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The Haunted House of Hazel Green

Built on an Indian mound several hundred yards from any other breach in the earth's surface, the home of Mrs. Elizabeth E. Routt, better known in county history as Mrs. High Brown Routt, a mile east of Hazel Green, once held the limelight of local attention, principally because it harbored more scandal than any since and has kept folks awake around the fireside.

Both books and pamphlet, now unobtainable, recorded this choice gossip, and caused passersby, back in those days before the Civil War, to slacken the reins upon their horses and strain their necks for a glance of the mansion's owner.

The home, built in 1847 in the heart of a 500-acre plantation, once was beautiful, surrounded with flowers and well supplied with costly furniture. Even its predecessor, a two-story log cabin immediately to the rear, bore some charm.

But its distinctiveness is gone now. No longer does it indicate that it once sheltered wealth and aristocracy. The disasters of tenantry have befallen it.

History around this home lies almost altogether with Mrs. Routt. She was, before her marriage, Elizabeth E. Dale, daughter of Adam Dale, Volunteer Revolutionary soldier at the age of 14, and member of a company of boys raised in Snow Hill, Maryland in 1781.

Her grandfather was Thomas Dale, who married Mary Hall and commanded two companies of "Minute Men" sent to protect Salisbury, Md., Whig headquarters for that state, from a Tory uprising in 1777. Adam, who died while visiting his daughter in 1851 and was buried there on the plantation, received, with his father, land grants for service and re-

moved to Tennessee in 1797. He later raised, equipped and commanded a company from Smith Co., Tenn., and served under Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812. His wife was Elizabeth Evans.

Mrs. Routt was a beautiful and charming woman, with auburn hair, dark brown eyes and fair complexion. She was well educated, an aristocrat and had in her veins the blue blood of men who had followed in the steps of Lord Baltimore and Cecil Calvert. She loved fine clothes, fine horses, fine furnishings and all conveniences made possible by the considerable wealth of her family. Her appeal to men was unusual.

Before she was wooed by Alexander Jeffries, a widower and early settler from Madison County, she was married twice, first to a Gibbons and then to a Flannigan, both of whom had died rather mysteriously a short while after, leaving no children.

Jeffries had started the plantation at Hazel Green long before he met Mrs. Routt. In 1817, he had bought from Archibald Patterson the northeast quarter of a section for \$1,800., and had followed this the next year with the purchase of the east end of a quarter of an adjoining section from Thomas Murphy for \$700. Both tracts were entered by these former owners in 1812.

Then had come for Jeffries the task of clearing this acreage and of constructing the log house, which was to be a fairly spacious structure of its kind with four rooms. He had chosen the Indian mound for its site so that he could, from this higher point, look out upon the virgin forests and sparsely wooded country around him.

When the fields were cleared, he had planted them in cotton, a crop found by earlier settlers to be well adapted to this section. Slaves had been added as he needed them, advancing both his investments and his fortune.

Not long after the death of his first wife, he had visited Tennessee on business and had met Mrs. Flannigan, as Mrs. Routt was known then. Her fascination had led to a courtship which resulted in their marriage.

Two children were born to this couple, William A. and Mary Elizabeth. The daughter's birth occurred November 8, 1837, and her death August 13, 1844. She was buried on the plantation.

In 1837, Jeffries died, at the age of 65. Whether there was any suspicion concerning the cause of his death is not known, for his will, filed the next year, states that he was in bad health, though of sound mind.

In taking over the plantation, his widow found little trouble. She drove her slaves with an iron hand, terrorizing them with the fury of her commands, and slyly began to look about for another "lord."

Robert A. High of Limestone County, a native of North Carolina, was the next to succumb to her wiles. This man was a representative in the state legislature from 1838 to 1839, and was a zealous advocate of common schools. William Garrett, author of "Public Men in Alabama," writes of him as follows:

"At the time he served in the capitol, he was a dashing widower, seeking his fourth wife. His head was a little bald, which fact he took great pains to conceal. He filled a large space in society at Tuscaloosa and succeeded in marrying before his term of office expired."

