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NEAL, JAMES P. WRIGHT MASSACRE

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Jas. S. Buchanan, Field Worker

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The following account of the Wright massacre at Cane Hill, Arkansas on the Arkansas-Cherokee border is taken from an old History of the Arkansas Border published in 1889 which belonged to James E. Chandler until his death and is now a prized possession of his son, James E. Chandler.

Up to the year of 1838 the peaceful settlements of Northwestern Arkansas were rarely disturbed by serious crimes or acts of violence. Rarely were the courts called upon to investigate anything more serious than some misdemeanor. In 1838 the Cherokee Indians were brought from Tennessee and Georgia and located on the territory since known as the Cherokee Nation. This immigration brought with it many undesirable characters which are always found upon the extreme frontiers of our civilized settlements. Run-aways, outlaws from every state in the union were collected along the Cherokee border and preyed alike upon the whites and the Indians. For the especial benefit of these desperadoes, as it seems, line houses, as they were called, were erected immediately upon the line, one-half of the house being in Arkansas and the other in the Cherokee Nation, so that when a crime was committed in one part of the grocery, the offender had but to step across a plank in the floor and he was in another jurisdiction, beyond the reach of legal process issued by the court on the side he had left.

With the advent of these desperadoes peace and quiet were at an end. Murders, robberies and other outrages were of common occurrence, but what was still worse these crimes went unpunished.

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Numerous suspected persons were arrested, indicted and tried, but convictions did not follow. The culprit had only to summon a few of his friends, prove an alibi, and be discharged.

This state of things existed until law abiding citizens lost confidence in the courts and declared that they were in league with the assassin and the robber. The culmination was reached on both sides of the state line in 1839. On the Indian side the rival parties of Ross and Ridge had continued the deadly quarrel began in their native country before the Cherokees were moved to the Indian Territory. On the night of June 20, 1839, the leaders of the Ridge party, Major Ridge, his son, John Ridge and Elias Boudinot were assassinated by members of the Ross party. John Ridge was taken from his bed by a band of men, and in the presence of his family stabbed to death. Maj. Ridge had started for Van Buren, and was waylaid and shot from a bluff near the road about seven or eight miles from Evansville. Elias Boudinot was killed near his home at Park Hill, within about a mile of John Ross' home. Others of the Ridge party fled to escape a similar fate. These disturbances in the Cherokee Nation enabled the desperadoes to commit crimes along the border and cast the suspicion upon their Indian neighbors, which proved a most convenient cloak to cover their evil deeds.

#### THE WRIGHT MASSACRE

On the night of June 15, 1839, the people living in the vicinity of Booneboro, Arkansas, on Cane Hill, were aroused by the burning of the house of William Wright, and the cries for help from his terror-stricken wife and children.

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a neighbor was awakened by Mrs. Wright who informed him in accents of indescribable terror that the Indians were upon them, that they had killed her husband and children and burned the house, and that they would all be massacred if they did not flee for their lives. In a few minutes the scattered neighbors were aroused, and many of them, taking their families upon horses, in buggies or on foot, set out to seek refuge from the savage hordes that were swooping down upon them. They spread the news of the Indian invasion, and soon the entire country was aroused. Others of the Boonsboro people, more courageous, decided to hold their ground until the danger became more imminent, and finally two young men, that had previously lived with Esquire James B. Russell, who resided a short distance from the Wright family, observing that he had not put in his appearance, resolved to reconnoiter his house and ascertain whether he had been killed. They did so, and found Mr. Russell unharmed and asleep in his bed. He was aroused, and the Indians having somewhat subsided, a party was made up to visit the scene of the murder at Wright's. There a horrid sight met their eyes. In the yard and close to the burning house lay the body of Wright, pierced with a half dozen dagger thrusts and burned to a crisp; beside it was the body of his second daughter, a girl of fourteen or fifteen years of age with a bullet hole in her forehead. At a little distance was an infant, its brains dashed out. Upon the bed in the burning dwelling could be seen the forms of two little girls interlocked in each others arms, as they lay when the revolvers and the bowie knives of the assassins began their bloody work. Upon further search two little boys, aged about six and ten years, respectively, were found at some distance from the house administering as best they could to their older brother, a youth of some eighteen years, whose skull had been fractured.

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another child, a little toddling thing, was found uninjured in a cornfield near by. The oldest daughter had also made her escape. A jury was impaneled, and, in the absence of the coroner, an inquest was held by Esquire Russell, when the following facts were ascertained: Mr. Wright, who was a hard working, honest farmer, and one of the first settlers on Cane Hill, had the previous autumn purchased a large number of hogs which he had converted into bacon, and during the spring had been selling it to the newly arrived Indians. From this source he had received a considerable sum of money, a part of which he had deposited with his brother, a merchant at Poonsboro, and a part he kept in his house. On the night of the murder the family retired early, but about 10 o'clock Mrs. Wright arose to get a drink of water for one of the children. While in a back room she heard a noise at the gate, and peering out at a crevice between the logs, she saw three men approaching. A sudden pang of fear and suspicion seized her and she crouched down where she stood. The next instant a knock was heard at the door, and her husband arose and opened it. Instantly three gleaming bowie knives were sheathed in his bosom, and he was dragged, dying, out of the door. His daughter, awakened by the disturbance, sprang to his assistance, only to receive a bullet in the forehead from the revolver of an assassin, who was so near that the powder burned her face. Mrs. Wright saw no more, but fled from the back door, and escaped to a neighbor's house. The two older children, aroused by the confusion, attempted to make their escape; the girl was successful, but the boy was stretched upon the floor by a blow from the butt of a pistol, which fractured his skull.

