

## STRANGE THINGS DID HAPPEN HERE

Submitted by Marty Everse

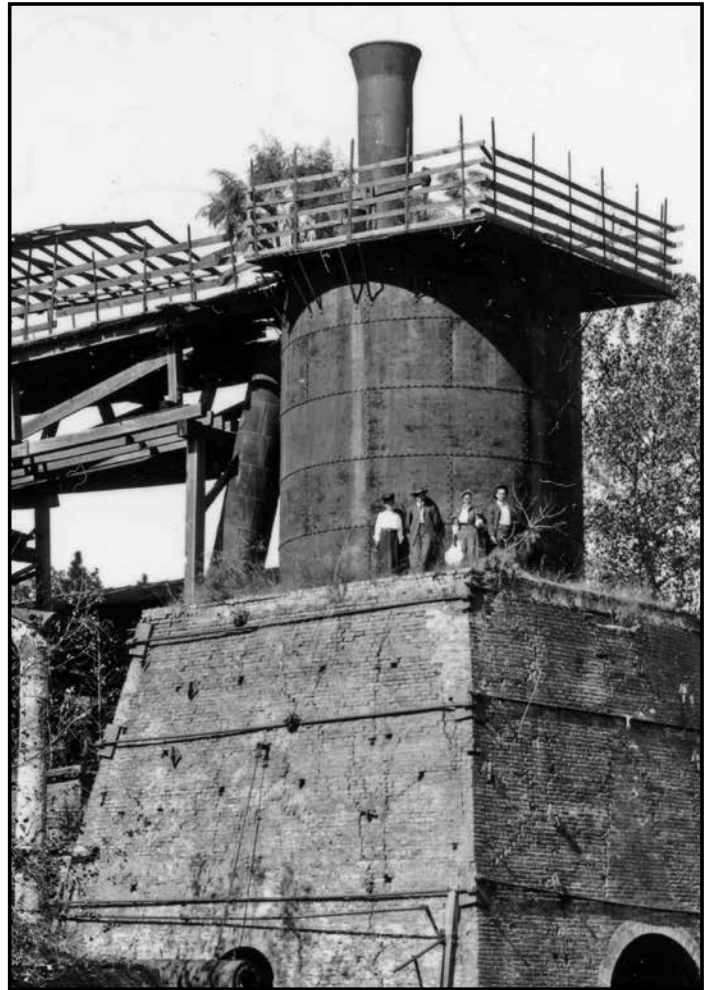
Rambling through the peaceful grounds of Brierfield Ironworks Park today, people find it difficult to imagine the frenzy of activity that once occurred there. In the years between 1862 and 1894 an industrial town had sprung complete with a monumental iron-making furnace, company store, post office, church, housing for hundreds of workers and a railroad that ran through the middle. But after Christmas Eve 1894, when the works shut down, the whole complex was, in the words of a local wag, "given over to the bat and owl." It wasn't long before the place became a curiosity, a hangout for courting couples, moonshiners, hunters, those just wishing to see a crumbling brick tower rising out of the forest and eventually a state park.

Over the years and up to the present there have been whispers and rumors of strange things happening there, cries for help, wailing, whining, eerie screams piercing the night's stillness. Overactive imaginations, pranks or the supernatural, who can know for sure, but many mournful events occurred within the bounds of this once bustling village that might have just upset the fabric of space and time, the pale between dimensions.

Ben Goggins, who lived out Pea Ridge way, was a farmer but found it very difficult to support his wife and their seven kids from the rocky, thin soils west of Montevallo. So, to make ends meet during the winter of 1881-1882, he hired on as an iron ore digger at the Bibb Furnace. On December 30, 1881, while deep in the ore pit, a massive boulder rolled down the bank and crushed him. He lived an hour and a half in great pain before, as the news reporter wrote, "death kindly relieved him from his agony." His wife Bettie would give birth to their eighth child, a daughter, six weeks later. Ben was carried to Macedonia Cemetery where he now rests with his parents. Bettie would live another 34 years.

Lee Payne, liked by everyone and small for his age, lived with his Irish-born grandfather John Callahan and his uncle Dan. One fine day in May 1885, he walked to the furnace to borrow a mule and plow from Henry Burke, a worker there. Jumping on the mule and carrying the plow and stock, he headed for the family corn field. The plow was heavy and hard to manage. Jostling along the road the handle smacked the back of the mule, frightening it and causing it to bolt and throw the boy. One of the mule's traces got wrapped around Lee's ankle and he was dragged a half mile. When found, little Lee Payne was dead, his arm badly mangled, skull fractured and face badly bruised. Thomas Fancher, a neighbor, commented, "he was torn up wonderful." He was carried to the Cahaba Valley Baptist Church burying ground where he lies in an unmarked grave.

Eighteen year old Charlie Stuart left Kentucky seeking fame and fortune. Somehow he managed, in 1887, to find himself



Two couples tempting fate on the Bibb Furnace about 1907.

toiling away at the Bibb Furnace. After a hot day in August, he walked from the furnace to the ore washer. Balancing along a narrow plank above the machinery his foot slipped and he fell between two large rollers. His screams were brief. His body mashed to pieces. The local paper noted that Stuart "had won the respect of all who knew him. This will be sad news, indeed to send to his relatives."

Ghost stories, tales of ethereal manifestations are rooted in tragedies, and they often emerge when the surroundings where they occurred are altered in some way. That has certainly been the case at Brierfield. Do Ben Goggins, Lee Payne, Charlie Stuart or someone or something else haunt the hollow along Furnace Branch today? Perhaps words from a *Twilight Zone* episode sums it best. "Maybe in the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge, the answer exists." Who's to say?

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