

THE BELL WITCH

for The Midnight Society



presented by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

4

INTRODUCTION

5

THE BELL WITCH

10

PUBLICATION DETAILS

11

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

Being in the market of writing dark fiction, it follows that much of my time is spent mired in the shadowy stuff. What you have in front of you is the results of my efforts researching, documenting, and dallying in everything from the arcane to the supernatural.

I've been writing fiction for several years, and have acted as a contributor for a number of online publications in the same timespan. Where possible, articles have been researched and referenced with citations.

You're holding a sampling of the the fun stuff that fuels my practice that other institutions, organizations, communities, and blogs were kind enough to publish.

If you'd like to work with me, make a suggestion for future articles, or alert me that the world is ending and I ought to backup my hard drive, feel free to send a note.

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THE BELL WITCH

for The Midnight Society

When we discuss folklore, the stuff of legends particular to certain areas, we're not always discussing the story itself — we talk about the hype that surrounds it; makes it bigger than it probably is. The fact is, a lot of the pop culture we get our hands on today lays roots in stories that were told a couple of centuries ago. I can't say that this suggests that there's no original horror stories anymore, far from it; it's interesting, however, that the origin points for the things we find scary now might actually have kernels of truth to them because they're so deeply seeded in history. What might've been a talented pre-literate outcast two hundred years ago with a penchant for herb knowledge, who could heal or harm because she understood local plants better than her counterparts, becomes the green-skinned, wart-encrusted, black-cat shapeshifting witch of later years. Suddenly, she can fly and she consorts with devils, and she casts spells on the neighbours who piss her off. Fear is alive and well today as it was back then, it seems, and the lore surrounding these legends often fuels it.

Paranormal or not, the origins of these legends morph over time, becoming greater than they were originally — the shadows denser, the teeth pointier, the claws longer.

Am I okay with that? Yessir. Yes, I am.

Today, I'm submitting for your approval the origin story that inspired a few different franchises, and I'll be upfront about this: one of them is pretty much my seed of destruction inspiration as a horror writer. Scared the hell out of me when I was in high school, and I still reflect on it — not for the shaky camera footage — but for the way the story loops around and draws the legend into the present tense:



One child faces the wall because she doesn't like to be watched while she kills the other.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

The Bell Witch haunting dates back two hundred years to Tennessee, but the story has inspired the likes of *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Bell Witch Haunting*, *An American Haunting*, and *Bell Witch: The Movie*.

FAMOUS HAUNTINGS: THE BELL WITCH

She's called the Bell Witch, because the haunting belongs to the Bell family: John Bell, his wife Lucy, and their six kids: Jesse, John Jr., Drewry, Betsy, Richard, and the youngest, Joel. They lived on a 320 acre farm in Adams, Tennessee, where, in 1817, the haunting that still allegedly persists today began over a dispute with a neighbour.

It's suggested that the neighbour in question was a woman named Kate Batts, who, it turns out, felt she was cheated in a land deal. Or was it over the sale of a slave? Or, was it even possible that a distant relation of Kate (Benjamin) actually got into the dispute with John, and Kate somehow became tangled in the mess? Whatever the cause, Kate was a poor woman, and was often ostracized by others throughout the Red River area. Her improper use of language, along with her sometimes strange ways, led many to think she was dabbling in the occult.

Guys, you know as well as I do, that if you're a little bit weird, people are gonna start whispering. Introduce the idea of Black Magic in the early 1800's when Salem was only a stone's throw away and the witchcraft trials are still fresh in people's minds after only a century and a half, and things are going to get hairy pretty quick.

This is how the spirit got it's nickname, "Kate." In one version, she swore that she'd haunt John's descendants forevermore. In another, Kate was responsible for conjuring the entity that showed up in a field of corn one day, scaring the bejesus out of Mr. John Bell.

It had the body of a dog and the head of a rabbit. Understandably, he shot at it, and when it scampered off, he thought nothing more of the creature until dinner when a series of rappings began around the outside of the farmhouse. The kids, in the nights that followed, had their bedcovers ripped off by invisible hands, nonexistent rats gnawed at their bedposts, and their pillows were tossed to the floor by entities unseen.



FROM AUTHENTICATED HISTORY OF THE BELL WITCH, M.V. INGRAM, 1894.

Oh, it's just a little poltergeist, you think. Nothing to it. What are a few whispers in the night that sound like the hymns of an old woman to add to the mix?

