

Black Thunder



I was probably about twelve years of age when I was told the story about my three-times great uncle, Birdsey Wade. The storyteller was George Faverau, a hired hand employed for as long as I could remember by my maternal grandparents. George was the oldest man I'd ever met from Easton, having been born in 1874. His stories were a good part of what inspired me to study local history. Whether this particular tale is fact or fiction, or somewhere in between, I couldn't really say. Happy Halloween!!!

It was a late Friday afternoon in mid-September of 1853 when John Tucker and Birdsey Wade received their wages for their work as laborers in Ransom Wheeler's stone quarry in the Narrows. By six o'clock, the pair was drinking rum in Eli Adams' tavern on the Jackson Highway.

Robbing Ransom Wheeler had been the farthest thing from young Birdsey Wade's mind that morning. But after Tucker had told him that he had seen Wheeler open the top drawer to his desk and then look at something written along the inside edge before getting up and then opening his office safe, the seed had been planted.

"You're certain it was the combination?" he asked his co-worker and drinking partner.

“What else would it have been? Wheeler’s getting along in years and his memory isn’t half of what it was. I know for a fact that there’s over a thousand dollars in that safe. If we split it, that’s over a year’s worth of wages for each of us.”

“But if we get caught...” offered Birdsey.

“Who is going to catch us? The old man’s house is three-hundred yards up the road. The trick is that we leave a couple of hundred dollars behind. We open the safe, take most of the money, and then hide it safely out of sight until the sheriff asks his questions and then decides that the old man probably either forgot how much money he had in that safe, or that he had taken it out himself and already spent it. It’s not like Wheeler is going to hire the Pinkerton’s to solve his mystery.”

The more rum he drank, the better the idea sounded to Birdsey.

By ten o’clock the pair was back at the quarry. Tucker had conveniently left a window ajar before he quit for the day. He had already convinced himself that he could sell the impressionable young Birdsey on the idea to boost him through the window and then stand guard while he noted the combination and robbed the safe.

In less than ten minutes, the deed was done. The two men quickly and quietly made their way along the western bank of the Mill River. As the fast-moving clouds occasionally blocked the moonlight, the dimly illuminated landscape would sometimes fall into total darkness, making it difficult for the pair to find their way.

Tucker had already thought of a hiding place to stash their newly acquired fortune. As they approached it, Birdsey suddenly froze in his tracks.

“What’s the matter?” asked Tucker as he turned to look back at Birdsey.

“Didn’t you see it?” asked the obviously frightened young man, as the forest had gone

black as another large cloud covered the moon.

“See what?”

“When the moon was shining through the clouds, I looked up and saw a horse. At least I think I did. He was staring right at me. He wasn’t more than fifty feet in front of us. I swear his eyes were red like fire. He scared the life right out of me.”

“You drank too much rum before. You’re just afraid we’re going to get caught and are starting to imagine things. Maybe what you thought you saw was a deer, or even a moose. Most of the moose are long gone, but sometimes a bull wanders this far south looking for a female during rutting season. Come on, there’s an old house about a hundred yards ahead where we can stash the money.”

“Nobody lives in it?”

“No. The old woman who owned it died a few years back. She didn’t have any family and it’s just sat there empty for the last five or six years. I lived in that house as a boarder when I first came to Easton and started working for Wheeler. There’s a place inside the chimney where the money will be safe until we come back to get it.”

When the house came into view, it appeared to be little more than an abandoned shell. The windows were missing, and the doors had been removed. The fast-moving clouds allowed only partially illuminated glimpses of an eerie looking building that made the hairs on Birdsey’s neck stand up. He waited nervously outside while Tucker went in to hide the money.

When their ill-gotten treasure was securely hidden in the old house, the pair made their way out of the valley and headed towards the old house they shared near the center of town. As they got closer to their destination, the clouds blocked all the moonlight and there were rumbles of thunder from an approaching autumn storm.

The wind was increasing in velocity as the pair approached the Reverend Bennett's house. Suddenly a bolt of lightning lit up the sky and both men saw him at the exact same instance. Reared on his hind legs, with his front hooves high in the air was a large black stallion - saddled, but riderless. The lightning made his large eyes appear red with fire. The horse was no more than six feet in front of them - his front hooves hovering a good twelve feet above the ground.



Birdsey heard the awful sound of the crushing bones and blood curdling screams as the stallion's front hooves came crashing down on John Turner's head and left shoulder. The sounds of the horse pulverizing Turner's body with repeated blows from his sharp hooves continued unabated for several seconds while Turner's initial screams slowly turned mute as the last of the life was drained from him.