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The two little girls were shot as they lay in bed, and the butchery was made as atrocious as possible to give color to the suspicions against the Indians. Two little boys were sleeping in a trundlebed, under the one occupied by the parents and were not noticed by the assassins. They did not awake until after the departure of the robbers, when the heat from the burning house aroused them. They arose, and with wonderful presence of mind succeeded in rescuing the wounded older brother from the flames.

By daylight on the morning after the murder people from the surrounding country began to come in, and by noon hundreds had assembled. That night a council of old citizens was held, and the question of public safety was discussed in all its phases. The powerless condition of the courts was recognized, and after a long debate it was decided to take the matter into their own hands. A committee of thirty-six discreet and reliable citizens was selected to direct investigations and punish the criminals should they be apprehended. The names of the members of the committee, as given by Col. James P. Neal are as follows: Mark Bean, Rev. Andrew Buchanan, James Coulfer, Levi Richards, Rev. Samuel Harris, Robert Bedford, John R. Pyett, Lewis Evans, John D. Moore, Rev. E. H. Pierson, William Oliver, Gravin Dunn, Leander Burnham, James Buchanan, Robert Buchanan, James Hamilton, Aron Parks, Robert Parks, T. C. Wilson, James Mitchell, William D. Crawford, Samuel Carnehan, James Crawford, Sr., Henry E. Campbell, John Tilly, Sr., Thomas Tiner, Rev. Thomas W. Norwood, William Crawford, Richard Been, M. W. McClennan, Isaac P. Spencer, William Munkress, Samuel Larrs, John Campbell, Harry E. Campbell and John Latta.

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Rev. Samuel Harris was chosen president of the committee. One hundred able and energetic men were selected as a company of light horse. They were sent in tens over the county, with instructions to arrest and bring before the committee all suspicious persons, gamblers, idlers and stragglers. Meantime the committee was engaged in trying to get some clues. Suspicion finally rested on James Barnes, William Bailey, Taylor S. Barnes, John Asbury and Alexander Richmond and Ellery Turner, all of whom were taken into custody and brought before the committee. Witnesses both for and against the prisoners were summoned before the committee, and several days were consumed in the trial. One by one they succeeded in establishing plausible alibis, and it became evident that all must be discharged. Bailey was a gambler and a stranger in the country, and was looked upon with greater suspicion and dislike than any of the others. The circumstantial evidence was much stronger against him, although he had proven as good an alibi. While the guards were conveying him to Boonsboro where the committee was in session, he threw away a letter, which was recovered. It was written to his father, and stated that he had killed a man and was about to leave for Texas. Also a shirt, sprinkled with blood, was found in his saddle-bags. For these he had a plausible excuse and his alibi was good, but some of the citizens were not satisfied with his innocence. The night before the men were to be released they took him from the guards, and taking him to a neighboring mountain, endeavored to extort a confession from him by whipping him, but failing in this they turned him loose, and he disappeared from the neighborhood.

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All of the suspected men lived near the Cherokee line. John and Alexander Richmond were small farmers, and Turner a farm laborer, who lived with his mother and sister. James Barnes was much superior to the others in education and intelligence. He had come from Howard County, Missouri a few years previously and had lived in the family of Rev. Andrew Buchanan at Prairie Grove, where he attended school. He came of a highly respectable family, and is said to have been a man of unusually fine appearance. At this time he was married and keeping a grocery on the Cherokee line. After the discharge of these prisoners the people returned to their homes and the excitement abated, but the light horse continued to ride and the committee came together whenever circumstances rendered it necessary. A few days later Asbury Richmond was at his brother John's house, and being intoxicated became angry with his brothers, John Richmond, and he, his wife and daughter and a young man who was boarding with him, heard Asbury Richmond accuse his brothers of several acts of stealing, and at last say: "You, you d---d rascal, helped to murder that family on Cane Hill, and I was taken up for it and disgraced in consequence." This was communicated to the committee, who had Asbury Richmond brought before them. He there made a statement in substance as follows: He said that his brother, John Richmond, James Barnes and William Bailey once proposed to him to go into an arrangement to get some money, but he did not join them; that on Sunday after the murder John Richmond told him that they had done the business on Cane Hill, and that in a few days he would be able to pay the money he owed him.