As these things go, the problem usually escalates, and if you're familiar with your horror movies, you know there's got to be a target for the attacks once they start. In this case, John Bell's daughter Betsy caught the brunt of it: the brute force attacks that left her beaten, scratched, and covered in welts were hushed up for a time, until John confided his "family troubles" in his close friend and neighbour, John Johnston. He and his wife spent the night, experiencing the same terror as the Bell family: the slappings, the bedcovers being removed, until finally, in the wee hours, he exclaimed to the darkness, "In the name of the Lord, who are you and what do you want!"

That stopped things, but only for the remainder of the Johnston's stay.

The entity gained a peculiar intelligence — it learned it had a voice, and it was determined to be heard. Hymns, scripture, intelligent conversation — this was par the course. The entity, on one occasion, even quoted two different sermons occurring in two different churches thirteen miles apart. Oh, what a pious little ghost, you might think: but give it enough free reign, and eventually it develops an opinion, and its opinion of John Bell, or Betsy Bell and her suitors, were not particularly favourable.

When Betsy met Joshua Gardner and the pair were engaged, there wasn't a spot in or around the property where they could be left undisturbed. The entity followed them doggedly through the fields and nearby caves with such nagging persistence that eventually Betsy got fed up and broke off the engagement.

While that made for an unfortunate broken heart, the entity desisted for a time, but never failed to promise her hatred for John Bell, vocally wishing him dead. In his formative years when John took ill and was confined to the house, the entity would slap him during his seizures, remove his shoes when he tried to walk, and constantly referred to him as "Old Jack Bell."

On the morning of December 20, 1820 when John Bell died, a strange vial was found in a cupboard in the house. The entity assured John Bell Jr. that, "I gave Ol' Jack a big dose of



that last night, which fixed him!” Upon administering the contents of the vial to the family cat, it died instantly.

That wasn't it, though: the entity saw fit to attend the funeral. Being one of the largest and most widely attended ceremonies in the county, there were plenty of guests to hear the entity's singing as they departed: a song about a bottle of brandy. It didn't stop until the very last guest had left.

Following his death, the spirit became much more benign, seeing its purpose fulfilled, but that doesn't suggest that it stopped haunting the property completely.

THE BELL WITCH IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED

Though the haunting took place over two hundred years ago, inexplicable sounds of children's voices in play and people talking, as well as the occasional manifestation still occur on the property of the old Bell estate. Sprit candles, orbs, and spirit photographs are sometimes recorded. Photographs don't always turn out the way they were intended, and once in a while an unusual, inexplicable mist gathers.

While nothing is conclusive in regards to the activity that still occurs in the area today, its generally agreed upon by those who've documented the phenomena that something is just as wrong today with the area as it was two hundred years ago.

CONCLUSION

The Bell Witch remains one of the best documented cases of a haunting in history. It has been substantiated by eyewitness accounts, affidavits, and manuscripts written by individuals who experienced the phenomena firsthand. There are multiple books on the subject, though none are conclusive, and many theories conflict in regards to the origins of the haunting.

Regardless, it makes for an interesting case, and even more engaging thought-food when rendered as a sensational cinematic treat.

FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Written in 1886 by historian Albert Virgil Goodpasture in his History of Tennessee, he wrote:



A remarkable occurrence, which attracted wide-spread interest, was connected with the family of John Bell, who settled near what is now Adams Station about 1804. So great was the excitement that people came from hundreds of miles around to witness the manifestations of what was popularly known as the “Bell Witch.” This witch was supposed to be some spiritual being having the voice and attributes of a woman. It was invisible to the eye, yet it would hold conversation and even shake hands with certain individuals. The freaks it performed were wonderful and seemingly designed to annoy the family. It would take the sugar from the bowls, spill the milk, take the quilts from the beds, slap and pinch the children, and then laugh at the discomfiture of its victims. At first it was supposed to be a good spirit, but its subsequent acts, together with the curses with which it supplemented its remarks, proved the contrary. A volume might be written concerning the performance of this wonderful being, as they are now described by contemporaries and their descendants. That all this actually occurred will not be disputed, nor will a rational explanation be attempted.

FOOTNOTES:

“The Legend of the Bell Witch of Tennessee – by Pat Fitzhugh, Author / Historian.” The Legend of the Bell Witch of Tennessee – by Pat Fitzhugh, Author / Historian. Web. 28 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.bellwitch.org/story.htm>>.

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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The Midnight Society

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<http://midnightsocietytales.com/2015/03/14/famous-hauntings-the-bell-witch-2/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Butler writes speculative fiction for adults, new adults, and young adult readers. She especially appreciates dark urban fantasy and low key horror, and likes to write about everything in between. She lives in Montreal, where she is working towards the completion of her first young adult horror novel.



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