

NIGHT OF TERROR

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From 1907 through 1909, the Tobacco Farmer's Association put the squeeze on tobacco growers and small farmers to deal only by their say-so, and sell only at their price. This was the "pressure group," and the Night Riders (KKK) were the "Enforcers." This caused great anxiety and suffering.

Night Riders and lawlessness had a terrific impact on local living conditions, which disrupted and ruined many lives. Independent growers and farmers who preferred selling their dark-fired tobacco outside the limitations of the Association, bargaining for their own price, were subject to intimidation, harrassment, continual pressure and fear.

Warnings were tacked to barn-doors, outbuildings, porch posts, gateposts. If these directives were not heeded and followed, dire things could happen to the farmer, and even members of his family. Fear was the leverage to compliance.

"We will *get* you!" had a sinister note, for these threats were real. Night Riders would see to the punishment. Scare tactics were effective. Homes as well as barns were torched. And, there was no doubt as to bodily harm coming to the victims for "retribution!" Hard whippings, severe beatings, "cuttings" were meted out, as by regal fiat. The victim was spied on, pressured, hounded, pushed against his will, to conform or else! He must henceforth sell his crops *only* through the Association. He must state publicly his "mistakes" and vow allegiance to the Association in all future sales of his tobacco.

Actual events occuring during the Tobacco War were a shameful usurpation of power. There are personal experiences handed down; many stories told of the "victimizing" of innocent people. The Night Riders, it was said, enjoyed the rough treatment, the harsh punishment they delivered, particularly if it was someone they had a personal grudge against. This was "Justice!" Little, or no mercy. It was *war*, for sure!

We had a taste of "scare tactics", one awful night that I will tell you about. It is remembered vividly to this day, though I was only four or five years old when it happened.

My grandfather, James Bryant Hicks, was a highly respected citizen of Calloway County. He farmed nearly 70 acres, about half tobacco. He was not a "big" grower. There were tenants on the place to help work the land, for besides farming he was an architect-builder and brick mason. His fine work is in many public buildings of Murray and environs.

He helped rebuild the William Mason Hospital after it burned in 1910. Also he worked twice on the Court House in Murray, after it was gutted by

fire in 1906, then again in 1910-11. When finished the second time, he served on the First Jury Panel, in 1913.

He worked not only on public buildings, but homes as well. His brick-work was remarkable. He had quite a reputation for erecting chimneys with flues that "drew" properly, that did not take the heat up the chimney and let the smoke into the room. In our house there were fine big fireplaces, logs that gave out warmth and a sense of contentment. He was a true artisan, in that he took pride in what he did, be it a job large or small. He gave it his best. He was a man of honor and integrity, and had earned the high regard of all who knew or worked with him. He was the eldest son of Howell Jonas Hicks and Mary Ann Outland. Having learned the building trade from his father, he knew how to draw plans "true;" how to do every step from the foundation on up.

Since he did not grow a large amount of tobacco to dispose of, he did not feel that anyone had the right to tell him where to sell, or for how much. He did not want to join anything, or give anyone jurisdiction over his personal right freedom of choice.

There is a brief prologue before we get into the story of The Night of Terror. And it goes like this:

It was fall of the year 1908. My aunt Lottie was away somewhere. It could have been a time she was teaching. Anyway, supper dishes done, my mother and I came into the living room to sit by the fire; she in her rocker and me in my little chair grandfather had made for me. The logs were blazing, making many-colored lights. Home was a place of love and peace. My grandparents sat at a small table with the kerosene lamp. He was doing some figuring, and making notes. My grandmother was busy with her mending. It was a cold frosty night with a big full moon.

Suddenly, grandpa raised his head; he was first to hear the sound, like a muffled roar of distant thunder. This could mean only one thing: men on horseback, riding fast over the Big Road. They were coming nearer. The galloping horses turned off the road onto our small lane. Whooping and yelling blended in with the other noise as they approached the house.

"Quick, Lou! Douse the light!" By now he was standing at the South window by the stairway. With one finger he held back the window shade a crack, as he looked out. The horses were going so fast as they passed by they seemed to shake the earth, the house, and us with it. Like a tornado, they rode on, on, on, making for the Murray-Hazel Road, which they would get to through our back woods. I was so scared I climbed on my mother's lap. She held me close. Some unknown fear seemed to pervade the room; something "not right."

"Oh, Jim, what is it?" Without turning his head, he motioned to be silent. He was still looking out. "Jim, are they hunters going through?"

He turned back and sat down. "No. No hunters. These fellers are not after possums or foxes, but bigger game." Nothing was said for a few minutes. The silence was almost as deafening as the noise had been.

"Jim, did you count them? About how many?"

Grandpa reached for the poker, and stirred up the fire. He jabbed hard at the logs as though angry.

"Can't be sure as to count, but maybe ten or fifteen. Couldn't pick out the men, but could identify three or four horses. Since the men had pillow slips over their heads, they were riding on some devilish punishment; all liquored-up on a rampage, scaring everyone along the way. These are strange times, Lou, very strange!"

Sometime later, grandfather had business in Coville, Kentucky, in regard to a building contract. That meant he would be away from home overnight, which was a rare thing. Before leaving he told my grandmother to be sure and "lock up good," before we went to bed. See that all doors and windows were securely fastened.

