

TURNING BACK THE WATERS
OF THE ASHOKAN

by NORMAN STUDER



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SQUIRE ELWYN DAVIS lives alone in a large frame house overlooking the Ashokan Reservoir, New York City's main source of water in the Catskills. Sitting on his front porch, he can look down over the fields into the Reservoir and point out old landmarks known now to only a small and dwindling number of people. He can tell you where, under the water, West Shokan once stood. He knows just where the old house was located which was built by his forebear, Henrick Crispell, who came into the wilderness and settled the valley in 1760. The waters of Ashokan covered the site in 1915, but in a few minutes of conversation Squire Davis can turn back the waters and recreate a warm and human past with a hundred little tales of people long since gone from this earth. He recalls events that happened long ago in his boyhood, but he also remembers with the same tenacity the things old men and women told him. Thus his memory transports us back to the beginnings of our country.

Squire Davis was once census taker and that was an appropriate job for him, for he loves to collect information about people. He writes personals for several country weekly newspapers, and long ago wrote a little pocketbook-size history of West Shokan, a dry compendium of names and dates. Davis is at his best as a conversationalist and a spinner of yarns around the cracker barrel. For the past three years he has taken an active part in the story-telling fests at the Folk Festival of the Catskills. Here are some of his best tales:

NEW YORK FOLKLORE QUARTERLY

A Big Man

Boiceville was named after a man called Boice. Originally it was—Byce—John Byce. He was a very strong man. He was for the British side in the Revolution. The Americans captured him and were about to hang him. They had the gallows all fixed up, were going to hang him from the limb of a tree. When they pulled him up, the weight was so heavy the rope broke and his feet struck the ground. There were several wagons standing side by side and he bounded over these wagons and escaped.

Another thing I heard in regard to him was that when they were clearing follows down there, he had a pair of oxen. The off-ox was small and he couldn't carry his end of the burden. When they was tearing out old stumps, old Mister Boice he used to put his shoulder against the yoke of the weak ox and give a lift at pulling stumps out.

A Slave in Old Shokan

I have down home a bill of sale of a slave dated 1795, and of all the legal phraseology of the time he certainly was bound hand and foot. The price paid for him I believe was about \$150 in our money. The slave took the name of the master's family.

Jackie was a slave of the Crispell family. Jan Crispell, a Hollander, sold Jackie to his son Thomas, who was a veteran of the Revolutionary War.

About the time of the War of 1812 Jackie was getting along very well in years and this Thomas Crispell had a son Avram. He and the old colored fellow didn't get along very well, and so he delivered an ultimatum to his father that he'd either have to part with one or the other. So in order to keep peace in the family the old man gave Jackie his freedom and that went along fine. They helped him build a log cabin up along the stream now known as Jackie Brook, a short distance south of where the Olive Library is. As a boy I can well remember the old orchard there and I can still go to the place and show where the log cabin was and the chimney had toppled over. A few years ago I named my farm the Jackie Brook farm.

It seems that Jackie still continued to be very good friend of his former owner who lived a short distance away. Old man Crispell had some sheep and they made a bet: the colored fellow said he could steal one of the sheep without his knowing it, and he would even tell him about it. Old man Crispell said it couldn't be done. So one dark, gray

TURNING BACK WATERS OF ASHOKAN

morning Jackie came down and he went around the sheep pen where he was familiar and he put one of the black sheep on his back and started off with it. Before he went very far he went to the house where the old man was sleeping. He knocked at the window and woke him up and said, "Master, the weather be very black and heavy this morning."

He was carrying the wether on his shoulder.

Old Uncle Rowell

Down on old South Mountain some fifty or sixty years ago lived a character, Rowland Bell. He was known as Uncle Rowell, and he lived on the trail to High Point, where there was city visitors by the thousands in the course of the years coming and going, and they all stopped at Uncle Rowell Bell's, where they were entertained by the old man and his wife.

He was quite a fiddler, an old-time fiddler. He didn't know much abouts flats. We used to have another good fiddler down there, and Rowell used to say he could play as good as Tom Thatcher, if it wasn't for the flats. I'll tell you the name of a few of his favorite tunes he used to play, and they used to say he'd play them at dances and he'd play them on the same key. One of them is "Devil Shootin' Crows on the Mississippi," "Sal on a Log," and "Kate's Got the Belly Ache."

He used to go barefooted. When he was a young fellow he used to go out sparking the girls there around that territory, go to dances and everything, and I said he went barefooted and didn't carry a lantern or flashlight in those days. He used to say, "I'd be going along in the dark through the woods. First thing you know, I'd stub my toe on a stone and the sparks would fly." When he was eighty-three he made the trip up High Point barefooted.

When the city people went up the trail to High Point, they'd stop at the plank cabin to get Uncle Rowell and Aunt Beck to entertain 'em. Well, Uncle Rowell he was kinda coy about that. His rheumaticks always bothered him till somebody produced a pint of liquor. He could feel his rheumaticks goin' right out of his fingers then. He'd get hold of the old fiddle and his wife she'd accompany him. She used to have an old tin monkey with hands onto it like cymbals. She'd set that on her knee and keep time while Uncle Rowell would sing and play. That little toy monkey she used to play is still in existence, also

NEW YORK FOLKLORE QUARTERLY

the fiddle. That I have been unable to get hold of. It was passed down to a grandchild.

I also have a Colt's revolver over a hundred years old that he used to shoot rattlesnakes with. They used to have a lot of rattlesnakes up on South Mountain, up on Rattlesnake Den, they call it, where you look down into South Holler, two or three hundred feet. Rowell and his brother they used to go up there and Rowell would take his fiddle and get up there and entertain the rattlesnakes. They'd come out to hear him play and sing and while Rowell played his brother would pick them off. And I was told by my Uncle Jake Crispell, who died some years ago at the age of 90, that he knew it to be a fact that between the two of them they killed twenty-six rattlesnakes in one day. And if the rattlesnakes hadn't bit themselves when they were shot Uncle Rowell would skin them and put their skins up against the cabin, and the fat he'd fry out.

I can remember him as well as if it was yesterday. He used to come down to what was the village of West Shokan. It's now beneath the waters of the Ashokan Reservoir. He'd come down maybe after a thundershower in the morning, barefoot and every step he'd kick, and the kids'd say to him, "Rowell, whaddye kick for?" He'd say, "By God, I'm kicking the rheumaticks away."

Uncle Rowell used to take a gallon kerosene can and go down to Kingston and get it full of alcohol. He called it "akkeyhol." Used to mix it with water, put in a little rattlesnake juice, and put syrup into it. It made a very potent drink, no question about that. He used to go down past my place and every step he'd kick. Goin' up back maybe he'd have too much of that akkeyhol and rattlesnake juice. Some of the boys that lived up above me—the Persona boys—they'd get a long grapevine and they'd string it across the road and Uncle Rowell he'd try to step over the grapevine. They'd raise it up a bit, a little bit. Then he'd say, "Boys, you're diabolic hypocrites. You were brought up with insensibilities."