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Upon his testimony John Richmond, James Barnes and Ellery Turner were arrested and taken before the committee. William Daily had fled from the country, but a search for him was instituted. As at the former trial, witnesses were summoned for both the prosecution and the defense. James Barnes produced several witnesses to prove an alibi. Nathan Wofford testified that Barnes was at his grocery until about sunset, and that at dark they ate supper. After supper he and one McCracken went to the grocery and slept there, leaving at the house James Barnes and his wife, Taylor S. Barnes and Jacob and Patsy O'Bryant. Jacob O'Bryant, who was an honest and highly respectable young man, testified that he and his sister, having been belated on a journey, had slept for the night at Barnes'; that he had slept in the same room with Barnes; that from this room the only means of egress was by a door, and the night being warm he had placed his pall immediately in front of the door, so that Barnes could not have left the house except by passing over him. The testimony was corroborated by the others present.

Against Barnes was introduced the testimony of Mrs. Wright, who swore that he had been at their house for bacon two or three times; that on the day before the murder Wright's wagons, loaded with bacon, had passed Barnes' grocery on the way to the Nation, yet during that day Barnes had called at Wright's for bacon, and while waiting for Wright to come from the field had asked many questions concerning the amount of bacon he had sold, the money received, etc.; that Wright had asked Barnes why he did not get his bacon from the wagons, and that he had replied, he had not seen the wagons when they passed.

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James Shelby, the driver of one of the wagons, was then called, and testified that he had stopped and talked with Barnes at his grocery on the morning referred to. This constituted the case against Barnes, outside of the confession of John Richmond.

In behalf of Turner, William Hunter, his brother-in-law, Mrs. Turner, his mother, and Mrs. Hunter, his niece, all testified that he, accompanied by William Bailey, had come home on the fatal night from a ball play, a short time after dark, and that they were at home at the hour at which the murder was committed. John Raymond, when brought before the committee, denied the charges that had been made by his brother Asbury and refused to answer the questions of the committee. Finally, watching an opportunity, he broke from his guards, and made a dash for liberty, but being weighed down by chains he was quickly recaptured. After sitting speechless for a time, under pressure from the committee he at last agreed to make a full confession. He stated that the murder and robbery had been planned and committed by himself, Jack Nicholson, a resident of the Cherokee Nation, who was never captured, James Barnes, William Bailey, Ellery Turner. He related all the harrowing details of the horrible butchery, stating that their object had been to do the murder in Indian style.

After this confession Barnes and Turner still denied all knowledge of the affair, and demanded to know if they had not proved good alibis. The prisoners were remanded to the guardhouse, an old log building formerly used as a schoolhouse. After some deliberation, the committee took a vote upon the question: "Shall these men suffer death?" and it is said that but one vote was cast in the negative.

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The condemned men were then once more brought before the committee and were sentenced to be hung on the following Monday, July 29, 1839. On the morning of that day about one thousand people assembled at the scene of the execution, just south of the present town of Boonsboro, Arkansas. At the hour appointed for the execution the gallows was surrounded by a surging mass of humanity, white, black and red, all impatient for the exciting event, and fearful lest it be postponed. At last the wagon bearing the victims appeared. Each sat on his coffin, Richmond wearing a shroud, and Turner and Barnes in their accustomed dress. Arrived at the scaffold, they were given a few minutes in which to take leave of their relatives and friends. The confession of Richmond and the evidence produced at the trial was then read from the stand, after which the prisoners were ordered to stand up, facing the people. The chairman of the committee arose and requested all who sustained the action of the committee to raise their hands. About ninety-nine out of every one-hundred hands went up. The ropes were then adjusted, the victims standing on the rear of the wagon. A fervent prayer was offered by Rev. Andrew Buchanan, the order to move on was given to the driver, and the next instant three writhing forms hung swaying to and fro beneath the gallows tree. Thus ended the first chapter in one of the most remarkable incidents in the whole history of lynch law. William Bailey, whom more than any of the others was thought to have deserved punishment, had escaped, but the committee had been tracing his footsteps. About the middle of December following a message was received on Cane Hill from Rev. Guilford Pylant, who lived a few miles south, that Bailey was at his house in charge of Creed Taylor and Bill Mussett, who had captured him in Pulaski County.

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A guard was sent down to bring him to Cane Hill, and the committee of thirty-six was again convened. The trial began the next morning, and before the close of the day, the sentence of death was passed upon William Bailey. The execution was fixed for the next day, and at the appointed time he was in the same way, and at the same place, as his alleged confederates.

It had been thought that at the last moment he would confess the crime, but he died protesting his innocence.

After the excitement attendant upon these executions had somewhat subsided, a reaction naturally set in, and it began to be asserted that the men who had been hung were innocent. In time there grew up two distinct parties in the county, the one upholding the action of the committee and the other condemning it, and for many years a reference to the Cane Hill tragedy aroused the gray haired pioneer, and you were soon made aware to which party he belonged.

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Ref:-History of Northwest Arkansas. Preservation of sundry personal, business and private records. Published by the Goodspeed Publishing Company in the year of 1889 from data gathered from the pioneers of that time. The foregoing story of the Cane Hill massacre as recorded by Col. James P. Neal.

Note-This old pioneer history was the property of James M. Chandler who was a pioneer of the Cane Hill country, and is now in the possession of his son, James E. Chandler of Okay.