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Was This Shoemaker John Wilkes Booth? -

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NEWKIRK, OKLA., the once obscure little county seat of Kay, its only enlivening influence being cattle trading and court sessions, destined in the opening of the Osage reservation and when oil was struck thereabouts to come within the radius of fabled opulence, the adjacent lands yielding immense revenues on oil leases, making the Indians a monied people, lays claim to a greater distinction than mere commercial stridency. Was "Happy Jack, the shoemaker of Newkirk," John Wilkes Booth?

We are familiar with the details of the assassination of President Lincoln in Ford's theater, how John Wilkes Booth, scion of a family of histrionic and intellectual note, leaped after the deed from the presidential box to the stage. his foot entangling in the draperies, throwing him violently; how he escaped to the side door, where it is conjectured sympathizers attended and bore him away, later finding a respite and relief in a barn on the Garrett plantation near Bowling Green, Va. The barn was fired and man, supposedly Booth, shot by Sergeant Boston Corbett, some aver Edward Harper Sampson of Moline, Ill. It is this guardsman that the niece of Booth claims knew that Booth was not the man killed on that fateful night. The body was interred as such, but recent data has fixed the man as Ruddy. Booth, it is claimed, escaped five hours earlier.

Charges and countercharges have arisen. Did John Wilkes Booth die on April 26, 1865, thus assuaging the tide of public indignation, or did he, as D. E. George, "Happy Jack, the shoemaker of Newkirk," die by his own hand in 1903, a stern retributive finale in the life of the mysterious recluse that for years baffled a small community?

Blanche Booth had broken the sixty-year silence of the Booth family by affirming the statement that her uncle, John Wilkes Booth, lived thirty-eight years after the assassination of President Lincoln, dying in Enid, Okla., January 17, 1903, at the age of sixty-five.

An interesting sidelight on this momentous question is the graphic description and personal recollections of the famous character by Mrs. M. P. Franklin, of 428 Calhoun street, New Orleans. In the light of revelations that accrued upon his dramatic suicide in Enid, Mrs. Franklin is firmly convinced that "Happy Jack" was none other than John Wilkes Booth. Her conviction is strengthened by the family knowledge of the Booths, she being a member of the historic Revolutionary Beale family of Virginia. Like "Stonewall" Jackson, she was born in two states, Parkersburg, Virginia, later West Virginia.

At the time of the dramatic setting she was the wife of Joseph Virgile Herard, styled the "Cattle King of the West." His vast holdings of one hundred thousand acres, leased from the Osages, extended from the Kansas line to Pawhuska, Okla. Newkirk, the county seat, was sixty miles further.

In 1897 she attended court session in Newkirk in divorce proceedings against her millionaire husband, the case lasting until 1898, when she obtained her decree, with Judge Bayard T. Hainer presiding.

The Smith hotel was the accepted hostelry for lawyers, court attendants and their families during these sessions. Mrs. Franklin recalls Louisianans; Mr. and Mrs. Holt, the Sutherlands of Kansas City and others. These ladies one day approached her.

"We hear you are a pianist and we have decided to liven up a bit; too much seriousness around here, let's dance. We have secured a D. E. George, a fine violinist, "Happy Jack, the shoemaker of Newkirk," the folks generally call him. He seems a semi-recluse and rather eccentric character."

Mrs. Franklin readily acquiesced, experiencing a "thrill" over the break in the monotony of the staid atmosphere of a county seat in a primitive locale. It brings forcibly to mind Will Rogers' terse summary of pioneer days: "You could buy Indian Territory for a song and if you had fourteen dollars left you could buy a slice of Kansas."

The night of the dance came, and D. E. George was duly presented. He was dressed faultlessly in black broadcloth and with white tie .

"I don't believe I ever had the pleasure of meeting you before," he said as he bowed low before her.

"He had the stilted diction of the most conventional school, his manners were princely and when I looked at his expensive and scrupulous attire I wondered how it could be that a supposedly poor shoemaker could present so pretentious an appearance," said Mrs. Franklin. "What may have ensued



Mrs. M. P. Franklin,
New Orleans woman, who knew "Jappy Jack," and believes he was John Wilkes Booth.

after my sojourn in Newkirk I do not know, but this I know, that up to that time he had not become a victim of environment or roughened by contact with the crudities of the West. He was a man of striking personality, high intellectual forehead, flashing black eyes and iron gray hair that he habitually stroked backward.

"As we played and he swayed to the rhythm of the music he emphasized this movement, his long, slim white hands with tapering fingers further awakening my interest and marvel at his lowly occupation. His gestures were so expressive that I found myself studying the man.

"We laughed and chatted gaily as the couples tangled up in the intricacies of Lancers and Virginia reel, and I recall how we reveled in the 'Blue Danube' and other Straus waltzes, of which he seemed particularly fond. He was a fine violinist, having a large dance repertoire and most conversant with classics.

"He knew stage and artistic celebrities, had seen much of the drama—and then after a bit would lapse into a clamlike silence.

"I remember among the dancers Ed. Perkham, lawyer and railroad magnate; Roy Hoffman, distinguished jurist, and so many others who have since figured in the great constructive advances of Oklahoma and national politics.