Birdsey somehow had enough forethought to seek out the Reverend Bennett's nearby barn, sliding the large door open just enough to make it inside before he heard the horse head in his direction. He had just enough time to secure the door when the crashing hooves could be felt against the solid oaken panels as the horse kicked furiously with his hind legs. Birdsey was sure the animal would eventually succeed in kicking his way inside as he scurried through the inky darkness feeling for the ladder leading to the hayloft above.

Almost as suddenly as the horse had appeared, the angry sounds of his kicking stopped. There was dead silence. Birdsey was huddled like a child in the loft when he heard the barn door slide open. A light from a lantern illuminated the barn floor below and he heard a voice call out, "Is there anyone in here?"

It was the Reverend Bennett, come to check on all the commotion.

"Up here," Birdsey could barely utter.

"What's going on out here?" the old minister asked.

"We were attacked by a horse," the young man finally replied. "I'm sure that crazed animal killed poor John..."

"John?" asked the minister.

"John Turner. We were headed home from Mister Adams' tavern when the horse

suddenly appeared out of nowhere and then attacked us. He was surely the biggest steed I've ever seen."

When he was back on the ground level, Birdsey motioned for Bennett to lend him his lantern as they he then led the way outside to see if his friend was truly dead. Suddenly the sky was clear, and the moonlight bathed the landscape with ambient light.

Turner's body should have been laying in the roadway. But it wasn't. Birdsey took the good reverend's lantern and began looking closely at the ground below. There were no hoof marks. No signs of the violence Birdsey had just witnessed.

"So, where is your friend, my son?" asked a now skeptical Bennett.

"He was just here. The horse had to have killed him. I heard the terrible crushing sounds of his bones being broken. You must have heard it! Isn't that why you came out of the house?"

"I heard a lot of yelling. I'm guessing it was from you. You been drinking, son?"

"Yes. But I'm not drunk now. I know what I saw..."

"So you say. But I don't see no signs of any horse. Didn't hear any horse neither."

"You must have heard John scream when the horse's hooves cut him down."

"Well, I heard somebody scream. But so far, all I'm seeing is you."

"Well, take a look at your barn door. That horse was kicking it for all he was worth. There has to be marks from his hooves in the wood," declared Birdsey as he walked back towards the barn.

The door was clean. The wooden panels undamaged.

“Best you go home and get some sleep, son,” the old minister told him. “I’ll bet you’ll find John Tucker already at home and sleeping in his bed.”

Birdsey Wade knew there would be no John Tucker in the house they shared. There wasn’t. The house was just as they had left early that morning. Empty. Devoid of life. Birdsey grabbed a shotgun, loaded it, and sat in a chair staring out the window of the parlor. There would be no sleep that night. Only fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the unexplainable. Fear that horse was real. Fear that he was about to die.

There was an eerie fog over Easton on Saturday morning. The kind of autumn fog that shrouds the tops of the trees and obscures the distant views as they are consumed by the gray mist.

It was shortly after nine o’clock when Deputy Sheriff Osborn appeared out of the mist. He walked up and onto the porch. He was about to knock when Birdsey opened the door, still clutching the shotgun in his right hand.

“The Reverend Bennett said you woke him out of a sound sleep last night. He said he was concerned about your state of mind. That you kept insisting that John Tucker was dead and that you had been attacked by riderless horse. You sleep it off, did you? Discover that John was already home in bed?”

“What happened last night was real. Real as me talking to you right now. I just can’t explain where that horse disappeared to and why we couldn’t find John’s body.”

“Well horses and dead bodies just don’t vanish into thin air, boy. You ever see that horse before?”

“No, but he was as big a steed as I ever laid eyes on. Black as coal too, he was. He was saddled, but no sign of a rider. Fancy saddle as I remember it. Lots of ornate silver trimmings on black leather.”

“Sounds a lot like the saddle that Ransom Wheeler has sitting in his parlor. Kind of a memorial to his granddad. That saddle belonged to the old man and Ransom wouldn’t think of ever parting with it. But since old Ransom don’t ride anymore, it couldn’t have been that one. Although it’s hard to imagine that there would be another one like in these parts. Maybe you’re just describing it like that because you remember seeing Ransom’s saddle once or twice when you was in his house.”

Birdsey had never set foot in Wheeler’s house. Just his office, and once in his barn when the old man had him fetch a cross-cut saw so that Birdsey and John could cut down an old maple tree next to the office.

“Well, according to the reverend, there wasn’t any sign of a horse having kicked at his barn door, nor any sign that John Tucker had even been there last night. Just you screaming and hollering about that darn death horse you still claim you saw. I’m guessing you had just drunk yourself into a stupor at Adams’ tavern and then passed out on your way home and had yourself a real bad nightmare.”

“So, then where is John?” asked Birdsey.

“Darned if I know, son. I ain’t his keeper. He’ll likely show up soon.”

