THE MURDER OF ELLEN AND JARVIS BUCK: WAYNE COUNTY, KENTUCKY'S BEST KNOWN CRIME

On October 26, 1886, one of Kentucky's most brutal murders occurred in an isolated cabin on Bat Cliff Mountain, south of Mount Pisgah in Wayne County. The victims were a local farmer and livestock dealer, Jarvis Buck, 42, and his sister, Mary Ellen (called "Ellen"), 38, the North Carolina born children of Micah and Maranda Buck who had moved to Wayne County from nearby Fentress County, Tennessee before 1860. Their killer was Granville (called "Gran") Pruitt, a ne'er-do-well friend of the Bucks, who sometimes helped around their farm, or was at least an occasional visitor to their home where they lived together with Ellen's eight year old son, Lowden (or Louden).

According to most accounts, Pruitt, learning of Jarvis's success in a recent stock sale, decided he would have the money from that sale and, for some reason, believing it was his due, came to the Buck home one night to demand that the money be given to him. He apparently did not know that Jarvis had used most of the proceeds from the sale to repay a loan from old man Burnett, a neighbor, and had only five dollars left.

Accounts of the actual killings seem to vary to a certain extent. According to the most accepted local tradition, Pruitt asked Jarvis to take a walk with him before bedtime. They walked to a nearby spring where
Pruitt said he had hidden a jug of whiskey. When Jarvis bent over to secure the jug in a patch of briars, Pruitt took his knife and killed him. Finding no money on his victim, Pruitt then returned to the cabin. Ellen asked why Jarvis had not returned with him and was told that he was tending to his stock and would be in shortly. When, after a considerable time, he still had not returned, Ellen became suspicious and demanded to know where he was. Pruitt pulled his knife, telling her that he had killed her brother but could not find any money on him. He assumed that she knew where it was and demanded that she give it to him quickly or he would kill her too. When Ellen couldn't produce the money, Pruitt began to choke her. A fairly large woman, she resisted his efforts only to be subdued by a fatal blow to the head by a washboard.

A witness to Ellen's assault was her son, Lowden, who sought to escape her fate by running out of the door, Pruitt in close pursuit. Almost in reach of the boy, Pruitt was attacked by the Buck's large dog giving the boy a chance to avoid capture by hiding in some tall brush. After Pruitt gave up the search and fled to secure a hiding place for himself, the boy ran a mile to the nearest neighbor for help. Those who returned with him found Ellen's body and, later, Jarvis's, and the cabin in shambles. A posse was sent to apprehend Pruitt and
brought him to Monticello for trial where Lowden, as state's witness, identified him as Ellen's killer.

Vivid accounts of Pruitt's hanging, the last legal execution in Wayne County, have been preserved in print. The Monticello Signal of January 13, 1887 reported a

"record crowd of at least 400 people from all over but only 60 were permitted to enter the enclosure of the gallows. The tickets sold for...&5.00 each. The gallows were erected in the rear of the court house yard, around which was an enclosure, rising two feet above the platform...The beam to which the rope was fastened was 16 feet high and the scaffold 7 feet high and 8 feet square. The fall was 4 feet and the rope...was 7/8 of an inch.... Every tree, house top, and fence was covered and so thickly with people...." (Johnson, P. 181)

Asked what he wanted for his last meal, Pruitt is said to have answered "hogs jowel and turnips". (sic) The late Dan Eller who, as a 16 year old, had witnessed the hanging, described Pruitt as "a tall, well built, handsome" man who, upon the scaffold, spoke to the crowd, attributing his crime to whiskey. He advised people "to leave it alone (for) they could see what it had done for him." (sic) For some reason little Lowden was also on the scaffold but he rejected Pruitt's request for forgiveness and refused to shake his hand.

The Bucks were buried in a little cemetery on Joe Hurt's farm, just west of new KY 167 and 300 feet north of Hurt's Mill.

Lowden Buck later moved to Dabville, Kentucky and, for years, was a conductor on the CNO & TP (Southern) Railway run between Danville and Oak Ridge, Tennessee.
The above is the gist of the case. That Granville Pruitt was accused, tried, convicted, and executed for the murder of the Bucks has never been in doubt. But his motives and the actual manner of the killings have never been revealed by eyewitness testimony. Thus, like many similar events which the passage of time has dimmed in man's memory, this has become legend.

Variations in most of the particulars, even the identity of the principals, reflect distortions in the years of telling. In some accounts, for instance, it is Dave Pruitt, not his brother, Granville, who is the perpetrator of the crime, and the family name is sometimes spelled Frewitt. Jarvis (sometimes spelled Garvis, Jarvice, Jarris, or even Gilos, in written accounts) is often identified as the son of Mary or Mary Ellen, and Lowden or Levi is his younger brother; or else Mary or Mary Ellen and Jarvis are married and Lowden is their son. Mary, Mary Ellen, or simply Ellen is either a widow who came to keep house for her brother or had borne her son out of wedlock and was never married. Even the year varies with the telling. Though the date of the killings, as given above, has been historically verified, tradition has placed it earlier or even later. In one account it is 1866 and the hanging occurs that fall; in others, it is a more recent event, even as late as 1900.
Since there were no eyewitnesses to the actual murders, one can only assume what must have happened; in broad outline we are sure it occurred as reported above. But the details vary with each rendition. In some accounts, both Jarvis and Ellen are killed inside their cabin. "As Buck was on his knees building a fire in a fireplace, Pruitt struck him from behind. He clubbed him to death for the $30." (Eller). Ellen may have been dispatched by a washboard, as mentioned above, or by a chair, by choking, or by stab wounds to the throat. The details of Pruitt's apprehension also vary. In some accounts he meekly surrenders to the posse; in others he offers resistance and has to be subdued.

"My stepfather, Isaac Burnett, was with the posse of men that arrested Gran Pruitt. The posse found him hidden behind a log, and as my stepfather was an old Civil War soldier and he was carrying the old Cal. 56 Civil War rifle and when they found Gran Pruitt he was slow raising his hands and when Pruitt heard the two clicks of the hammer he raised his hands high." (sic) (Burnett)

In the absence of eyewitnesses, relaters of any event can, and often do, take many liberties. Who is to prove them wrong? And if their reason for recounting the event is only to tell a story, it does not really matter much what actually happened as that the story interest, fascinate, or frighten (in short, entertain) the readers or listeners. Such is the present appeal of the Buck
murders. Nearly every resident of Wayne County has heard of this event. Many oldtimers like to tell about it; most enjoy listening to accounts or reading about it. It is probably the county's most popular crime and the most frequently told tales relate of it. The Bucks, whatever might have been known or thought about them in their own day, have become over the years, the most appealing figures in the county's history. Though probably not directly related to any living Wayne Countians, Jarvis and Ellen, in a sense, have been adopted by them in a show of sympathy to the victims of so foul and brutal a murder.

References
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