

Stormy nights at Old Union

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A curious smile crept across the face of 75-year-old Greenbrier native Ernest Geesling as he recalled stories he'd heard through the years about the area's historic Old Union Meeting House. He leaned back in his chair and took a long, deep breath as eerie images from boyhood when he would walk late at night past the old one-room log church in Overton County and its adjoining cemetery filled his mind...

It was a Saturday night in the late 1930s, and an uneasy Geesling, who was around the age of 14, had just finished watching the late movie in Livingston, something he said he did as often as he could.

"There wasn't anything else to do, and boys, if they had the 15 cents, would go to town and see a movie," he said.

The reason for Geesling's uneasiness was the trip home.

Getting all the way to Livingston earlier that evening hadn't been a problem -- many times he and his friends could hitch rides to town.

But since the area lacked an abundance of vehicles, Geesling said the boys didn't have much luck hitching a ride back home late at night.

So they had to walk.

Most of the time, Geesling had company during the long journey. Other times, he walked alone -- with frightful thoughts circulating through his mind about the unavoidable area he'd have to pass on the way home.

Dread consumed young Geesling as he drew closer and closer to the dark, dreary structure up ahead built a century before. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and the wind began to pick up speed.

"It was really scary coming through there," Geesling said. "I wanted to get away as quickly as I could!"

So he did.

Having grown up just a short distance away from the Old Union Meeting House, Geesling had heard many spooky tales concerning the church and cemetery, many of which he now believes were just made up to scare him and the other local children -- and it worked.

He said they didn't have the knowledge that some of the young people today have about what's real and what's not.

"If someone told us a ghost story, we believed it," he said.

The tales typically involved unfortunate folks who traveled in solitude by foot or wagon late at night along the lonely road past the old tombstones, many times while a fierce storm was raging. They reportedly witnessed strange occurrences that caused them much fright.

One story Geesling heard involved a man named Cordell who, of course, was walking by Old Union late one stormy night. Needing shelter from the rain, he went in the old church house and sat in the back pew.

It was so dark, Geesling said, that Cordell couldn't see his hand in front of his face -- except when lighting streaked across the raging sky and lit the room through the windows.

But during one of those instances, Cordell saw something besides his hand. His gaze instead fell upon an 8-foot-tall figure in the front pew, appearing to have also sought shelter from the rain.

Geesling heard that Cordell believed it to have been a man, but he didn't stay long enough to find out for sure. In an instant he was out the door with an Old Union story of his own to share.

Geesling said most people believed this story to have been made up, but it and others similar to it still made the rounds in the vicinity, leaving most locals fearful to walk past the cemetery at night alone -- especially during a storm.

"And I was one of them," Geesling said.

Geesling told a story of how one local, called Donald, got over that fear.

"He was up in Livingston and stayed for the late movie one Saturday night, and he thought some of the other boys would be up there, but they weren't," he said. "So he was by himself as far as around here (the Old Union area)."

But he came prepared.

"Of course, Donald liked to drink moonshine, and he decided that he needed a little moonshine to build his courage up," Geesling said. "He said it started raining, and he was walking and drinking his whiskey and studying about going through the cemetery. And he must have got to daring himself to go in there (in the church) and stay all night.

"Anyhow, the next morning when he woke up, he was lying on the floor, and the sun was shining through the window. He wondered where he was at, and he looked around, and he was in the church house. He said after that he never did worry about going through there. It didn't bother him a bit."

Geesling remembers his father telling him about a strange happening at Old Union that occurred in the late 1920s or early 1930s:

"Him and Walter were coming from Livingston, riding mules -- he said it was raining that night -- and when they got there in front of the church, there was something white coming out the door," Geesling said.

Actually, several white things came out the door and quickly headed toward Camp Ground Road, which is a short distance away.

Feeling courageous, one of the men said, "Let's see what that is."

So they took off on their mules and caught up to "it" about where the road begins to curve.

To their relief, they discovered seven sheep. Apparently, a loud crash of thunder had frightened them away from the shelter of the church.

"And he said, 'If we hadn't checked that out, we'd have always thought that was a ghost story!'" Geesling said.

Geesling said he never experienced anything unusual at Old Union but friends of his claimed they did.

