

Finding of Remains of Rev. W. T. Hawkins Solves 18-Year Mystery

By LARRY W. MULL
Herald Staff Writer

Twilight was descending over the rolling, grassy slopes of the picturesque Sapphire mountains in Western North Carolina. Deep red, bright orange and pale purple splashed the sky and a soft, misty haze hung over the verdant countryside.

A stout man trudged slowly along the mountainside, his sharp eyes searching carefully the peaceful scene before him. This stout mountaineer with the tanned, wrinkled face and the bright eyes was Parson W. T. Hawkins, beloved circuit riding Methodist minister, who spent most of his time traveling about the hill country, preaching the gospel to his neighbors.

Parson Hawkins paused and wiped the sweat from his brow. He had started out a short time before—the exact time being 3:30 p. m. on that peaceful afternoon of March 18, 1930, in search of a stray cow that had failed to come up at milking time. This had worried the old man and he had set out immediately in an intensive hunt for the missing animal.

His first step was to search the fields and pastures near his home but this failed to produce results. Next, he turned his attention to the dense patches of woods and thickets that dotted the adjoining hills. Finally he reached the dense underbrush along Timber Ridge, still looking for some signs of the wayward cow.

From time to time he halted at various homes along the way and made inquiries regarding his cow but none of his neighbors could remember seeing the animal. Later they were to recall that he was in the best of spirits except for being slightly worried over his pesty cow.

Pushing deeper into the jungle-like vegetation, the Parson paused occasionally and called out to the animal but failed to hear the animal low back in return as was its custom. Presently he found that soft darkness draped the mountains and the stars were out. Tired and weary, he turned back towards his home, walking briskly. He was anxious to reach his abode where a warm, nourishing meal awaited him. Despite his seventy-three years, he moved at a fast pace.

He entered a small woods and disappeared from sight. . . . mysteries in the history of Western North Carolina—a mystery that was to defy solution for a period of eighteen years and was to cause much wild speculation and guessing as to just what really had happened to the kindly old parson on that fatal March evening. There were vague tales about vengeance seeking bootleggers, cruel bandits and poisonous snakes that struck down their deadly enemy.

Back in the Hawkins home, the parson's wife waited patiently, peering through a window from time to time, hoping to catch sight of her husband. At first she wasn't worried because she knew her husband was an expert woodsman who would hardly lose his way in a region he knew so familiarly. But as time passed and he failed to return, her conflicting emotions aroused to action.

She picked up a shawl, draped it over her shoulders and stepped out into the chill darkness. With a heavy heart, she directed her steps to the home of Joe L. Wright, son-in-law, who lived nearby. She found the family in the living room where a fire blazed cheerily on the hearth.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Wright asked anxiously, noticing the worried expression on her mother's face.

She twisted her hands nervously. "It's . . . the Parson . . ."

"What about him?"

"He hasn't come home and I have a feeling something has happened. He left the house about 3:30 to look for a cow and I haven't seen him since."

Knowing the minister as they did, Mr. and Mrs. Wright believed, at first, that Mrs. Hawkins was unduly alarmed. They were sure that no man alive knew the hills around the settlement of Cashiers any better than the old man. Many times the parson had led them unerringly to and from some lonely, isolated spot in the mountains where they were sure they could never find their way back. They felt reasonably sure that Hawkins had lingered along the way to chat with some neighbor and tried to reassure Mrs. Hawkins that he would show up soon.

Yet when an hour passed, Wright found his own suspicions aroused. He decided it was time for action

Mr. and Mrs. Wright Recognize Knife, Watch And Teeth Of "Parson" Hawkins



Shown standing before the general delivery window at the Cashiers Post Office are Mr. and Mrs. Joe L. Wright, daughter and son-in-law of Rev. W. T. Hawkins, holding the knife, watch, pocket book and false teeth recovered with the skeleton found by Ernest White on June 17, and which identified as the belongings of Mrs. Wright's father, the missing "Parson."

and immediately rounded up several neighbors to help him search for the parson. With flaming torches, the group began to comb the underbrush and forests along Timber Ridge.

