

St. Michael and Mr. Pyles

By H.W. Devlin

My Uncle Crum used to say that when someone died in anger, their spirit remained forever trapped in a dark dream. He also used to take us on tours of the Cass County countryside looking for old, abandoned homes—especially around All Hallows Eve. He would explain to us how the families that once lived there had come to their unfortunate end. My nephew and I, superstitious by nature, brought with us on these trips spiritual protection in the form of our St. Michael medals. They were to us what uncle Crum's .22 sidearm was to him.

On one trip we were to visit the Old Pyles' homestead. Pyles and his family had been amongst the first settlers in Virginia. Despite his best efforts, Mr. Pyles' family fell on hard times. A few bad years in the field, diseased livestock and a sickly son caused them to slip deeper and deeper into debt. Eventually the oldest boy died of TB and the mother fell into an inconsolable darkness.

One day, a Mr. Teacot, the owner of the local dry goods store, rode with his son to check on the family. They found the two Pyles boys shot to death and the mother -- still sitting at the kitchen table -- with her throat slit. The girls were nowhere to be found. The Teacot boy suggested they check first in the root cellar hoping maybe the girls had taken cover there when the madness was upon their father.

In the root cellar they found a mound of fresh earth with what appeared to be pale tubers growing out of it. Upon closer examination, they saw that it wasn't roots protruding out of the ground; they were fingers. Mr. Pyles had buried them half-alive and they had tried to claw their way out. You could see his boot prints where he had crushed their desperate hands. It was said that Pyles still wanders there, angry that the townsfolk re-interred the girls with their mother and brothers.

So it was that strange late October morning that we found ourselves sliding an old wooden ladder down into the depths of the root cellar in the great search for the burial mound of the Pyles' sisters.

I lit a red-tip stick match on the zipper of my pants.

“Do you see anything?” I asked my nephew.

We clearly saw a raised mound, probably seven- or eight-feet long and three- or four-feet wide. Over the years it had certainly settled, but still there was a distinct shape different from the rest of the earthen floor.

Then the strangeness began. There was that first moment I felt an itching on my ankle, something that at first didn't bother me because we had walked through tall grass and were stamping around a damp cellar. I looked at my nephew. We reached down nearly simultaneously to flick away whatever it was.

Nothing.

As my nephew looked at me I noticed the pressure on my leg had taken on the distinct feel of something very familiar, very identifiable: fingers. I could not speak and I could see that my nephew was breathing heavily and trying to say something, too, but it wouldn't come out. Finally, I broke the silence with a great effort of will.

"Hey! Help! Hey! Help!" the sound came out and my effort seemed to free him as well.

"Uncle Crum! Uncle Crum!"

My foot began to slide backwards toward the mound. We were trying to free our legs, gripping them with both hands. By now we were both screaming at the top of our lungs.

Then silence.

Whatever happened next is up for debate, but we both today agree that at some point we reached for our St. Michael's medals.

"St. Michael, defend us in battle!!" We remembered the prayer.

There was a stinging pain in my leg but I was free. I saw Tony shoot past me to the rickety wooden ladder. A deep booming voice issued from inside the cellar. "Out! Out!" It was deep and dark just like the cellar, just like the earth that had covered the mound. Needless to say, I climbed with great urgency!

We were out. I raised my jean pant leg to expose a series of deep puncture wounds just on the back of the calf. I was trying to staunch the wounds with my shirt when my uncle, laughing quietly to himself, made his way over the top of cellar.

We never forgot that day, never went back to that old house even though the ruins are still there, somewhere off Parlier Road. Today, nearly 40 years later, the scars still ache upon occasion, at which time I reach for the St. Michael medal that hangs around my neck, the very same one that saved us that day from joining Mr. Pyles in his dark dream.

The end