"There used to be a boy down here, Earl," Geesling said. "He would come through there - - it was after he had got an automobile. He said that if he came through by himself at night, the driver's door would come open, and he couldn't hold it shut when he'd come through that cemetery!"

"Earl and me -- we were good friends -- and he said, 'You don't believe me, do you?' and I said, 'Well, I don't know, Earl,' and he said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll come down and pick you up, and we'll go over there at night.'"

Geesling said he was scared to get into the car, of course, but he did anyway. To his relief, "We went over there, and nothing happened," he said.

They turned around and made several trips back through the area but to no avail -- the door just wouldn't open by itself.

"But after that, he told me that he went back, and it came open again -- but if he had anybody with him, it wouldn't come open!" he said.

Another local, F.T. Lee, 75, has also heard stories about the Old Union Meeting House.

"There have been a lot of stories told about Old Union," Lee said. "Of course, I don't know if they actually happened or not, but they scared people pretty bad."

Lee grew up in Hilham and attended Sunday school at Old Union as a child. The church went unused for a number of years afterward, but around 20 years ago, Lee and a few others started meeting there again.

These days, the church holds services for 15 to 20 regulars. It has no preacher but does have Sunday school, which is many times led by Lee.

He said he doesn't believe in ghosts -- thinks there's an explanation for all the strange occurrences.

He remembers a puddle of water that collected in the middle of the road by Old Union.

"There'd be a big round white ball that would come up off that mist, but I believe it was the headlights of the car striking that water and causing it to float up," he said.

Not a ghost.

He also told of a man who was traveling past Old Union on a wagon pulled by a team of mules late one night when the mules abruptly stopped and would go no further.

The man finally got the mules to move on, but as they did, the wagon tongue began to rise ... and a loud bellowing noise could be heard.

"He said it really scared him," Lee said. "His hair stood straight up."

To the man's relief, though, he found that a cow had been lying in the middle of the road. The mules had stepped over the sleeping animal and awakened it. The confused cow then tried to stand up, lifting the wagon tongue as it did.

But one man Lee knew wasn't lucky enough find an explanation to his Old Union encounter.

The man, called Luther, was driving his car through the area one night when "something" decided to join him for the ride.

"I guess he was looking for a ghost when he came through there," Lee said.

Apparently, as Luther passed by the graveyard, "A big round white thing come up to his window and settled in the back seat, and he said it looked like it was reaching up for him," Lee said.

When Luther got home, he got out of his car and fainted.

"He couldn't talk for a long time," Lee said. "But they finally got him to tell what had happened."

Some other Old Union ghost stories are included in a publication compiled by members of the church in the early 1990s.

One is about a girl who was particularly afraid of cemeteries. She was dared by her friends to go at night to the Old Union cemetery and put a butcher knife into a grave to prove that she had been there.

The next day, her friends went there to see if she had followed through with the dare -- and they found her lying dead beside the grave with the knife stuck through her dress tail, holding it to the ground. Apparently, she had died of a heart attack, thinking that something from the grave was holding on to her.

Another story was about two men who were walking home one day when it started to rain. They made their way to the church to wait for the rain to stop, but when they got inside, they were startled by the sudden fall of a large, free-standing blackboard.

They tried to think of a rational explanation for the strange occurrence, like maybe the wind had blown it over -- even though no breeze was passing through the old church. By the time they had convinced themselves of the wind theory, the blackboard slowly started to rise until it was standing upright again.

Deciding not to wait until the rain stopped, they quickly retreated from Old Union and headed for the comfort of home.

The Old Union Meeting House, one of the oldest churches in Overton County, was built in the 1830s, according to the recipe and history publication.

"The church was reportedly shared for services on alternate Sundays by three denominations: Methodist, Baptist and Cumberland Presbyterian," the publication said. "Thus, the name 'Union' was given to the church."

When other churches were built in the area, the Union 'divided,' with the Methodists going to Mt. Gilead, the Cumberland Presbyterians going to Camp Ground and the Baptists staying at Union.

Since the union had divided, the church became known as the *Old Union Meeting House*.

It is now a nondenominational Protestant church -- and its members have had no trouble with Old Union's spooks in recent years.

Apparently they've all moved on to haunt other cemeteries.

Published May 22, 2000 9:34 AM CDT: Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

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