Meanwhile, word was rushed to the home of Deputy Frank Allen, a capable, hard-working officer, who soon joined the searching party. Throughout the long hours that followed, the men worked feverishly, believing that Parson Hawkins might be lying somewhere in the darkness seriously injured. Time after time they called his name, their shouts ringing through the hills but they received no reply.

Speculation was that he had fallen and broken a leg, had been attacked by an animal or had suffered a heart attack. Some of the men even hinted that the kindly old preacher might have fallen victim to foul play.

For hours the hunters stuck grimly to their task but not a single clue to the old man's whereabouts was found. Eventually one member of the party pointed out that if Hawkins were alive and merely crippled, he would have attempted to attract attention to his plight by building a signal fire. Others agreed that he might be right.

Finally dawn tinted the eastern horizon with shades of pink, gold and purple and a yellow sun crept up slowly from behind the Whiteside mountains. Tired and exhausted, the weary men assembled at a point near the Wright home to get their breakfast and discuss their next move. A grim, forbidding silence hung over the tensed, sorrowful men as they conversed in undertones. They now feared the worst; that Parson Hawkins was dead somewhere in the desolate thickets.

Many of these men had known Hawkins since their childhood days. He had converted and baptized many of them into the church. At the funerals of their loved ones, he had spoken the final words. Always in their hour of deepest sorrow, they had received renewed faith from the strength he had given them. Never had he failed to come to their assistance. Now they must not fail him.

But what had happened to him? That was the question on everybody's lips.

"Shucks," one man in the crowd spoke up encouragingly. "I reckon the parson can take care of himself in the hills. Ain't nobody around here knows them any better than he does."

"Yeah," another added. "Any one who can handle rattl snakes like he can, sure can take care of himself in the woods. Look what he did over at Cashiers that time. Didn't get riled a bit either."

The others nodded agreement. They recalled the incident to which he was referring. For years Hawkins had made studying poisonous snakes a hobby. He had spent many hours watching the reptiles and often he would remove their poison sacs. On one occasion he had appeared in the Cashiers barber shop with a particularly vicious looking rattlesnake.

"Well, boys," he said, while a group of spectators looked on nervously, "I'm gonna make this here critter harmless. Snakes are a whole lot like human beings. Some of them are dangerous and some ain't. You got to know the deadly ones and watch them."

Then, slowly and carefully, he began to extract the sac containing

poison from the mouth of the reptile. He worked with clear cut precision and without fear. The frightened spectators looked on in tense silence.

Suddenly some one cried, "Watch out, Parson! He's coiling!"

The next instant there was a swift blur of motion. With lightning fast speed, the brown snake drove his fangs deep into the wrinkled flesh of the old man's arm. Hawkins dropped it momentarily. Then he quickly scooped up the snake.

One of the bystanders wanted to kill the reptile but Hawkins refused to let him. He carefully caged the rattler and then administered first aid. For a long time afterwards everyone in the community wondered what effect the snake bite would have on the parson. They were amazed to learn that he was fully recovered within a few days.

"The parson sure knows how to handle rattlers," an old man in the hunting party said, after a few minutes of silence.

"The same thing goes for moonshiners," another put in.

After a brief rest, the men eagerly renewed their search for Hawkins. The party began to increase as others, learning that the parson was missing, had hurried from the nearby towns of Sylva, Highlands, Cullowhee and Tuckasee, North Carolina along with other citizens from Walhalla and Pickens, South Carolina. By now a huge posse delved and probed every nook and cranny on Timber Ridge, expanding the hunt to cover a larger area.

But noon came and there was still no signs of the missing minister. At last it was decided that he might have fallen in Lake Cashiers and drowned. Soon the placid, glassy waters of the beautiful mountain lake were dotted with a half dozen boats loaded with men who probed and dragged the bottom. Nightfall finally came and the prolonged search had failed to produce results.