With that, the deputy turned and left. Birdsey knew full well that he hadn’t been that drunk. He remembered every detail from Friday night. Including robbing old man Wheeler’s safe.

Deputy Osborn’s mentioning of Ransom Wheeler’s saddle stuck in Birdsey’s mind. What if it was the same saddle? How did it get on that horse, and whose horse could it have been? He had worked for Wheeler for the past two and half years. The old man owned a pair of oxen that pulled either the stone boat through the quarry or the heavy wagon they used to deliver the cut stones. In addition, Wheeler had one old Bay mare he used to pull his carriage. Birdsey had never seen another horse on Wheeler’s property.

It was early afternoon when Birdsey decided to walk down to Selleck Osborn's store across from the church. Being a deputy sheriff in Easton wasn't a full-time occupation, Osborn also ran a feed, grain, and dry goods store, carrying a few groceries as well.

Sitting on the porch was Hiram Gillette, perhaps Easton's oldest living resident at ninety-six years of age. The old man squinted as Birdsey approached and then spoke, "Selleck says you had yourself quite a dream last night..."

"It wasn't a dream, Mister Gillette," Birdsey responded.

"Well, it couldn't have been real. Old Black Thunder has been dead for over thirty years..."

"Who is old Black Thunder?"

"Elijah Wheeler's pride and joy. His black stallion."

"Elijah Wheeler? Any relation to Ransom?"

"His granddaddy. Ransom ended up with the horse and that fancy saddle the old man had made in New York. After Elijah was killed, Ransom took care of the horse for probably twenty years before the old stallion just got tired and died. You musta seen the saddle. Ransom keeps it in his parlor. Keeps the leather fresh with boot wax and polishes the silver on her two or three times a year. Saddle is good as the day it was made even if Ransom ain't.

"The Reverend Bennett says when you seen that horse that there weren't no rider...That would have to be Black Thunder...In your dream anyway. Elijah was riding home from Bridgeport one night. Just entering the Narrows when he was accosted by a highwayman intent on robbing him. Shot him dead while he was still sitting atop Black Thunder - at least that's how the story goes.

“Poor Elijah hit the ground, and before the highwayman could grab his money, Black Thunder musta reared up and came down on the thief before he knew what hit him. Didn’t just hoof him once neither. Musta kept it up for a while, because when they found him the next morning his body was crushed and broken like an old straw doll. The horse was still standing there, looking down at Elijah’s lifeless body as if he was expecting him to get up and back into the saddle.

“Ransom was maybe twelve or thirteen at the time and he took over caring for the horse and keeping that saddle looking good as new.”

Birdsey felt ill. If the story Gillette had just told was in any way true, he knew that his fate was likely sealed. He’d be next. That loaded shotgun Birdsey had back at the house would do him no good because that horse was already dead. Even if Black Thunder didn’t appear again that night, he would show up sooner or later to exact his revenge. A terrible, painful revenge that Birdsey would be powerless to prevent.

Ransom Wheeler never mentioned any missing money. John Tucker’s body was never found. Birdsey Wade never made an attempt to retrieve the cash from the old house where Tucker had hidden it.

Birdsey went through the motions of living for the next five weeks. He went to work, and he went home every night alone. He knew what was coming and he was soon resigned to accepting his fate.

All Hallows Eve fell on a Monday that year. By the time Birdsey was walking home after work, the last vestiges of sunlight had faded in the western sky. His route took him far off course that evening and he was inexplicably powerless to change it. As he neared Union Cemetery, he could see a glow from within the confines of the iron fence that surrounded the old burial grounds. His fears were now absent as he walked through the

gate and towards the light.

He soon realized that the glow was being emitted by an untended kerosene lantern. There were two freshly dug graves in front of him. One was open and one was recently covered. The headstone on the newly covered grave read: John Turner, born April 3, 1827, died September 23, 1853. The headstone over the open pit beside it read: Birdsey Wade, born July 3, 1831, died October 31, 1853.

Birdsey Wade could suddenly feel the heat from those burning red eyes on the back of his neck. He knew exactly what was coming. As he turned, he could see the hooves as they plunged through the dim light and slammed his body into the ground.

That evening, a strong wind deposited a fresh covering of brightly colored leaves upon the two newest graves at Union. An early snow blanketed the ground less than a week later and no one in Easton even took notice of either grave until the following year.

Ransom Wheeler died in mid-November of that fateful year, and the mysterious black stallion was never seen again.

Union Cemetery has always had its share of spooky tales. Whether one believes in spirits or not, almost everyone enjoys a good ghost story this time of year. Today, those headstones are nowhere to be found. Perhaps they were vandalized and toppled. Or perhaps they only ever existed in Birdsey Wade's guilt-ridden mind. We at the Historical Society of Easton hope you have enjoyed our month of Halloween themed articles and ghost stories!