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### Harper Mill - History and Legacy

The forest near Harper Mill's property was feared by Native Americans before the land was settled by Europeans. Stories of ancient malevolent spirits kept most away from the forest. It is not known how many people were affected by the location before white men arrived, as there was no written record. There were vague stories of men and women entering the woods and never returning, but no formal information is known. There were rumors among the natives that a medicine man had lived in the area ages ago, and was eventually exiled from the tribe because of practices that caused fear among the people. There were some who believed he could raise the dead, and others believe he talked to spirits in the forest (Tamaren chap.1).

The town of Helen's Bluff was founded in 1877. As the population rose, needs had to be met. The feed mill was ordered by Alexander Harper Senior in 1905. He was the main financier of the project, though there were a few other farmers who invested in the mill.

The first death claimed by the mill occurred during construction. William Hardeson was a construction worker. He was at the top of the grain elevator, the main structure for the mill. The framing had been done, and the workers were preparing the site for concrete to be poured for the walls. A worker would later say he saw William standing on a beam, his arms out, and he was shouting into the heavy winds that were sweeping through that day. Officially, the report showed the death as an accident. William had fallen. The worker who saw him, though, believed he was acting against his will. "He was shouting in protest, and then suddenly lurched forward as if pushed" (Tamaren, 42).

Just over a week later, Alfred Albrecht was the last worker to leave the mill. He lingered behind for unknown reasons while the others made their way to the bunkhouse. He'd been acting strange for the past few days, an acquaintance later said. Alfred didn't show up for work the following morning. "A trail of blood streaked into the forest bordering the property. A search was held, but no body was ever found. Rumors began to circulate among the crew at that time, that the place was cursed, that a beast roamed the forest and had taken Alfred" (Harrison, 98). Work continued on, though.

Ten days later Gary Knight, another construction worker, got drunk at the bunkhouse and had a fight with one of the other workers, who had insulted the man's wife. After the scuffle, Gary wandered from the bunkhouse and ended up at the mill construction site. A friend of Gary's went to find him later that night, and discovered Gary's body. "His legs were missing, and most of his innards had been removed. A huge gash had been swiped across his face. His buddy ran, and as he drew closer to the bunkhouse that was located two hundred yards away, he felt something chasing him. He looked over his shoulder as he ran, and saw a dark mass behind him. It was out of focus, he said. Blurry. He told anyone who would listen that it was 'not all there.' Not exactly see-through, but as if it were a fog trying to materialize into something real" (Harrison, 112-113).

Two years later Hassel Graveman, the keeper of the mill at the time, was found dead in the main room over the grate where grain was dumped. No one knew the cause of death, but the expression on Hassel's lifeless corpse was one of terror.

Twenty years went by. The town of Corner expanded, and the Mill expanded with it. It became the largest feed mill in North Alabama. Rumors still surrounded the place, but as time went on they became more and more hushed until finally no one was really sure what all really happened those years ago. "To find out the truth one would have to spend an exorbitant amount of time to research such events. Hours poring through newspapers at the library, or speaking to the older townspeople or reading correspondence from those who remarked on it. The trouble with that was everyone told their stories just a little bit differently, until they were so far out in the weeds that they would have only barely resembled the truth" (Belko, 81).

Most were content to believe whatever version of the story they heard from their gossip circles. Depending on the disposition of the person asked, one might tell you it is the hand of Satan stirring trouble from beneath the ground, another might wave you away, saying there were only one or two deaths and they were accidental. People heard what they wanted to hear. Generally, after twenty years of whispers and shrugs, most of the town rolled by the mill and stopped paying attention to it entirely.

Two things caught the town's attention in 1927, twenty years after the death of Hassel Graveman. One was the apparent suicide of Elizabeth Geinsfield, a nineteen-year-old daughter of a bank owner who had entered onto the property one night, climbed the stairs to the top of the tower, tied a noose to one of the grain chutes on top of the building, slipped it around her neck and jumped.

The second was a newspaper article that was printed a week after Elizabeth's body was found dangling from the side of the building. Ezra Bellington was a reporter for the *Helen's Bluff Reporter*. While doing research for the initial article for Elizabeth Geinsfield's suicide, he stumbled across newspapers from years ago documenting the first deaths at Harper Mill. He also spoke with workers at the mill, to discover anything interesting about the days leading up to the death.

He learned two things. The first was that some workers, who spoke anonymously so they would not get in trouble with the Harpers, told Ezra of some strange things that happened in the mill on a regular basis. Cold spots, strange lights sometimes emanating from dark areas at night, whispers heard when no one was around. The strangest story was the time the grain elevator got stuck, and when one of the workers opened the access panel to view the little buckets that carried the feed to the top of the tower, hundreds of strange insects spilled out. They'd spilled all over the worker, some of them clinging to clothes or, in some cases, skin. The poor girl ran, brushing at her torso as she did to get the bugs off of her. Finally she did, and when she walked back to the loading room, where she was in charge of keeping the log book, other workers were looking at her funny. She explained, and led them to the access panel to see for themselves. She kept back, watching from afar, and when they opened the hatch the buckets were full of grain. No bugs anywhere. Everyone laughed it off, told her she was working too hard. No one but the worker notices all the tiny scratches and scrapes from the things' claws. She fell ill the next day and stayed that way for a week, vomiting and fevered. She was convinced the sickness was brought on by the mystery bugs.