By now relatives of the preacher were frantic with grief. They were positive that Hawkins was dead or had fallen victim to amnesia. Still the search continued for two long weeks. Then one morning, Deputy Frank Allen talked the matter over with Hawkins' neighbors.

"Looks like it's useless to keep this up, boys," he said. "Under normal circumstances, I'm sure we'd have found his body by now if it was close by. We've searched everywhere within miles of his home and dragged the lake without any luck."

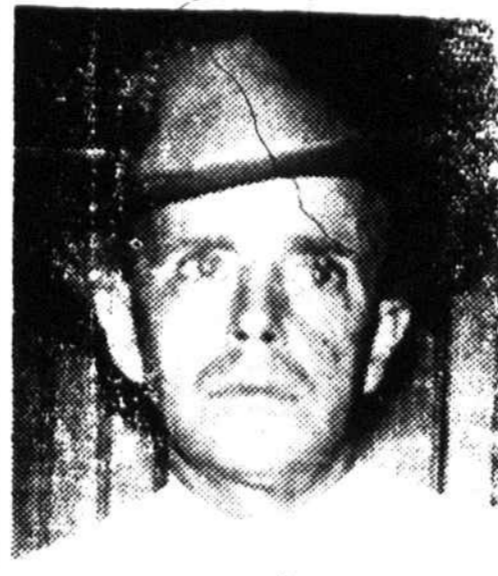
"That's right," Joe Wright remarked. "We've struck a cold trail."

Thus the organized search for the aged minister was abandoned, although for many months to come some of his neighbors voluntarily spent much of their spare time combing the hills.

The burning question on everyone's lips in the sparsely populated mountain region was: What happened to Parson Hawkins? It was the subject of conversation everywhere in the community. Newspapers picked up the tragic story and spread it across the nation.

Of course, there was considerable speculation, as there always is when a person disappears under mysterious circumstances. There were two theories that were given much thought. One, that the old parson had become an amnesia victim and had wandered from the

Directed Search



Deputy Sheriff Frank Allen, above, was responsible for assembling groups and directing the unsuccessful search for "Parson" Hawkins at the time of his disappearance on the afternoon of March 18, 1930. Deputy Allen did all in his power to locate the beloved old preacher, and although it looked as if the case never would be solved, Mr. Allen never closed his books on the case, hoping some day a break would come to solve the mystery. He was one of the first to recognize the remains found June 17, 1948, as those of the missing man.

hills, was the most widely accepted.

