

## Fiction:

Story  
Hour

The reason the trees all died around the courthouse was on account of Eljay. Eljay was a nigger that went up one time and sawed the dead limbs off the live oaks, only he sawed too much. He also forgot to spray the aborviate hedge, and it is full of worms. The tree trunks are still standing around for no good reason with their dead limbs sticking up in the air like amputees.

The whole town is backwards like that. No wonder they moved the county seat away from Connelly Springs to Morganton. Court trials don't amount to a row of beans anymore: a lawsuit once a year whether somebody's bullpen is astraddle somebody else's boundary or not; Red Circle Stores or Harmony Hardware work up a shoplift or a non-payment now and then. When Connelly Springs was still a county seat and had a circuit court judge once a month instead of just a justice-of-the-peace, it was different. There was a lively murder trial once over a farmer that stove in his own field hand's head, with a loy. But that is long forgotten and now hardly anybody even remembers how it turned out. All Jimbob went to the courthouse for anymore was story hour.

Whenever Jimbob passed through the courthouse grounds he thought about wartime on TV and would rather be watching it than going to story hour. The dead live oaks with their limbs cut off reminded him of a Marine on TV that stepped on a booby trap and was interviewed. He would collect over 80 per cent disability from the V.A. and was set for life. The only reason Jimbob went to story hour in the first place was his momma made him.

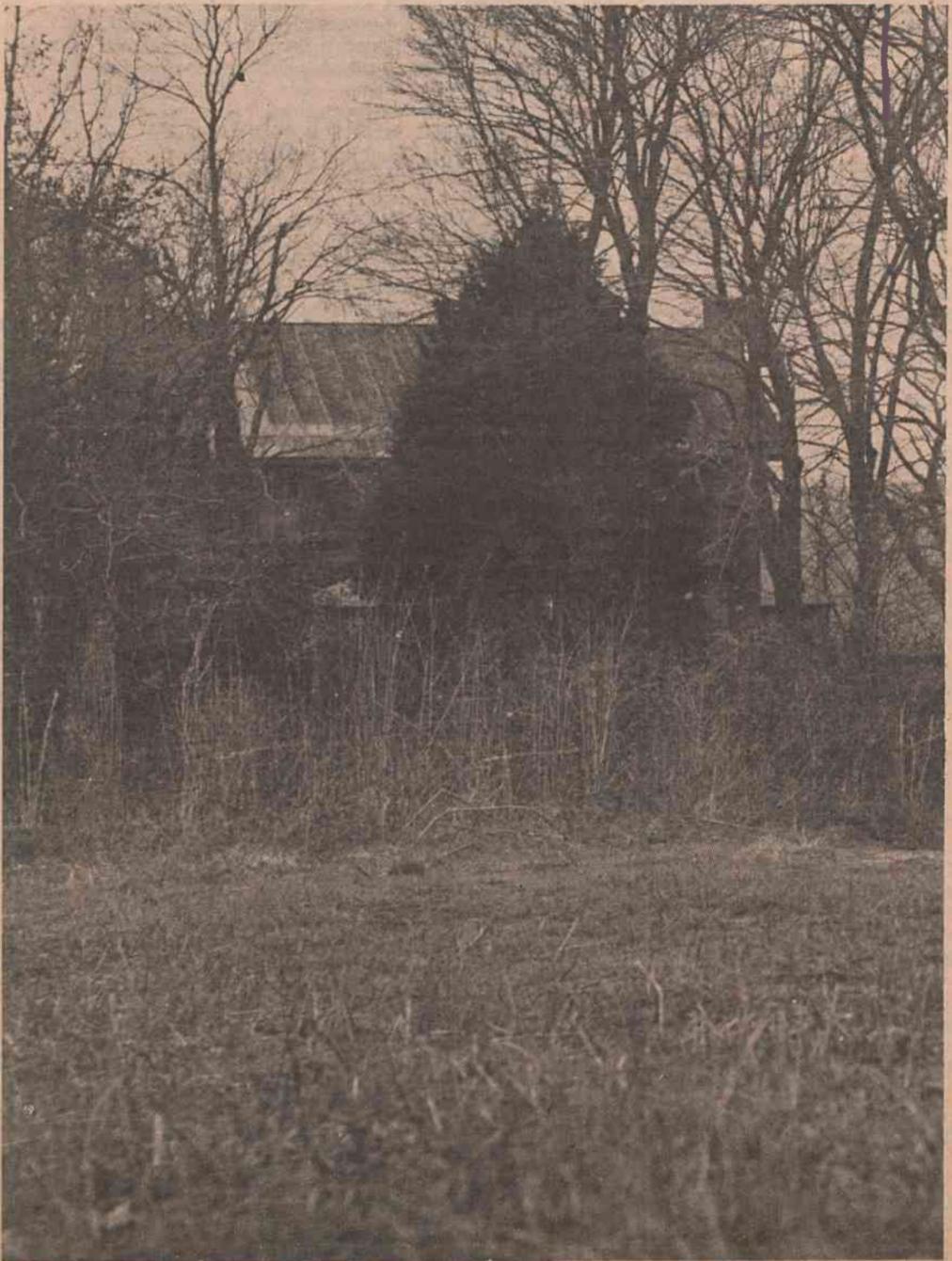
"Allrightsir. No story hour. No TV. You can just take a restful siesta for yourself."

