



Yesterday was when something happened to hundreds of haunted houses that once dotted North Carolina's landscape. It was noticed most in this section, after military bases sprouted at Cherry Point and Jacksonville.

The houses stayed right where they had always been, only they weren't scary any more. A shortage of dwellings made desperate shelter seekers immune to strange noises and even stranger tales.

Spooks don't like to be crowded, and hate people who refuse to take them seriously, so there was no choice but to gather their sheets around them and head for where spooks out of business congregate.

"We didn't have a ghost of a chance," a particularly gloomy ha'nt confided to us one night, while gazing dispiritedly at a brightly lighted, freshly painted home on the outskirts of New Bern.

At first, he appeared to be inebriated, three sheets in the wind that is, but the more he talked, the more sense he made. A ha'nt, we discovered, ain't a bad guy when you get to know him.

"These young service couples started it all," he said. "They blew into town from the North, South, East and West, and in less time than it takes to say boo they claimed every available house, apartment and room."

And, he added, "They didn't inquire about spooks, all they wanted was a place, anywhere at any price. If the price didn't scare them out of their wits, it was a cinch we didn't have a chance."

What had happened to prior occupants was of no concern. "These young upstarts," the ghost informed us, didn't take any stock in all this stuff about pirates and other cut throats in New Bern's spook parade."

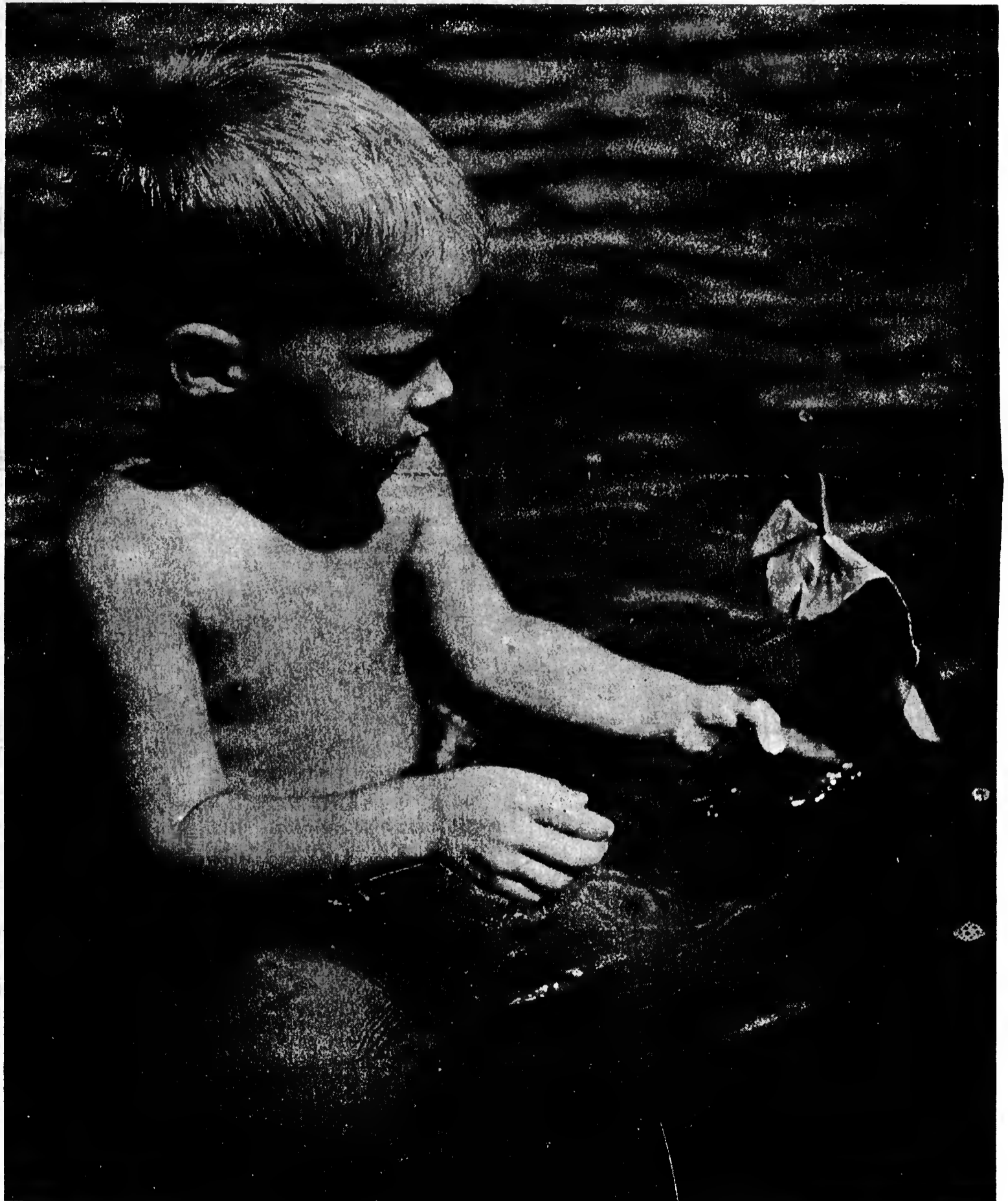
They were willing to concede that lots of unusual deaths occurred here, before and after the Revolutionary War. So what! They had their own lives to live, and they were going to live to the fullest.

Scarcely pausing for breath, or whatever it is that enables a ghost to talk, the dispirited spirit continued, "Civilians took a cue from service couples, and having experienced the dwelling shortage too, they grew disdainful of our scare technique.

"As a matter of fact, it wasn't much point in trying to make houses sound creaky. A high percentage of the places really were creaky, without any assistance from us, and nobody knew it better than the tenants."

Spooks fared worst around military areas like New Bern, Jacksonville, Wilmington and Fayetteville, but there was a shortage in other towns too. Some apartments were so crowded a ghost would have to be a midget.

"What worries me," moaned our talkative ghost, "is a sneaking suspicion that folks never will get around to being afraid of ha'nts again, at least



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—Photo by Theodore Baxter