But High lived only a few years after his marriage to Mrs. Jeffries on May 15, 1839, dying in April, 1842. The widow's next choice was Absalom Brown, merchant of New Market, whose wife she became on March 16, 1846.

Mrs. Routt had planned for years a fine home to which she might invite her guests, some of whom were members of Madison County's most prominent families. After this betrothal with Brown, she began the present structure, which required a Negro slave carpenter more than a year to complete, even with all his assistants.

The frame house, facing the east, was ell-shaped and had eight large rooms, four above and four below. Two stairways connected the two floors, one in the hallway separating the four chambers in front and the other midway between the front and back.

The front hall was of moderate dimensions, with an opening at each end. The main door was in two panels, bordered with tiny panes of glass. Only a few feet from the north side of the building and at the foot of the mound on which it was erected ran the road from Hazel Green, which intersected a few hundred yards to the front of the house with a lane bordered by a dozen or so slave cottages.

No more care was taken in preparing this mansion than was placed in the layout of its surroundings. A row of tall cedars and pines around the hill circled bed upon bed of all kinds of flowers and shrubs. Bear grass was planted along the main walk in front of the dwelling, while shrubbery of some nature skirted even the brick walks which led toward the stables and icehouse to the rear.

Furnishings were the richest obtainable. In this respect, Mrs. Routt was never satisfied, for she had in mind tall mirrors and costly mantlepieces, items she did not acquire before she lost her fortune.

When completed, this home was not a lonely abode there amid its curtain of trees. Often, its owner took in travelers for the night, while again, she returned from a trip to Columbia, Tenn., with guests for a house party and other festivities. Every convenience was furnished them, even servants' bells in each room.

Brown died in 1847, of some unknown malady which caused his body to swell so that it was necessary that he be buried during the night following his death. Present residents of the county recall that their parents and grandparents often remarked on their part in this ceremony there in the dark, aided only by lantern light, held by shaking darkies.

But this was not the end of the widow's matrimonial adventures. On May 11 of the following year, she was married to Willis Routt, her sixth husband. He, too, passed the way of the others within a short while.

Around this time, Mrs. Routt became engaged in a controversy with Abner Tate which eventually led to her trial in the courts in Huntsville on a charge of murdering her husbands, but she never was convicted.

Tate, a neighbor, had several squabbles with her over loose livestock and other plantation matters. They confessed no liking whatever for each other. Tate was blind to her beauty and openly charged her with murder. Consistent with this accusation was the rumor, substantiated by sight, that the woman had a hat rack in the main hallway of her home upon which she hung each husband's hat after his death.

Mrs. Routt sought to put an end to this enemy of hers. In 1854, Tate was wounded by a shotgun in the hands of one

of his slaves. Rumor had it that his neighbor paid one of her slaves to shoot him, and that this Negro, in turn, had hired one of the victim's men to commit the deed.

That failing, Mrs. Routt next turned to a cleverer scheme. She had been receiving much attention from D. H. Bingham, a school teacher at Meridianville, who desired her hand in marriage, for this woman was beautiful even at 60. So when it was reported that a drover from Kentucky, on his way back from selling his herd in South Alabama, had been murdered at Tate's home and cremated in a large fireplace there, she had this suitor prefer charges against him.

Tate answered these accusations in a book called "Defense of Abner Tate Against Charges of Murder Preferred by D. H. Bingham." He also struck even further at Mrs. Routt, charging that her "bridal chamber was a charnel house," and spoke of her as the woman "around whose marriage couch six grinning skeletons were already hung."

This book led Mrs. Routt to file a \$50,000 damage suit against its author for defaming her character. The following quotations from Tate's book were taken from the circuit court records of 1857, the year after the suit was entered:

"poor soul - she is alone - she ought to have a husband, an industrious, sober husband like D. H. Bingham! She has not been particularly fortunate in that respect heretofore, and in Bingham's opinion was entitled to all the consolation an industrious, sober man can bring to the bed around which nightly assembles a conclave of ghosts to witness the endearments that once were theirs, and shudder through their fleshless forms at the fiendish spirit which wraps the grave worm in the bridal garment and enforces a lingering death with a conjugal kiss. The worst fate I could wish for Bingham would be the success of his undertaking, but I doubt whether the prize will ever be his. He is dealing with a shrewd, bad woman, and she may calculate that she can induce him to goad me beyond endurance on the ... day ... 1856."