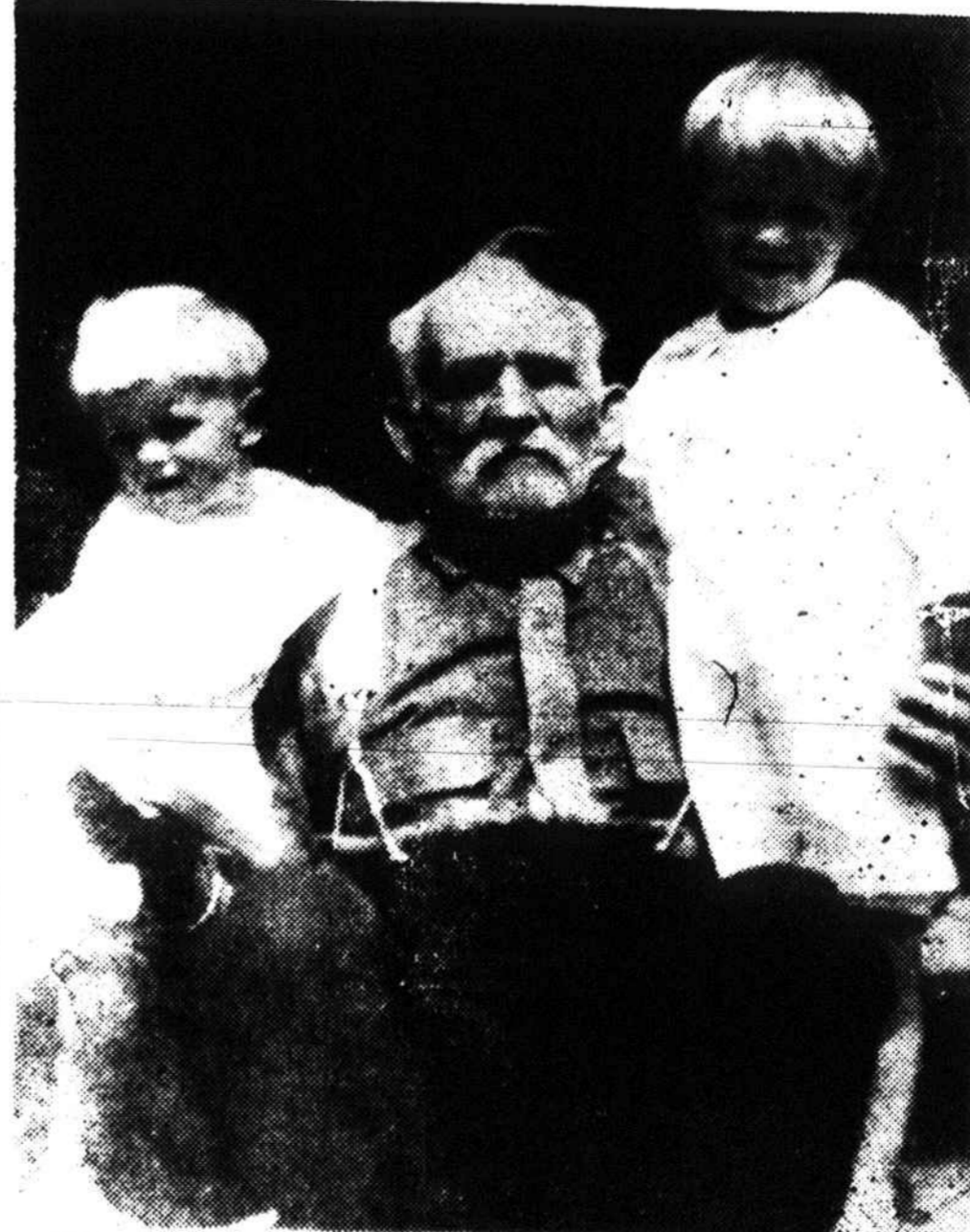
The other was that Hawkins, a fiery opponent of alcoholic drink, had been murdered by moonshiners and his body concealed some where in the mountains. This theory was strengthened when it was recalled that the old man's life had been threatened by several men who it was believed manufactured illegal whiskey and sold it in the nearby towns. Yet their threats failed to disturb Hawkins who continued to preach vigorously against the traffic in liquor.

"You can be assured," Deputy Allen informed relatives of the missing minister, "that I'll never be satisfied until I locate the Reverend Hawkins. If he met with foul play, I'll do my best to see that those responsible are caught and punished."

True to his word, Deputy Allen never closed his book on the baffling case through the years to come. He worked unceasingly to locate the parson. His first step was to talk with the missing man's wife and other relatives. But he failed to find a reason for the old man disappearing.

Next, he contacted hundreds of police departments throughout the country, sending them a complete description of Hawkins, suggesting that he might turn up an amnesia victim, and requesting that if he did, they immediately get in touch with him. Often he went back to the hills, nosing around and keeping alert for some clue to

Rev. Hawkins And Two Grandchildren



This is a picture of Rev. W. T. Hawkins with two of his grandchildren, taken shortly before his mysterious disappearance. This shows the beloved "Parson" as he looked to his many friends and acquaintances and proves that he was a man of large frame and fine physique as well as a determined character, a man to be reckoned with in any event.

The grandchildren in Rev. Hawkins' arms are Joe and Charlie Wright, now grown, around 20 years of age.