It started to rain soon after he left. Beginning gently, by nightfall it was turning into a storm, pelting the earth and beating heavily on the roof. Along with the heavy rain, the wind was high. Lots of thunder and lightning came with it.

This was probably mid-February of 1909. Grandpa had brought in plenty of wood, and had seen that fires in all the hearths were burning well, before he rode off on Old Morgan. Lottie was home, I recall.

After dark all the windows and doors were checked, to make certain they were secure, latched and belted, with all shades drawn. To me, a child this seemed odd for we lived in an area where people seldom locked their doors. It seemed unlikely that anyone would venture out on such a night as this. Rain increased in intensity.

Lottie got an old iron and small hammer, to crack a lot of hickory nuts and filberts. We would eat some, but most would be for some fudge she had promised me. How pleasant it was here beside the fireplace, with the howling wind and rain outside.

As it neared bedtime, grandmother wound the clock on the mantel. About then, we heard a "different" sound; not rain, but creepy footfalls on the front porch! Soles and heels, walking across wet wood. All four of us seemed to freeze, like statues, but straining to hear what was *more* than sounds of a storm.

Just then, the door-knob turned! Slowly at first, then vigorously rattled. You could see it move! Earlier when checking, grandmother had placed a straight-back chair under the knob as an extra brace.

Lottie grabbed the poker, dashed to the door and yelled, "Go away! Go away from there!" If the door were burst open, she was in a fine position to crack someone's skull, as he came through the door.

We heard someone leaving the porch, go slowly around the house trying windows and doors. Nothing was hurried; all seemed deliberate. Now a return to the front porch. The door knob rattled more insistently this time. Suspense mounted! I was badly scared and started to cry.

Lottie began beating on the door with the poker, screaming: "You get away from there!"

"Lottie! Stop that, this minute. You are denting the door and besides, you wouldn't scare a flea. Be quiet, all of you. Alney, you stop your crying. I'll be right back."

She had gone to the pantry to get my grandfather's pearl handled pistol. Giving Lottie a slight shove with her left hand, to get her out of the way, she took a firm stand a couple of feet back from the door. Though her voice was "thin," at times it has great carrying power. This was one of the times. She spoke with authority, projecting her words clearly:

"You, out there! Hear me, and hear me good! I've got a loaded pistol in my hand. If you don't move AWAY, I'm gonna fire right through the door and blast the LIVIN' DAYLIGHTS OUT OF YOU! NOW MOVE!!! (No sound but the rain.) I say, GIT!"

You could almost hear his breathing as he hesitated. Then there were footsteps as he jumped on the walk, where he seemed to pause. Hearing his move, grandmother with her left hand flung away the chair from under the door knob, turned the key, opened the door a slight crack, just enough to stick the pistol through. She did not put her head out to look, but raised the weapon, pointed about where she thought the man might be standing, on his way to the gate.

There was a terrific sound as she fired twice in rapid succession, which seemed to drown out rain and thunder! A frantic running; the bang of the front gate, as it crashed shut after him. Now switching the pistol to her left hand she slammed the door shut, turned the key in the lock, replacing the chair under the knob as before. No lost motion.

To me, she looked ten feet tall, as she stood straight and sure of herself. "I hope I winged him," as she carefully laid the gun on the mantelpiece. Then she took the poker Lottie had been holding and placed it back in the rack. Suddenly she seemed very tired, as she sank into her old rocker, her face pale.

My aunt started a breathless chatter about *who* it could have been and *what* they could have wanted, on "such a night like this!"

"Now Lottie, you be still! I don't feel like hearing any talk. I want to be alone, be quiet a little bit. You children go along to bed, now. I want to sit here by the fire a while. Nothing to be afraid of anymore. Rest easy!"

She leaned her head back, closing her tired eyes; tired, completely drained of energy. I patted her hand, as it lay on the chair arm. We went to bed exhausted, and after a while, we slept.

We awoke to a clear day. Sounds and smells of a good breakfast got us out of bed. Fires were going and usual routines of daily living resumed. Last night's anxiety and terror were over, but would never be forgotten.

Grandmother had sat up all night, waiting, just in case there would be another "try" at scaring us. After breakfast, she, my mother and Lottie went around outside to look for evidence. I stood on the porch, watched and listened to what they said. There were deep impressions in the wet ground around the house, and beside the brick wall. On the porches were muddy imprints of big shoes, where a man, or men, had walked or stood. These marks were still visible when my grandfather returned, late in the day. He was much upset by what had happened during his absence.

Someone deliberately came to scare us, frighten and harrass us, thereby "getting at" grandfather. He reasoned that whoever it was had tethered a horse or horses down by the mailbox on the Big Road, then walked up the lane to the house. In his opinion there was more than one person. All this was discussed at the supper table, and he felt sure it had something to do with his saying "No" to the Association's jurisdiction. It was some of the Night Riders who had come out here to give him a "message," by frightening us; a signal to him, to keep his mouth shut, or worse would happen.

My grandfather was a quiet, soft-spoken man, like his father. But he was really angry about what had happened. Though he was alert to any news, he heard nothing of anyone being shot, or having had an "accident." He searched the area around the house and yard, but no spent bullets were found. None in the porch posts, tree trunks, gateposts. So it was reasonable to assume that probably my grandmother's shots hit a running target - an "Enforcer!" We were never again bothered as we had been on that Night of Terror!