

COMMUNITY

Folkways and Folk Speech

by Roger Whitner
Contributing Columnist

Speculation about the mystery of North Carolina's Brown Mountain Lights has been going on since the moving balls of red and orange were discovered in 1913.

No satisfactory answer has yet been found despite the use of scientific means of investigation.

Perhaps the folk solution is as good as any. At least some elderly citizens in the Brown Mountain vicinity attach a certain amount of credence to a story first credited to Granny Clark.

It was narrated by Mrs. Ira Vance of Pineola for the late Frank C. Brown but was not included in his massive folklore collection. It was discovered among the Brown papers of Charles Bond, a Duke University student, and recently appeared in Jan Harold Brunsvand's "Readings in American Folklore."

"Well, I'll tell you now what caused the Brown Mountain Lights. There's lots of folks thinks they are caused by minerals--different kinds of minerals or something like that, but I know that it wasn't caused by that. I know why it is caused, because there wasn't any lights there before this tragedy happened."

"Now Jim was a mean and cruel man and he had the most lovely little wife you ever saw. She was just as good and clever as she could be. Her name was Belinda, and Belinda was expecting to have a baby and Jim was just as mean to her as he could be, and he was kind of sparking another old woman that was around there in the country. Her name was Susie. He was crazy about her, and so one day Belinda was not feeling so good, and folks missed her out of the community, and some folks went over to her house one day and asked Jim where Belinda was, and he says, 'Oh, Linda, she just put on her old bonnet and left the other day and she hasn't come back yet.'"

"Folks got to looking around and found blood on the doorsteps and blood on the gate and down the road where there was wagon tracks. And so folks got to hunting for Belinda, and, way about 10 or 12 miles away from where they lived, they found Belinda's bonnet. And immediately after they found the bonnet, they got to searching all through the woods for Belinda, and all of a sudden a fire got out and swept the whole country out. And so of course if there was any more clues as to Belinda's whereabouts, it was destroyed when the fire passed through; and immediately after that the Brown Mountain Lights came."

"And so I watched and I watched the Brown Mountain Lights and I decided there was something queer about it, and I was going to find out what it was. So one night I kept seeing the lights go up and come down and go out, and there would be two or three lights that would come up and go down, up and down and out, and up and down, so I decided I would get the position of those lights located on Brown Mountain and in the daytime I would go and search it out and see what caused it."

"So I went over there with a couple of my friends and we came to the face of a big cliff, and I climbed around and got on top of the cliff and looked down at the bottom, and I saw a pile of stones laying down there at the foot of that cliff. And I says, says I to myself, 'The Lord didn't put them stones there. That's been put there by the hand of a man.'"

"I climbed down off the cliff and went down there and unpiled those stones and what do you suppose I found? I found the skull of a grown person and the skull of a baby. You know folks say the skulls of murdered people never decay, and I have heard all my life that if you ever took the skull of a murdered person and got it over the head of the person who murdered the one who was murdered, and asked them about it they couldn't tell a lie; they would have to tell the truth."

"So we picked up those skulls and took them back to Jim's house and put them in the loft and we kept watching and watching until one day we found him sitting right under those skulls and I just popped right up and asked, 'Did you kill Belinda?' And he raised up and turned just as white as a sheet and trembled, and the sweat just poured off him and he didn't say a word."

"It passed off that he was just about as mean to Susie as he was to Belinda, and Susie was afraid to say anything, afraid he would beat her and maybe kill her. So it passed off till his health began to fall and he got sick, and oh he had the awfulest time in the world. He was all the time a-screaming and hollering and had a stick in his hand beating it in the air and saying, 'Oh Belinda, get away, get away, get away, take that crying baby away!' And he just screamed and screamed and did that way for weeks and weeks."

"The folks at that time let their cattle all run in the range, and they had their calves penned up so the cows would come so they could get the milk, and hogs and everything run out in the woods then; and the evening that Jim was about to die he was worse than usual. He had been screaming all day and fighting Belinda away from him all day long, and it looked like he was com-

MUSIC MAN MEMORIES

by Gerry Girard
Community Editor

We all sat in the semi-darkness waiting for the curtain to go up, listening to the overture of the Music Man. Movement was slow and quiet, some whispered some clowned around, some did stretching exercises. The stage crew was busy. It was the last of the three performances of homecoming weekend. We were all tired but the magic was still there and it was a good tired.

This had been my first experience with the theater. I had a small part. I was shocked when I got it, especially since I was not a theater or music major. I thought back almost two months before when I had first heard of the play and that it was open to the community as well as to students. I almost backed out of even trying for it because of the heavy load of twenty-one credit hours that I was taking. This would be my last semester at school and I had to pass everything.

I called C. Robert Jones to seek his advice. He suggested that I go on the first night and just observe then do my audition on the second night. What was scary was that not only did you have to read for a part but also sing. I've sang in the church choir for years but never, never by myself. I'm glad that I decided to do in in spite of all of the hard work involved. I would have missed one of the best experiences of my life.

I decided to practice singing before my actual audition. Thank you, Linda Kovacik, for your help with it and helping me to pick out the song. Reading for the part was fun but when I sang "Yesterday" for everyone my legs trembled so bad I was sure it made my voice shake. I never knew so many talented people could be there in one place — singers, dancers, and actors. They were all delightful and so much fun to work with!

At first it seemed confusing, I wasn't sure who I was or what was expected of me. We just practiced the songs. The main parts were handled right away but the more complicated knowing where you belonged when you were just a "townsperson".

One very exciting moment was the day after the auditions were over when the list of cast members was posted near the Music Library. Just seeing my name on that list floored me! Practice sessions ran over a period of a month and a half. Sometimes they were boring and sometimes very funny. It was exciting, though watching it all come together especially when the cast doubled and the college chorus was added.

The last week was the most exciting and exhausting, though. Costumes, make-up, and then the orchestra were added, props and scenery, lighting and sound. I never realized what hard work went into such a production. The costume people were a wonder and so were the stage crew and designers. They certainly do not get enough praise.

One more special happening during the homecoming weekend was Saturday night and the reception we had with the cast from the Music Man that was performed in 1966. I talked to the gentleman who played Mayor Shinn and it really touched me. He said they enjoyed the play so much. That they could still remember the words and they sang along with us. He then said he also cried and he got choked up again and couldn't speak.

Thank you, Jim Thomas and Dr. Reed for casting me. And to everyone in the play — you were an absolute delight! I enjoyed getting to know each one of you.

pletely exhausted. He had gotten to where he couldn't raise his voice and he had just about passed fighting with his stick, and all of a sudden all the chickens began to cackle and the roosters began to crow, and the ducks began to quack and the geese began to holler, pigs began to squeal, cows began to bawl, and horses began to neigh, and the gate flew open and we looked out and saw a black cart backed right up to the door. It started pulling out and when he started to leave the door, there was a big black ball laying in the black cart, and Jim was dead."

Readers are invited to send folk material to FOLK-WAYS and FOLK-SPEECH, Department of English, Appalachian State University, Boone, N.C. 28608.

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