"No thanks," said Jimbob. "A nap is worse than story hour."

The astronauts were going to the moon again and if their spacecraft happened to blow up on TV (so what, we were ahead of the Russians) he would hate like the dickens to miss it. He figured he was already missing the blast-off on account of being on his way to story hour.

People said the courthouse was going to rack and ruin, and Jimbob could see where they were right. Weeds grew up out of the flagstone steps. The whole front lawn was more crabgrass and dandelions than anything. That was Eljay's fault, the janitor. He was already asleep by 3 p.m. when Jimbob came by. Stretched out on a warped closet door somebody had hired him to plane down, on two sawhorses. His tin cup was on a watch chain attached to one strap of his overalls dangling down swinging under the door, empty. He always carried his cup on a chain so he wouldn't lose it. In case somebody offered him a drink. Naturally he could not drink out of the same bottle as a white man.

Connelly Springs may be dry, but the next county is not and there are more bootleggers around town than you can shake a



stick at. Jimbob saw an empty pint bottle on the door with Eljay. Bootleggers will sell to niggers, anybody. Eljay was known to be drunk half the time and asleep the other half. Now he was both.

(Eljay's only sober memories were when they let him be bailiff and run for Cokes for the jury and take up spittoons after a trial. He was the only nigger bailiff in North Carolina. Then they went and changed the county seat to Morganton, and Connelly Springs ended up with only a justice-of-the-peace. So Eljay gave up trying and took to drink.)

Jimbob stepped on into the courthouse out of the heat. There sat Miss Poindexter in the judge's seat, as per usual.

Miss Poindexter read. They put her in charge of the library since she went and wore a NEVER button and got out of school teaching. All the library was was a closet next to the jury box. It was full of Little Colonels and Life and old back issues of Kiwanis Magazines. Also a stack of half-burnt hymnals when the Cherry Log church caught fire and they bought new ones. There was a stack of Perry Masons, too, but Miss P would not allow anybody under fifth grade to read them. Jimbob would not have been caught dead in the library except his momma made him.

His momma felt sorry for Miss Poindexter. Miss Poindexter was peculiar and never got married. The only thing anybody could think of for a not-too-bright and not-married lady to do was teach school, so she did it. Jimbob had her himself in second grade. She was a stretched-out type woman on the order of a telephone pole. Her folks were all tall people, and she took after them. Her teeth were nice and her own, but big. She had never in her life dipped snuff which left them whiter than most. She always tucked her ears up inside her tight hair or where you never saw them. She had little-bitty eyes and glasses. Jimbob didn't know if she never

got married because she was peculiar or she was peculiar because she never got married.

When Miss Poindexter took to school teaching, Jimbob's momma said, "I do believe that woman's found her niche in life at last." But if you asked Jimbob, she was no genius at schoolteaching. He half the time stuck an Action Comics in his geography when he had her, and she never knew the difference. He did memorize his time-tables off Miss Poindexter - or was it some substitute from Valdese? - for Miss P was a lot out with heart trouble and the heat. That was before they integrated. And Miss Poindexter switched her cameo she used to wear for a NEVER button.

A long time ago, about World War II, nearly every nigger in Connelly Springs went to Hickory to work at Wright's until all that was left was one black family in the whole county. That was Eljay and his woman Pearl and they weren't even married. Pearl used to take in washing at a penny-a-piece (be it sheet or handkerchief), so naturally the women all sent sheets till she got smart and charged a nickel. They had this little girl, Trellis. Jimbob doubted if Trellis ever saw the insides of a schoolhouse till integration came along. They sent a marshal all the way down from Asheville just to put Trellis in school.

The marshal had to sit in a teeny-weeny grade seat like Trellis, and not smoke.

What Miss Poindexter decided to do was turn her backside on Trellis and the Law of the Land both. Jimbob was in second grade himself, and saw her do it. She wouldn't teach Trellis how to spell cat. And pinned on a NEVER button where her cameo used to be, for good measure.

The whole town said she was a mighty plucky female to buck the government like that. Jimbob's momma said she put the KKK on

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