The second thing Ezra learned was that Elizabeth Geinsfield had been seen talking with Alex Harper (called Junior by most, he was Alexander Harper Senior's son). Alex was an obnoxious young man who was seen as odd by most of the townsfolk. Ezra inferred from their comments that Alex and Elizabeth may have been courting, and spoke with Alex about his relationship to the girl. Nothing much came of it. Alex was short with his answers and ended up asking Bellington to leave. Ezra, who did not put this in his article, thought the man not only strange but spoiled and snotty. He got the impression that old man Harper gave Junior exactly what he wanted, whenever he wanted it. Ezra thought it stronger than just bad upbringing, though. He couldn't quite explain how or why he thought it, but he felt that Junior was evil.

The article that came from all those interviews caused a bit of an upheaval in the town. A lot of the workers at Harper Mill were fired

and replaced following the report. It seems Alexander Harper Senior didn't want bad publicity for his mill, so he punished those who told the stories to Ezra by firing them. Ezra, having found this out, further investigated it and planned on writing a follow up. Alexander Harper was a wealthy man, and held a lot of influence in the town. Unknown to Ezra Bellington, Harper was in league with Jonah Welsh, the owner of the *Helen's Bluff Reporter*. He was fired before he finished his follow-up. The influence the Harpers had over the newspapers may be the reason for the silence of news coming from the mill over the past twenty years (Bellington, 132:148).

The article that was published was done so before Welsh saw it. He was not an editor, and did not read every article to every paper that was printed by his company. It was Harper that brought it to his attention.

Ezra was fired because his follow up, which Jonah Welsh closely monitored, suggested that Alex Harper Junior might have had something to do with the suicide. Bellington even went so far, in his personal diary, to suggest that he believed Junior might have coaxed the young woman into the act, or participated. One could assume by reading his diary that Ezra actually believed Harper murdered the young woman.

Harper was never actually accused, and the cause of death never changed from suicide. The Harpers knew the right people in town.

"In 1938 the mill expanded, adding an enormous lean-to structure and two silos for holding more grain" (Spartan, 141). The expansion project was carried out on the weekends, while the plant was not operating. Donald Miller was a worker hired to pour the concrete slab for the additional building and silos. He showed up early one morning and began setting up his truck to dump the concrete onto the leveled area near the mill. As he began pouring, something came over him. No one knows how it happened, but the most popular theory was that he passed out or suffered from some medical complication. Either way, he fell forward, his head clanging against the truck's spout, and fell unconscious beneath the steady flow of wet concrete. Donald never woke up. Other workers showed up thirty minutes later and found him mostly buried in concrete beneath his truck, an arm protruding from the muddled pool of hardening cement. Some rumors persist that, even today, Donald's body was not fully removed from the concrete. Harper was insistent on continuing his expansion, and pushed for the cleanup from the event to be handled quickly, no matter what. There are rumors that a person has seen a finger locked inside the concrete, petrified, unable to be removed. No one has ever proven if that is true (Wexler, 6).

When the mill finally closed its doors on October 27th, 1963, it claimed another victim. A plant worker named Burton LaSalle was one of the last people on site, and he was walking through the mill in search of Gerald Harper, the last owner of the mill who was the nephew of Alexander Harper. A co-worker later told a reporter that Burton was searching for Harper to thank him for all the years of employment. Someone heard a scream, and when they went to see what was wrong they found Burton lying on the floor in a hallway. The coroner labeled it a heart attack, but it sounded eerily similar to the death of Hassel Graveman back in 1907. Mr. LaSalle's face was, according to one witness, frozen in terror.

The last known deaths to occur on site at the mill were a married couple, Julieanne and Alexander Dresden, ten years after the death of Burton LaSalle. The two were supposedly murdered in the forest near the mill while on a camping trip. Their bodies were then dragged onto the property of Harper Mill, where they were discovered two days later during a search for the missing couple. They had been almost unrecognizable. When the deaths were ruled homicides, some folks in the town grew angry. There was some evidence that a local outcast, Ezekiel Harvin, was responsible. He'd been seen near the spot where the two had camped, and had been known for strange and erratic behavior among the townsfolk. Julieanne's father grew more and more certain that Harvin was the killer. He vowed revenge, and formed a posse of family members and friends who shared his belief that Ezekiel was the murderer. Zeke Harvin disappeared two weeks later. It was never proven that Julieanne Dresden's father and his lynch mob were the culprits, but many in the town believed that Harvin was taken to Lewis Lake and sunk to the bottom with cinder blocks tied to his ankles. Officially, both Ezekiel Harvin's disappearance and the deaths of the Dresden couple are unsolved.

There have been close to twenty cases of missing persons within a half-mile square of Harper Mill over the past fifty years. More are rumored. It seems that this town has its fair share of secrets, and a lot of those secrets revolve around the quiet old building that stands on the edge of town, looking over it like a hawk watches a field for mice.

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