Then later in the record comes this quotation:

"I say for money, because I cannot believe even in him any amorous passion mingled with his feverish anxiety to get possession of the hand of Elizabeth

Routt. He knew her past history. He knew that she offered herself as a reward to him only on the condition that he accomplished a murder. If he succeeded, every time her lips touched his, desire must have fled in horror, as if from the cold, clammy taste of a putrid corpse. He would indeed have waded through my blood, and the tears of a heartbroken wife and a host of agonizing relatives, to the possession of her property, but her person he could not touch. The clasp of her arms around his neck would call up dreadful shapes to sit upon his dreary pillow and make his nights as fearful

As if the dead could feel
The icy worm around them steal,
And shudder as the reptiles creep
To revel o'er their rotting sleep."

The evidence presented in the record closed as follows:

"Mr. Bingham has failed but he deserves the possession of the venerable bride; I trust that happiness will not be denied him. The union is one so eminently fit and proper that it would be a pity to prevent its accomplishment. There is no crime, no vice, no detestable meanness that is not familiar to one or both of them, and though the dead should flee away in shuddering horror from the bride, there will be enough of grinning friends to witness the ceremony and congratulate the happy pair on the... day of April, 1856."

This case, however, never was decided, for Mrs. Routt sold the home to Levi Donaldson in 1855 and went with her son, William A. Jeffries, to Marshall County, Mississippi, later dismissing the suit. Whether or not she married Bingham is unknown.

Other quotations, from the chancery court record of 1858, point to the suspicion with which Mrs. Routt was held. She sued Abner Tate and Jacob H. Pierce for \$1400. that she claimed they owed her for her cotton crop of 1840. The following letter, presented in the case, was written to her by Pierce in 1843:

"Madam, in the name of God, do you intend to try to ruin me? When I have protected your interest ever since the death of your late husband, Alexander Jeff-

ries, in thousands of instances? Lest your mind should be treacherous, I will name a few. After the death of Mr. Jeffries, when his children should have been your friends, but instead of that, they were your most inveterate enemies and even went so far as to say you were the cause of his death, which was reported from one end of the county to the other. Who were your friends?..."

And Mrs. Routt replied:

"I received your letter by father late on Friday evening, and company came in just at that time, so I had no time to write until I got home from church this afternoon. I am sorry to find your feelings are hurt with me, for I never intended to say or do anything to hurt you in any respect. Your kindness to me I do esteem in the highest, and ever shall, for I always have believed you to be my friend, and you may rest assured that I will not nor never intend to sue you..."

Then came the following postscript:

"I intended to have sent this last evening, but on account of Mary E. having a chill at church, it detained me so that when I was done writing, it was too late to send it. Then I thought I would get father to hand it to you in Huntsville, but finding you will be at home today, I will send it there. I hope all will be well yet. I am your friend..."

Donaldson, grandfather of Mrs. A. D. Rogers of Huntsville, who was married in the home, bought the plantation for \$12,500. He lived there until his death in 1874, then passed it on to his heirs who kept it until 1902.

Few things about the mansion now mark the wealth which once paid for its upkeep. There is no orderliness, no neatness in its vicinity. The structure has become ramshackle and prone to the whims of its occupants. Doors sag, window panes are missing, and plastering has fallen by the wholesale. On the north side of the house, two brass door knobs appear conspicuously out of place.

Only one forgotten item about the plantation remains in memory of the woman who lived there three-quarters of a century ago - the graveyard. A few yards to the south of the house, beneath an immense holly tree, surrounded by

a low thicket, tombstones lie in a random pile - that of husband, child and ancestor, a harbor for reptiles and field mice.

Note: The High-Brown-Rouff home burned to the ground in the fall of 1968. From the main road, skeletal remains of two chimneys are the only visible evidence that a house once stood on the ancient Indian mound.



The ante bellum smokehouse on the Wade estate is now used as a retreat for the present owner's children. 1969.