

Haunted Roundhouse

The following story is from the Branch County News and Coldwater Sun & Star run on Thursday January 25, 1934 in Coldwater, Michigan. For those who do not know, a roundhouse was a large building with rail road tracks coming out of it in many different directions. Within the building was a large turntable that the steam engine and tender could be driven onto then turned around to be able to exit on any of the tracks in any direction. This was used mainly to turn the engine around so it would be facing the opposite direction for a return run back along the way it had come. Eb, the primary character in this story is my grandfather, Ebenezer LeRoy Butterworth.

George LeRoy Snyder

Haunted Warehouse: Eerie story reveals ancient Myth.

Do any of you old-timers recall the fateful night of Nov. 17, 1904, when Coldwater was given it's first ghost scare? Let me repeat this strange tale, which will give the younger generation, the lovers of detective fiction and weird stories, the opportunity to know what really happened in their own locality.

As I said before, it was November, when winter was just beginning to lay hold of it's victims. The cold nights were brisk and the clacking of footsteps could be heard as one approached in the crust covered snow, which had been sprayed, the previous night, by a slight rain, then frozen to incarcerate mother earth.

The footsteps of the "pest" were heard breaking through the crust, as the tender of the roundhouse and his companion sat before the cover-heated stove, which cast a semblance to an observer, as if painted a light red, from the grates to the stack.

As he entered to join the company of the latter, we observe, a large, muscular man, his large eyes bloodshot and his breath reeking the smell of gin. His uncertain footsteps impressed the boys, that he had been subdued by his old habit.

After his departure, they put their heads together, to devise a plan, whereby, they could cure him of drinking and at the same time rid themselves of this pest. The nightwatch, who in his younger days, had traveled with a vaudeville show, finally struck upon an idea. His companion agreed with this plan and they set about to put it into service.

The next evening the pest came, liquored up as usual. He went to warm himself, in the roundhouse, opening the door, he stood aghast, he blinked his large eyelids, still it was there.

"Lordy Lord" he yelled at the top of his voice, and turning as soon as he was able to make his feet obey the command of his brain, ran in a record breaking stride down the track. It was rumored that someone had seen him running through Quincy at a high rate of speed, but we have no one checking up on this statement.

Before the boys could remove the ghost, a band of workers from the old "B" mill where now stands the Shell Oil company, entered and beheld the skeleton. It was standing before the stove, as if it's cold bones were trying to absorb the heat from the fire. Terrified they retraced their steps to the flag shanty, to inform the nightwatch of the strange apparition.

They found him in the flag shanty with his companion, eating his lunch, laughing and joking as was his usual manner. The leader of the group said, "Eb, there is a ghost in the roundhouse." His voice betrayed his fright. Eb, winked at his companion and replied with an invented story.

"Haven't you ever heard of the murdered fireman?" Delaying time, while his partner left unobserved to dispose of the ghost.

They all answered, "No."

Eb continued with difficulty to keep from laughing. "Well, it happened on this run. The engineer and the fireman were both in love with the same girl. A fight occurred on which the fireman was killed, hit on the head with a wrench, I believe. The engineer, wishing to dispose of the body, dumped it here, as the train slowed down for the station, and his ghost is supposed to be waiting for the engineer to return, but I don't believe a word of what I have just said."

"But we have just seen him." They all answered in a chorus.

"I would like to see this ghost myself." Eb said in a doubtful voice..

"Come with us." They all replied, and led the way back to the roundhouse.

Inside there was nothing, but the atmosphere of the huge building pierced only by the rays of the fire in the stove.

"There is nothing here," Eb said in an irony voice, "go home and sleep it off boys, you will feel better in the morning."

Some of the men scratched their heads, while others just said, "Well I'll be damned."

Nothing more was seen or heard of the ghost until a German flue setter arrived from Elkhart, to make some repairs. The boys wishing to have some fun with the little German, repeated the show.

He returned late one evening to ask if they had by chance found a tool which he had misplaced or lost. Entering the roundhouse, he witnessed a sight he never forgot. Facing him was the skeleton, the witness of the skull and bones piercing the inky blackness of the interior. Then all of the sudden, it disappeared, as if pulled into the heavens.

"Mein Gott!" he cried, "vot vas it?" And ran in the direction of the engine. Eb who had busied himself by coaling the tender, was not surprised to see the little fat German out of breath, murmuring to himself in German. "Somethings-the-matter. I-see-somethings." he blurred out between breaths.

They were interrupted by the timely appearance of Eb's companion, to which Eb repeated mockingly, "He sees somethings, probably his missing tool."

The little German could see that they were making fun of him and said, "I vos nott a drinker, but boys, please come mitt me and haff derr schnopps." Not knowing wether it was fright or embarrassment, that he wished them to accompany him from the yards, they readily agreed.

At the taproom, his tongue became loose by the drinks, and he related the experience. The German's story confirming the previous rumors of the workers from the "B" mill, added to the excitement of the customers. The news spread fast and a complaint was sent to headquarters. A company detective was dispatched to solve the mystery of the ghost.

The boys were at ends, wether to keep up the farce or to expose the ghost. It was finally decided to see how bright this "Dick" could be. The detective was not so easily frightened and upon seeing the ghost, ran forward to tackle whatever this apparition was, but as he drew within a few feet, it gave a quick jump and was engulfed by the darkness above. A search of the building in the daytime failed to give any evidence.

Puzzled by this strange phenomenon, he was forced to return to headquarters with his failure to capture the ghost. It was not till then that the city officials were asked to take a hand. They too saw but were unable to outwit the ghost. Upon one occasion one of the spectators even shot at the spectre, but still it returned.

Eb, to cover any suspicions, went to the night operator at the depot, who also was an accomplice and in the presence of the city officials, bid the operator to send a message to the Elkhart roundhouse for a relief man. Then turning to the officers said, "Will you return with me to fix the fire?"

"No, I wouldn't have your job for a thousand dollars a night. This is the worst night I ever spent in my life."

Again the city was astonished, when Eb appeared one morning with hair as white as snow. This proved too much for the home office. The superintendent, with other Rail Road officials, stepped into the scene. Holding a conference with the instigators of the plot, they were advised to expose the ghost to the town people; at the same time, tell how Eb's hair had turned white over night, (the use of talcum powder) and were warned not to make any more practical jokes at the expense of the company.

The details of the device are as follows:

A piece of black heavy cloth, cut to form the outlines of a skeleton, which was lined with white cheese cloth. The reflection from the rays of the stove, exposed only the white outlines, giving the ghastly effect. This was nailed upon a crosspiece of wood, to which a rope was tied. The rope in turn was passed through a well oiled pulley, wired to the top of the roundhouse. By pulling the rope, it gave the impression of the skeleton jumping into the heavens.