

The Legend Of The Devil's Hoof Prints Of Bath



Vivian Shackelford, Ms. Betty Hughes,
and Mrs. Emily Padgett point to three of
the hoof prints.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a legend that reverberates
with a certain ring of truth: lusty

horsemen; a contested race; demonic influences; sudden, violent, unnatural death; and enduring imprints of a hellish event. These are the ingredients of the legend of Bath known as "The Devil's Hoof Prints."

Mrs. Hughes, Mr. Armstrong, Teresa Cox, and I talked with Mrs. Emily Padgett, of Douglas Crossroads, about exactly what happened, according to her recollections and knowledge. Many things are questioned to this day, but some matters seem sure. In 1813 (although some say as late as 1850), a horseman named Elliot was in Bath to participate in a horse race at Bath Commons the next day. Elliot, "in his cups," met another horseman by the name of Buckingame and argued violently with him about the comparative speeds of their horses. Elliot challenged Buckingame to a race on the spot. Elliot's horse crashed into a tree, killing both Elliot and the horse. Buckingame apparently was not heard of again.

The events after this are those in question. Some maintain that the hoof prints of Elliot's ill-fated steed can be seen to this day and that there are all sorts of mysterious properties--demonic influences--associated with them, that they are, indeed, the "Devil's Hoof Prints." Also, the number 13 seems to show up in many ways--some disputed--in the story.

Born in 1904 and living most of her life in Bath, Mrs. Padgett grew up in the atmosphere of "The Devil's Hoof Prints." She graciously consented to talk to us about the story. She received us in her lovely home. A slim, lovely, decorous lady, Mrs. Padgett

spoke with animated certainty about some parts of the story. For some aspects of the story, she referred to Judge Whedbee's account. But most of her statements were from her own personal knowledge as a young girl and from statements from her parents and grandparents. Mrs. Ila Cutler, a friend of Mrs. Padgett, added her insight into the story.

Life: When did you first become aware of the story and what is your understanding of it?

Mrs. Padgett: The early teens. I used to visit my grandmother, and my grandmother lived on the Camp Leach Road just below where the horse tracks are. I lived just before you get to the Camp Leach Road next to Woodard's Pond school house. They've torn the house down, but that's where I lived. We could hear the bell ring and run to school to get there on time. But my grandmother, it was at her father's house, I have always been told, that Elliot stopped.

Elliot is the man who was killed. I've always been told, he stopped at my grandfather's home that morning. I thought it was morning, but, I understand later, it was in the afternoon. Elliot was "in his cups." And Elliot said he was going to this race. And he'd win that race or go to hell. And so it wasn't many hours after that, I've just learned from Judge Whedbee's story, a lot of people were coming from a protracted meeting and met him and heard him cursing this other gentleman with a horse, a horse that was as good a stal-

lion as his was, they said. They got into an argument, and Elliot started cursing. They were supposed to have the race at Bath Commons, I understood, the next day. And they got into this argument about the race, and this stranger said, "Well, that's where I'm headed. I going to race in that race tomorrow."

Life: Was this a regularly scheduled race?

Mrs. Padgett: It seems to have been according to Judge Whedbee's story. Seems to have been a scheduled race on the Bath Commons, and it was to be held the next day. He was trying out his horse that day, it seemed. The people coming out of the protracted meeting were so shocked when they were going home and heard this cursing. Elliot said to the stranger, "Let's get this race over right now and see who is the better man with the better horse!" So that's about the time the arguments got underway and they started off with the horses. Right then they hadn't been many feet, it seems, before this horse rared and stopped and hit the pine just a few feet from the road, and it killed Elliot.

I remember hearing that he was a red-headed person, and I remember having seen the hairs on that tree before it fell [rotted], some of the red hairs. The tree has been down for years. One side of the tree rotted and fell off. The other half stayed there for years and years and years. When I left here, I was gone for 25 years. During that time it went down to just a stump. I don't remember the top of the tree, but

I know the tall stump was still standing in my recollection. But it later went down to nothing, and finally it all rotted away.

Life: But you remember seeing the red hairs in the tree?

Mrs. Padgett: Yes, I definitely do remember!

Life: About when was that?

Mrs. Padgett: It would probably be around 19 and, um, '11 or '12 or something like that, or maybe a little earlier because I was born in 1904 and it was when I was a child that I visited my grandmother; she died in 1915.

Life: It was at your grandfather's house that he stopped?

Mrs. Padgett: Yes, Caleb Anderson Cutler. They tore that house down.

Life: There is much speculation about the date of this event. Some say it happened on October 13, 1813. At any rate, the number 13 figures prominently.

Mrs. Padgett: I think in Judge Whedbee's story he said [that it happened] about 1850. This is unbelievable: my grandfather was born in 1813!

Life: What about the other man? What was his name? Does anybody know?

Mrs. Padgett: Judge Whedbee says his name was Buckingame. Judge Whedbee says in his story that the stranger's face

seemed to disappear and the tracks from his horse also stopped right in front of the pine, right in the road. When they started searching for his tracks, where the stranger went, they were never found, and the person did not show up for the race on Bath Commons the next day. They just don't know whatever became of the stranger.

Life: Now please tell us about the hoof prints.

