

## Riverton Buzzard

by Cecil Hayes

Many years ago, the blacks who lived in Happy Hollow (Colbert County, Ala.) used to make up all sorts of songs and stories and ballads about the things they saw and heard around them — many about old river towns.

They were simple and direct songs, filled with the joys and tragedies and sorrows of their hard mountain life. They were played on crude, homemade instruments around bonfires at night. Most of them had their origin in some local legend or folk tale.

A few are still remembered. One tells about a huge black vulture that wore a sheep bell about its neck. I was told that when the black people played this ballad, the plucking of the fiddle or banjo strings at certain places in the music represented the tinkling of the bell.

This old legend concerns the community of Riverton and the folk who lived in the hill country of northwest Colbert County. Back in the rugged hills, there are places along deep hollows and coves and creek beds where high bluffs and strange rock formations formed the homes and breeding places of thousands of vultures.

These huge birds of prey are locally known as buzzards, and the rookeries were called Buzzard Roost. Because they did more good than harm, there was an unwritten law in the region that no buzzard should ever be shot.

One of the major sources of income in the hill country then was the raising of hogs. They required little trouble or expense, and almost every hill man had a large drove of them. They were earmarked by the owner and turned loose in the deep woods where they grew fat on chestnut and acorn mast.

In the late fall or early winter, they were rounded up and shipped to market. Whole valleys were often used for nothing but the raising of hogs. The Rosses, who lived in Hog Hollow, kept several thousands of these porkers. In the summer of 1895, hog cholera broke out in northwest Colbert County. Hogs died by the thousands and the nauseating stench rose like a miasma to fill the air. The great flocks of buzzards, feasting on the dead carcasses, transmitted the deadly disease from one part of the country to another.

The old unwritten law forbade the people from destroying the birds. But the hog raisers knew that if they didn't do something to check the spread of the disease there, wouldn't be a single hog left in the county. So the men of Riverton called an urgent meeting in the old Baptist church. They argued up one side and down the other and finally ended up with the crazy notion of capturing one of the big birds and attaching a small sheep bell to its neck. The noise of the bell — so they hoped — would frighten all the other birds away. Well, some of the younger men did succeed in trapping a young buzzard and got the bell around his neck. And to the utter astonishment of some of the people, this method worked to perfection. All the buzzards but the one with the bell deserted their ancient home and were not seen again for several years. After hanging around for a couple of weeks, the belled one, too, took to the skies and vanished.

It was two years later, in the spring of 1897, that the Tennessee valley got the biggest flood that has ever been recorded in this region. It washed away most of the town of Riverton and took many lives.

When the backwaters finally receded, dead carcasses of almost every kind were scattered about. It was said that one day before the great flood swept down from the mountains, the belled vulture returned to the area. Those who saw the great ebony bird at close range swore he'd grown to gigantic size, and that his eyes were fiery red, like hickory coals glowing in the darkness. The bell was never silent now, and the shriek that tore out of the repulsive fowl was the voice of doom.

Wherever he appeared, tragedy or misfortune was sure to follow. Some of the best marksmen in the area tried shooting it, but their bullets bounced harmlessly off the creature. Many of the hill people, true to their suspicious nature, were sure the vulture was possessed by an evil spirit.

Late in the following summer, there was a great epidemic of typhoid fever in the Riverton area. Death moved like a shadow over the hill country, taking its grievous toll. And always, soaring just above the house-tops, the bell never at rest now, was the huge black bird of doom. His piercing shrieks sounded even in the night, and the ominous whisper of his wings told of his passing.

All winter and all summer for many years he came and went, and wherever one heard the shriek and the tinkling of the bell, or saw the dark shadow moving over the earth, some sort of calamity was sure to happen. And even today, after more than a hundred years, some few persons believe the belled vulture still roams the skies. On dark nights they say they can hear the faint tinkling of a sheep bell, which never fails to cause a spell of gloom over their lives. Or so the old ballad, which is still sung at rare intervals, would lead us to believe.