Rev. Hawkins Remains Found in Rugged Section



Looming up in the background of this picture is Whiteside Mountain (4930 feet elevation) in the Southwest of Jackson county, which is surrounded by some of the most dense growth of timber and underbrush to be found anywhere. It was in the center of the timber shown in the foreground of the picture that Ernest White came upon the remains of the long-lost Mountain "Parson", Rev. W. T. Hawkins, as he was doing some logging on June 17, 1948. Finding of the remains cleared up Jackson County's most outstanding mystery in recent years.

the mystery. He picked up several promising leads and spent much time on them without tangible results. It was as though the old man had gone up in smoke.

Soon summer came to the beautiful mountain country. Flowers bloomed profusely on the hillsides and birds played in the green foliage of the trees. As usual tourists from everywhere flocked to the Land of the Sky to spend their vacation. The tempo of mountain life was stepped up and in a short while the puzzle of the missing minister was a secondary matter to the natives. Summer gave way to fall and then chill winter came to the mountains, spreading a blanket of snow over them.

With aching hearts and a downcast feeling, relatives of the parson waited patiently for his return. They never let their hope that he would return safely waver. Months passed slowly and still there was no answer to the riddle and it looked as if there never would be.

Years passed. War flamed in Europe and the South Pacific. Men fought and died miles away from home and time erased, except from a few hearts, any hope that the missing minister would every be seen alive. For if he were still alive now, he would be nearly ninety years old!

On the Sunday morning of June 17, 1948, eighteen years after the parson had walked from his home looking for a stray cow, Ernest White was engaged in cutting logs in the Whiteside Cove, a lonely, isolated section near the Hawkins home. Pushing through the dense

underbrush, he kept his eyes peeled for rattlesnakes. Presently something near his feet attracted his attention. An icy finger touched his heart as he saw a human skull, grinning at him, glittering in the bright sunlight.

He backed up a couple of steps and caught his breath. A second quick look revealed a skeleton sprawled in the grass. He hurried to the nearest home and reported the find.

Several people who overheard White tell of his find, and Deputy Frank Allen accompanied him back to the scene.

Presently, White gathered up several articles lying near the remains and held them up for others to see. They consisted of a gold watch, a pocket book, a key and a pair of weather worn shoes. As the men looked at the pitiful possessions of the corpse, they wondered who the dead could be. No one recalled hearing of any one missing from the community recently.

"Maybe he was murdered somewhere else and brought here," a spectator suggested.

"Say," Deputy Allen cut in anxiously. "I just thought of something. These are the remains of the Rev. Hawkins who was missing eighteen years ago." Ernest White snapped his fingers excitedly. "Great Scott! I think you've hit it. It must be the remains of Hawkins."

His surprising statement instantly aroused old memories in the minds of the others and they agreed that the skeleton might be

the long awaited answer to the baffling puzzle. There was one way, Deputy Allen told them, they could make sure. He wrapped the articles and took them to the home of Mrs. Genevieve H. Wright. Mrs. Wright examined them carefully and finally nodded. "Yes, these things belonged to my father. I well remember those false teeth where he carved on either side, because he said they hurt his mouth. I'm sure it is his body you found."

At last the mountain mystery was ended, although there are still many puzzling questions that will probably never be answered. So far as the authorities could determine there were no signs of foul play but then, after eighteen years there was hardly enough of the body left to tell anything about how the old man actually died.

Just what did happen there in Whiteside Cove on the night of March 18, 1930? Did Hawkins die of a heart attack? Was he killed by a wild animal? Or, did the moonshiners make good their threats to silence his fiery tongue forever?

You have all the known facts. Go over them closely and see just what theory you like best. What's the verdict? Did the kindly old man who never harmed a soul die of natural causes or was he brutally murdered and his body concealed?

For the information of those who do not know it the cow which Mr. Hawkins went out to find came in alone late that evening . . . another reason for Mrs. Hawkins' uneasiness that evening 18 years ago.

The End.

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