produced. He wept and shook. He could not believe the nightmare quality that waking life had acquired, "God help me," he murmured weakly. The crowd engulfed him and swept him away.

Who thinks for a mob in action? Who makes the decisions? Surely plans had been made before Chevie was broken out of jail. He was marched east a short way and then south on Bettis and past the courthouse. Several blocks south of the courthouse is a ravine through which Marr Creek flows. In the old days, before pre-stressed and reinforced concrete bridges were made from iron and had a deck of wood. Some of these old narrow bridges still remain but most have been replaced. The bridge across Marr Creek was known as the Mill Slough Bridge. It was a single lane bridge of iron and wood. Some fifteen or twenty feet below it Marr Creek sluggishly flowed through a bed of dolomite and limestone. It was to this bridge that George Chevie was brought that night.

As he was being pushed and dragged down Bettis Street, someone tied a slip knot in a rope and tossed the loop around Chevie's head and cinched it tightly around his neck until the rope chaffed and burned.

"How does that feel, hm? Hmmm?" a faceless man said, one of five hundred faceless men. "You best get used to it," said

another. "The crowd swept him along to the bridge. Chevrie moaned in the agony of his spirit. There was no God who could save him now. He thought of his wife and children, of his parents and his childhood home in Indiana. A thousand regrets went through his mind in a rush. And then they were in the middle of the bridge. Someone tied one end of the rope to a brace.

"Swing him," someone cried out and the crowd roared. "Swing him." they shouted. A large man with brown snuff stains trailing down from both corners of his mouth seized Chevrie by the shoulders and pushed him roughly to his knees. "Kneel and pray, you miserable sinner. Make your peace with God and ask him to forgive you for killing that Morris fella. You won't find forgiveness here." George Chevrie made no sound and thought no thoughts. He was numb and in shock. He did not feel it a few seconds later when he was hauled to his feet. He did not feel the hands that lifted him over the bridge and then dropped him. There was just an explosion of light in his brain as the rope went taut and then oblivion.

Someone looked at his watch. Just a little after 1:30 a.m. Members of the crowd lined along either side of the ravine and shined their lights on Chevrie's body as it swung in a decaying pendulum arc. Fresh red blood released from ruptured vessels in his neck dripped from his nose and mouth. His eyes protruded and his neck bent nearly perpendicular to the rest of his body. His tongue lolled and he stank for he had soiled himself.

The mob was a mob no longer. It was a crowd of people speaking in subdued voices, extinguishing their lights, going home. In a little while, George Chevrie was alone at last except for a solitary figure standing at the top of the ravine looking down into the dark valley in which Chevrie's body hung taut not seeing him in the dim light. Deputy Kizer had followed the mob and saw what they had done to George Chevrie. Kizer was filled with remorse at having failed to save the man. After several long minutes he slowly turned and left the scene.

The first light of the sun illuminated George's body as it turned slowly in the early morning breezes...slowly ... clockwise pause...counterclockwise.. pause.... Soon after daybreak the curious began to arrive. They came by the hundreds, leaning over the bridge railing and standing along the top of the ravine. A few stood in the cold shallow water under the bridge. Nobody said much. Their eyes said it all as they glanced back and forth from one to the other. As the day got warmer, flies began to gather around George's eyes, nose and mouth, but they were too late for the main course. The town's people had been here first and as they stared at George, they

deprived him in death the dignity that he never had in life. The flies had leftovers.



Finally, at 9:30 a.m. the sheriff drove up with a wagon and he and his deputies hauled George up, cut his rope and took the body away. As they slowly drove through town toward the cemetery, Deputy Kizer commented to Sheriff Russell, "If he was guilty or not, no man should have to die that way." The sheriff chuckled humorlessly. "Well, John," he said, "If you behave yourself, you won't have it to worry about."

George Chevrie was buried later that day, but his grave was never marked and its location has long been lost from memory. John Norris was also buried that day in Masonic Cemetery but he has a nice stone. Sheriff Russell didn't run for sheriff after he served out his term. He no longer had the heart for the job. Deputy John Kizer stayed on as deputy for several more years. The lynching affected him deeply and he was never again able to shake himself of the memory. Nonetheless, he went on to become immortalized in his own way, but that is another tale.

- Author Unknown