

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brooks Blevins. *Ghost of the Ozarks: Murder and Memory in the Upland South*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. Illustrations. xxii + 261 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03695-8.

Reviewed by Jim Leonhirth (Independent Scholar)

Published on Jhistory (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

Just a few months before Black Tuesday and the stock market crash that propelled the United States into the Great Depression, a sordid tale of poverty, rape, and murder emerged from Stone County in northern Arkansas. Newspaper coverage in the region and eventually across the country recounted the details of the rape of a sixteen-year-old girl, the beating and murder of her older fiancé, and the burning of his body. Investigation of the crimes resulted in the arrests of five men, their trial, and a rather unexpected turn of events—a man purporting to be Connie Franklin, the murder victim, returned to the county before the trial even began. For journalism historians, the book provides valuable insights into journalism's part in creating or maintaining stereotypes of a region and its residents.

Ghost of the Ozarks is a rather compelling murder mystery, made even more cryptic as it was unclear whether a murder occurred at all. The purported victim, Franklin, presents an equally mysterious figure. Franklin was a drifter whose primary distinguishing characteristic prior to his "murder" apparently was his talent in playing the French harp. The appearance of Franklin's "ghost" or an impostor brought investigations that also revealed a possible stay at a mental hospital as well as a wife and children in another part of the state. The other principal character in the tale was Tiller Ruminer, whose plans to marry Franklin ended when a group of men reportedly attacked them, killing Franklin, burning his body, and subsequently raping her. Ruminer, however, refused to confirm that the man who returned to Stone County was actually Franklin. She served as the principal witness in the trial of the men who allegedly attacked the couple.

Investigations of the crimes, Franklin, and the rela-

tionships of the many and diverse characters provide the foundation for an ethnography of the Ozarks region that includes Stone County. Author Brooks Blevins is the Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies in the History Department at Missouri State University in Springfield, and the Ozarks are as much a central character of the tale as the "ghost." Blevins focuses on the people of the region and the condition of their lives in rural Arkansas before the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II.

Ghost of the Ozarks provides two perspectives on the roles of journalism in the coverage of the crimes and their aftermath. One perspective deals with newspapers' and reporters' priorities in covering such events and of the Ozarks region. The second perspective examines the role of the press in creating and maintaining stereotypes for the region with its own traditions and rural qualities. No copies of the Mountain View weekly in operation during the era remain, so no local coverage of the crimes, the investigations, and the trial is available. Metropolitan reporters who traveled to Stone County from around the region and the country found relatively easy access to the personalities involved in the mystery. They also found a few technical problems, including the fact that electrification had not yet come to the county, although generators were in use, and that Mountain View had only one long-distance telephone line and no telegraph service. The closest telegraph service was seven miles away. The Associated Press installed a private telegraph line to Mountain View for trial coverage, but did not share the line with anyone else.

Although tracking newspaper coverage of the case provides a useful tool for the narrative and for examining the place of such crime coverage in the news budgets



of the era, the book is more effective in examining the role of the press in establishing stereotypes for regional and demographic groups; in creating story frames into which reporters may try, sometimes with difficulty, to fit the facts of the story they are covering; and in perpetuating comfortable scenarios despite available observations and facts that conflict with them. To pick a few pertinent examples, reporters presented conflicting perceptions of the “noble mountaineer” versus the ignorant “hillbilly.” Articles also portrayed poverty, illiteracy, and class distinctions based primary on land ownership. They raised questions about the possible presence of moonshining, night-riding, feuds, in-breeding, and peonage. One reporter even contended that “land barons” in the region of Stone County had “first rights” with the young girls of the hill people.

Events of 1929 divided the residents of Stone County, and, according to the author, they continue to divide

those still alive and the descendants of those who have died. The case put the community for the first and only time into the national spotlight, and the portraits of the community and its residents for many were wounding. The story became only entertainment for readers of the press, the author noted, while residents of the area found their lives and community becoming the subjects of ridicule and contempt. Still, prior to publication of this book, except for the residents of Stone County, the tale generally had faded into history.

Ghost of the Ozarks provides a useful case study for students of journalism on the dangers of sensationalism, stereotyping, and bending the facts to the assumed story rather than using the facts to build the story. Over and above its value to students of history, sociology, and journalism, the book tells a compelling tale. It is not so much a “whodunit” as much as “what was done,” “to whom,” and “why.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Jim Leonhirth. Review of Blevins, Brooks, *Ghost of the Ozarks: Murder and Memory in the Upland South*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36385>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.