Mrs. Padgett: I don't know if they are still there today, but they were at least twenty years ago, the last time I visited.

Life: Isn't there something about them that things are supposed to disappear in them?

Mrs. Padgett: Absolutely! I've done it many, many times.

Life: Mrs. Ila Cutler stated that the story is filled with thirteens: "October 13, Sunday morning, October 13, 1813, and it's 13 tracks."

Mrs. Padgett: I was thinking it was four tracks.

Life: Mrs. Cutler: "No, it was 13 of them."

Life: I've heard that things will disappear in the prints.

Mrs. Padgett: We'd even put stakes down there. The next day we'd go down there and they were gone. It was in the pine



Mrs. Padgett affirms that a stake placed in one of the prints will disappear overnight.

thicket, and the pine straw would fall around just as if it were a bird's nest. At the bottom of the track the center of the thing would be just the sandy bottom. At first you almost could see the hoof prints. But then one person had his hog pen there. They said the hogs would not eat corn over those tracks, but they'd eat all around it, and the birds the same way. You could scatter

bird seed around there, and they would not eat it out of those tracks.

Life: How deep were the tracks?

Mrs. Padgett: Well, they were deeper when I first saw them than they were the last time I saw them, and that was, I reckon, 50 years apart. Fifty years ago, maybe some of them were six to eight inches deep.

Life: Later when we visited the site to take pictures, we found the prints to be two-to-three inches deep and not distinct.

Mrs. Padgett: For a long time grass would not grow in them, and they said the grass would try to leap over and go toward the edges.

Life: What do most people think is the reason for the hoof prints? Is it because of the way Elliot died?

Mrs. Padgett: That's right. These prints were made in the process of the horse dying. Kicking when he was dying is the way I understand it.

Life: Mrs. Padgett read to us a poem "The Devil's Hoof Prints," written by Washington resident Taylor Koonce. It is a stirring, artistic account of the story:

THE DEVIL'S HOOF PRINTS*

By

Taylor Koonce

Back in the time of wind and sail
a coarse man rode a narrow trail
it was a wooded sandy path
a few miles west of quiet Bath

He'd shun'd the church on that Sunday
he shun'd the church and rode his way
and curs'd his mount to keep its pace
for he was late to a devil's race

The day was clear as was the sky
but then his mount began to shy
he curs'd and twist'd once again

His mount rear'd as the thunder broke
and threw that rider 'gainst an oak
then circl'd twice around that tree
and left those marks for all to see

The devil laugh'd and touch'd this place
and nothing grows now in this space
except some hair upon a limb
and horse's tracks the years can't dim.

*Reprinted with author's permission

Life: Getting back to the hairs that you saw embedded in the tree, were they horse hairs or human hairs?

Mrs. Padgett: They were Elliot's; he had red hair.

Life: Did you ever pull any of it out?

Mrs. Padgett: No, I didn't pull any out, but I certainly saw them. I was a little thing, but I certainly remember hearing them talk about it and saw it. I am sure that I saw red hair in the bark.

Life: Were you afraid to pull any of them out?

Mrs. Padgett: I reckon I was!

Life: When you were growing up as a young girl, did this place have the reputation of being haunted?

Mrs. Padgett: Yes!

Life: After giving us her fascinating recollections of "The Devil's Hoof Prints," Mrs. Padgett reflected on some of her memories of her days as a young girl. Of special interest was her recollection of boat rides to and from Ocracoke Island.

Mrs. Padgett: The captain of the ship went twice a week, I think, went down on Saturday and came back on Wednesday. It picked up the mail and all the groceries for the little grocery stores in Ocracoke and Hatteras. One year I know it snowed and iced over and the Hatteras folks were very late getting back to school.

We would get on that sailboat just about dusk, and sail into Ocracoke at dawn the next morning. And if you just did it one time, you would croak because everybody in Ocracoke was out there to meet you--and barefooted! We went to the square dances barefoot at the old

hotel down there.

Life: How long would the voyage take?

Mrs. Padgett: Take from dusk to dawn.

Life: Would you stay up all night?

Mrs. Padgett: Well, we did most of the time, but you could take your pillow and your blanket, if you wanted to, and sleep on deck. And so that's what a bunch of us did one night. And it started raining and we tried to make it to the hole but we couldn't get in it. I remember that time very well!

Life: About how long was the boat? Was it pretty good size?

Mrs. Padgett: Gee, I know it had to be pretty good size. It looked big to me. Oh, he would take, I reckon, 20 people. He'd take passengers and freight and things for the stores and the mail. That particular boat, I know I came back on it one Wednesday, and that's the only time I ever got blistered--sun-blistered. When I got back the next day, I had little blisters all over me. I was trying to stay in the shade of the sail and didn't quite do it.

CONCLUSION

After we talked with Mrs. Padgett, she served us coffee and cake. We were left with the impression that there must be something to the story, for Mrs. Padgett is a stable, sophisticated lady, not the type to be taken in by supersti-

tious nonsense.

These feelings were intensified when we visited the site of the story some weeks later to take pictures. Something is there. Whether they are "The Devil's Hoof Prints" or something else is up to each one of us to decide for himself. But you can't help but get an eerie feeling when you see them.