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News from the Dark Corner

As published in Greenville Newspapers
Greenville County, S.C.

Transcribed by
Cathy Griffith

Sources:

1. Microfilms: Greenville News, Greenville Daily News, Greenville News Piedmont (newspapers)
Publisher: Greenville, S.C., Greenville News Piedmont Co.; Greenville Co. Library, Greenville, S.C.

Additional Reading:

1. Title: Biographical sketch of Perry Duncan Gilreath July 9, 1836 to January 28, 1912, high sheriff Greenville County, South Carolina 1876-1900.
Author: Gilreath, John H.; Call Number: SC B Gilreath; Greenville Co. Library. Greenville, S.C.

This is installment 2 of some articles published in Greenville Newspapers. This single article does not focus on the Dark Corner of Greenville County but is interesting for the recollections of Jefferson Davis Gilreath (1861-1949).

Special thanks to Cathy Griffith for her interest and efforts in the transcriptions of these articles.

SOURCE: Greenville News, 75th Progress Edition
DATE: Sunday, September 25, 1949

JEFF GILREATH TELLS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT IN FORMER DAYS WAS SHERIFF FROM 1900 TO 1908; FATHER SERVED IN OFFICE 24 YEARS

By: Ruth Walker

Jeff D. Gilreath, now 88, is living in comfort in his fine home at Gitreath's Mill community in Oneal Township.

He can look back to the old days when he, as a county law enforcement officer, went up into the Dark Corner to capture "blockaders".

He can recall about the legendary escape of "Little Bill" Howard from the county jail.

He remembers the last hanging of Greenville County and the circumstances leading to it.

He can go much further back into his memory and tell of the time that he and another boy rode a saddle horse up and down Main Street during a red shirt rally in the days of Wade Hampton. He can remember the times when he, as a Deputy Sheriff, swept out the Sheriffs Office, since the county provided no janitor service.

Mr. Gilreath's father, Perry D. Gilreath, served as Greenville County Sheriff from 1876 to 1900. Jeff D. Gilreath was Sheriff from 1900 to 1908.

Mr. Gilreath served as his Father's Deputy for "15 or 20 years". The county appropriated no money for Deputies. The Sheriff had to hire them from his own money. One deputy was the customary number. The Sheriff operated on a fee system.

LYNCHING AVERTED

He recalled how his Father averted a near lynching, probably about 1889. Mr. Gilreath said that a negro had killed a woman near Simpsonville.

"My Father got word that they were going to try to get the negro", the former sheriff said. A man from the section involved was watching the jail, walking up and down the street, apparently to be apprised of any effort to remove the negro to another place.

Mr. Gilreath said his Father, who was not a heavy drinker, walked out to the street and invited the man to have a drink in a bar on South Main Street. The man, unsuspecting, accepted. During the few minutes that he was drinking with the Sheriff, the negro was moved by county authorities to the courthouse. He was hidden in the cupola. That night, Mr. Gilreath recalled, 200 or 300 men went down Main Street to the jail.

The jailor told them the negro was not there. The mob was insistant. The jailor invited them to designate a committee to search the jail. The search was made and the would-be lynchers were angered. The former sheriff said that there was some talk that they would make his father tell where the negro had been carried.

His father reasoned with the crowd, telling them words that Mr. Gilreath recalled were similar to these: "Boys, I don't blame you all for wanting to lynch that negro. Why didn't you get him before I did? I couldn't have said anything. I've got to protect him."

He said his father told them he would hang the negro and invited members of the masked mob to give him their names, saying that those who gave their names "I'll promise to let you see the hanging". Mr. Gilreath said they answered, "The devil you will", The crowd dispersed. There was no lynching.

RECALLS "LITTLE BILL"

Mr. Gilreath also recalls the details surrounding the legendary episode of "Little Bill" Howard. The elder Gilreath was Sheriff when a man was killed in the Glassy Mountain section. "Little Bill" was charged with murder in connection with the death. Young Jeff Gilreath was sent to get Howard and brought him back to Greenville. Howard signed a confession before Magistrate James Earie. Howard and several of his neighbors were indicted for the murder. "These men had money. Nearly all of the Greenville Bar was on their side", Mr. Gilreath said. He believes the killing ocured because some of the residents thought the victim had reported their blockading activities.

The presiding Judge ruled that the confession was good against Howard but not the other defendants. The co-defendants were freed and "Little Bill" was sentenced to hang. His lawyer appealed, with one ground being that the confession was not freely and voluntarily given, Mr. Gilreath said.

While the appeal was pending, Howard was in the county jail. His wife and several months old baby were permitted to spend a night there. Early the next morning, "Little Bill" called to the jailor, explaining that his wife had a long way to go. The jaibr unlocked the door to permit the wife and their small baby to leave. Out walked Howard, wearing his wife's clothes and carrying the baby. His absence was discovered a few hours later when the jailor carried breakfast to the cell.

The Supreme Court ruled out the confession and granted a new trial.

Howard on his second trial, was acquitted.

Mr. Gilreath said his Father was in charge of nine hangings and that he directed three. He believes the last hanging ocured about 1905 or 1906. The defendant was a young negro named Bob Keenan, who killed a Mr. Willimon, according to his recollection.

He said that someone had broken into the Willimon house and that Willimon had caught the intruder, identified as Keenan. Mr. Willimon, with a pistol in his pocket, was walking the negro to a place to await the arrival of the Sheriff. The negro grabbed the gun and killed Willimon.

Sheriff Gilreath said that he trailed the negro to Union. In the depot there he saw a big crowd of negroes. One woman, he said, looked nervous and "had mighty big feet". That was Keenan, dressed in a woman's clothes.

CARRIED TO PEN

The Sheriff put the negro on a train and carried him directly to the State penitentiary in Columbia. When the train the Sheriff had been expected to take reached Gn:enville a crowd jumped aboard. "If I had brought him they would have taken him and lynched him", Mr. Gilreath said.

Another time, a Magistrate Cox at Mauldin was killed. The Sheriff arrested two negroes between Mauldin and Woodruff. He took them to Woodruff and from there to the State Penitentiary in Columbia".

The Sheriff believes those were two lynchings that were prevented. "They would have lynched them in spite of creation", he added.

Mr. Gilreath said that when his Father was elected in 1876, the convention, rather than the primary system was followed. He recalls that while election results were being tabulated, an auctioneer would stand in front of the Mansion House, famous Inn on Main Street, and announce the results to a waiting crowd.

He remembers that at a Red Shirt rally he and a friend, Robert Patrick, who afterward became a Minister, rode the elder Gilreath's saddle horse up and down Main Street, hollering and "just having a time". He was about 15 or 16 years of age.

Of Gov. B.F. Perry, a Greenvillian, Mr. Gilreath said, "He was a fine looking man. You could look at him and tell that he was 'way above the average'. The same might be said of the former Sheriff.

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