"To return to 'Happy Jack,' he was possessed of dramatic fire, extremely fond of postures, a certain arrogance in his bearing and aloofness that impressed me strangely. The following morning the ladies greeted me:

"'How did you like "Happy Jack"? He has been a great actor and was on the stage when Lincoln was shot.'

"This statement became more significant by gossip and conjecture as to the identity of the 'shoemaker of Enid.' Visitors brought conflicting stories of another alias employed in other portions of the then Indian nation. Many were the stories in circulation, his grandiloquence of language, Shakespearean outbursts and familiar declamations, especially in inebriate moments, kept interest rife. One day a man wanted to fight him, and he struck such an attitude of defiance and impotent rage that his assailant flew, affrighted."

It was vaguely hinted that remittnaces were received from a lawyer in Tennessee; it was affirmed by a Mr. Irwin of this city that a lawyer from the aforesaid state was among those who came to Enid to view the body when it lay exposed in a public place.

In any event "Happy Jack, the shoemaker of Newkirk," was not what his name implied, an ordinary itinerant cobbler who had found his way into a young center. At all times a gentleman of meticulous grooming, suave, and save for his predilection for drink and a certain garrulity upon which was based much of the current gossip, there was a hauteur that precluded intimacy and made him a respected citizen.

It may be significant that the Cherokees were known to be very friendly with him, a great number having served in the Confederate army.

Mrs. Franklin recalls that time had dealt very kindly with him. A certain disability, for "Happy Jack" was a cripple and limped rather painfully, and his iron gray hair were the only signs of advancing age.

After a series of sprees and spells of melancholy to which he had become subject, "Happy Jack" committed suicide January 7, 1903, in Enid.

Mrs. Franklin, then a resident of New Orleans, in subsequent newspaper articles realized the verification of the identity of "Happy Jack," as considerable controversy was stirred up. The trend of events was unmistakably those that attended the ill-fated Booth. Mrs. Franklin cudgeled her memories of Edwin Booth in Hamlet, Othello and his other great roles, the vivid contrasting of the man who had accompanied her in the dances in Newkirk, and the result was inevitable.

Another interesting local insight was the visit of Mr. Irwin at the time when excitement was running high over the suicide. His brother George and he joined the throngs that surged into Enid viewing the body. From his personal recollections of the Booth family he claims that in his mind there is absolutely no doubt that the man who became a victim of remorse and weariness of evading the law was none other than John Wilkes Booth.

Mr. Irwin met the late Finis L. Bates, who wanted to claim the body and who started a series of lectures which were promptly suppressed by the authorities. Bates, however, emphasized at the coroner's inquest that the man was a cripple and that the ankle had suffered a permanent injury. Bates reiterated his claims, proving all characteristics by producing photographs of other members of the Booth family, in turn photographs of "Happy Jack" which were submitted, and thus the fight raged.

Bates incurred much enmity and his protestations brought forth a torrent of abuse, leaving Enid confident in his researches. He delved intensively itno the movements of the fugitive from the night of the supposed escape from Garrett's farm, in the interim roving through the West, having stayed some time in San Francisco and according to the recent statements of Blanche Booth was seen by certain members of his famliy, wandering into Mexico, thence into Texas, where, in the early 70s, under the name of John St. Helen, he told Bates he was John Wilkes Booth, perhaps in one of his unguarded bibulous moments. Thirty years later the same man, Bates testified, lived in Newkirk under the name of David E. George and made according to sworn testimony the same statement to Mrs. Ida Harper, wife of the Methodist minister of El Reno, Okla. From authentic statements, John St. Helen and David E. George were one and the same person, and to this end Bates was convinced and there remained no doubt in his mind that the real man was John Wilkes Booth. Bates died in 1923 firm in this belief.

When "Happy Jack" swallowed the fatal poison in 1903, Bates arrived from Memphis and identified the body as the triple personalities. Bates finally received permission to remove the body to his home in Memphis, where it was kept until his death in 1923. The body in a mummified condition continued to be exhibited and was viewed as late as last year, according to article in Harper's Magazine by William G. Shepherd.

Peculiarities of the mummified corpse that have figured prominently in the controversy are the scarred eyebrow, maimed right thumb, injured ankle and bushy hair parted low as familiar in the Booth pictures.

Therefore the question arises insistently—did Boston Corbett shoot John Wilkes Booth as he fled from the burning barn and did the Booth family in perfect sincerity inter him in the family plot in Baltimore, and that they and the war department made no mistake—or, as the conflicting statements maintain, Booth escaped and another trooper was shot by the sergeant and turned over to the family, who accepted him as their own and later instituted a trust fund and ready communication with their kin? If Blanche Booth's statement is accepted in good faith, this is as it happened. It would be a strange circumstantial freak if three beings could be so exactly alike and their identities blend into one—John St. Helen, David E. George and John Wilkes Booth.

Mrs. Franklin points out the characteristics of the Booth family, esthetic, temperamental, talented and subject to vagaries of imagination, verbosity, peculiarities of gesture, all of which caused the impression that grew upon her until in 1903 she was not surprised when the furore arose. She claims that time has strengthened her belief in her musical partner's dual character, the man who in his heart and soul remained the idealist and stage dreamer, withal maintaining with dignified poise the evasive, baffling role of "Happy Jack, the shoemaker."