

BRASSELL BROTHERS HANGED 99 YEARS AGO

History in Cemeteries, Part 1

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By Paul Oldham: Herald Citizen Staff Writer

I was a cold clear day March 27, 1878, as people came into Cookeville from all directions on horse back, on wagons, in buggies and on foot. Some came the night before and stayed the night with friends and relatives.

The crowd was swelling by 9 a.m. until the streets and stores were crowded with noisy people who were whispering and visiting about the thing which had brought them out of the hills, valleys and hollows and off the mountain – the hanging of the Brassell brothers.

Sheriff Campbell Bohannon had deputized 75 to 100 men who carried rifles and shotguns and pistols on their hips to protect the Brassells from the crowd and to keep their family and friends from seeing them.

Joe and Teke Brassell, twin brothers now 24 years old, are in the old log jail within a few hours of eternity.

Joe paces the floor and looks out the window past the armed deputy at the crowded town. Teke sit staring at the door, wringing his hands.

The sheriff and his chief deputies go over their plans for the trip to the hanging ground and the security measures they will use as they sit in the office of the jail, all the while keeping check on the crowd and its mood.

The scaffold has been built down near Billy Goat Hill on the present South Walnut Avenue of Cookeville. The ropes and trap doors are set and have been checked. Deputies sit around the scaffold with guns.

The Brassells had been convicted by a jury after a spectacular trial of the murder of Russell Allison.

Allison, a tax collector who lived in the Gentry community, had been found shot to death in his bed and the money he had collected gone. He was killed on the night of November 29, 1875 – 99 years ago this week.

The prosecution had contended at their murder trial that the two brothers had blacked their faces and disguised themselves as Negroes.

It was the common belief that a third party stood lookout for the ones who entered the house and that the third party had actually planned the robbery though no third person was ever charged.

The theory was that the burglars entered the Allison home and somehow knew that he hid his tax money in a grandfather clock.

The theory continued that while they took the money from the clock in the same room where Allison was sleeping, he raised up in the bed and recognizing the burglars, called their names and they shot him.

The brothers were also accused of shooting a deputy sheriff who was part of a group who arrested them at the site of a moonshine still not far from the present town of Baxter.

Feelings had been at a fever pitch against the Brassells for a time, especially during the trial. There was talk of lynching them, but Sheriff Bohannon had been able to keep the situation under control.

It is now past 11 a.m. Four mules are hitched to a wagon and pulled up to a church where coffins have been built for the Brassells. The coffins are loaded on the wagon, and the wagon proceeds on to the jail.

The crowd is huge, with most of them moving toward the hanging ground but some are around the jail hoping for a glimpse of the two convicted men.

Some of the people have brought food with them and have spread and eaten. Others have eaten in private homes and some in stores, cafes and saloons.

A lot of drinking is evidenced in the crowd. There is a sprinkling of Brassell sympathizers. Some feel they should not take the rap for the third person. Some believed them innocent.

The day is cold and still. The sun is shining brightly as Sheriff Bohannon and half a dozen deputies tell Joe and Teke to get ready – “It’s time to go.”

Teke weeps and begs, “Please don’t take me. I’m afraid to go.” The deputies pull him loose from his grip on the cell bars. They put his coat and hat on him.

Joe is sullen and uncooperative. He reluctantly puts his coat and hat on.

Both men are handcuffed with their hands behind them and escorted to the wagon where they are helped up and seated on the coffins. Armed deputies sit with them and others ride behind the wagon on horse back.

The sheriff and two deputies ride in front of the wagon with other armed men spaced along the route to the scaffold.

Little boys stare and chase behind the procession as the crowd moves toward Billy Goat Hill. Women and girls hold their breath as the wagon passes with the Brassells sitting staring without seeing.

Joe and Teke's mother and father are at the house. So is the brother and sisters. Teke's girlfriend and her brother are already at the hanging ground. They have visited him at the jail earlier.

Teke had kissed his sweetheart's goodbye as her brothers, at the prodding of the sheriff, pulled her away. "I'll always love you!" she had whispered through tears streaming down her cheeks.

Joe's son, James, is now seven. Joe's wife has died of measles at 22. Little James is with his grandparents.

Two graves have been dug not far from the Brassell farm home on the same ground where Upperman High School now stands.

A Rev. McFerrin has visited with the Brassell brothers, read to them from the Bible and said a final prayer for them. He will be at the cemetery for the burial.

The crowd has swelled to where it is estimated at between 15 and 20,000 persons by hanging time.

There are twin ropes and nooses hanging from the top of the scaffold as the Brassells are escorted off the wagon and up the steps to the scaffold.

Every eye is fastened on the scaffold which is completely surrounded by armed deputies.

With the Brassells in place, a deputy fixes the noose around Joe's neck and adjusts it and then the same for Teke.

Sheriff Bohannon asks Teke if he has any last words. He responds, "No," and shakes his bowed head.

"Joe, do you have any last words?" Bohannon asks.

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With that, deputies drop the hoods over their heads covering faces of the brothers.

Their weight tightens the rope and they struggle and move back and forth in the air, hanging as the judge had decreed "by the neck until dead."

In a matter of seconds the ropes stop moving and the bodies hang still and limp – Joe and Teke are dead!

The crowd begins to mill around and break up.

An uncle of the dead boys and a neighbor have a wagon to take their bodies home.

The bodies are lowered. The ropes are removed from their necks and Joe is stretched out in his casket. Then Teke in his.

Their shoes are placed in the casket with them.

And so begins the last long ride home for Teke and Joe.

The sister comes to tell the parents. "Here they come with Teke and Joe."

The mother, weeping uncontrollably, leans into the open coffins to kiss her boys for the last time and to wipe their faces clean with a soft wet cloth.

The strong hand of their father reaches in to grip the cold swollen hands of, first Joe and then Teke as he too weeps unashamedly.

The caskets are lowered into the ground as the Rev. McFerrin reads from the Bible committing the bodies to the earth.

The pine boxes are covered with dirt and the graves are marked. After a long time the father and mother return to the house.

Back in Cookeville that afternoon legend has it that an enterprising hardware salesman sold about two dozen hatchets, claiming that each of them was the one Bohannon had used to cut the rope.

Another legend is that on April 22, 1878 – less than a month later – a severe storm struck Cookeville, badly damaging the same section of the church where the caskets had been built for the Brassell brothers. This led superstitious persons to believe this indicated that innocent men had been killed.

A ballad which became rather popular in the area was later written and widely sung about the Brassell brothers.

Today, their graves, along with the grave of Joe's little James who died in 1880 of pneumonia, their parents and two or three other graves are located at the rear of the Upperman High School, the school having been built on the old Brassell farm and homeplace.

Grave markers are broken and in some cases parts of stones completely gone.

Some feel the graves should be moved to a permanent cemetery with perpetual care since they are now unprotected while others feel that a permanent fence or wall should be built around the little burial ground.

But Joe and Teke sleep on, along with all of those who really know what happened that November night at Gentry.

This is yet another version written in story form of the Brassell brothers and the hanging for murder on 28 March 1878. Some of the details differ from other recollections of the Brassell brothers and the trial.

**See The Brassell Hangings By Donald E. Spurlock
History/Putnam County: <http://www.ajlambert.com>*