The Three Deaths Of Old Benny Reed

David R. Beatty

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First Death: October 1780

Chapter 1: The Clear Or The Char

You bet, General Preston, grins Benjamin Reed to the impatient militia leader prancing on his white horse in the waning September sunlight. I'll weld that worm to the pot and get it flowing before you can say Jack Robinson.

Then go to it! My men are mustering at Draper's Meadow and we'll need that recipe when done with Ferguson and his redcoats. And by the by, I'm just a Colonel for my hunters and farmers.

Twenty-year-old Benny just shakes his freckled face, red hair waving in the gloaming as he glances at the silvery flash of Bald Knob catching the last light atop the evergreen ridge of Clinch Mountain. The clear or the char, Private?

William Preston stills his horse and stares down at the wiry brownsmith beneath the spreading oak tree, dark eyes hidden in the shadow of a black tricorn, pursed lips lost in a bushy beard. Make that the clear, and your loyalties, young man, had better be just as impurity free.

Always Major, just pick up your load under this here Tradail Oak at the new moon.

The Reeds had been rebels of the non-aligned variety from time immemorial in the British Isles, holding out by hiding out from first the Romans, then the Vikings, and ultimately the English crown whose standing army and meting out of land to loyalists had forced many a Celtic clan to emigrate. From tenant farming in Belfast to indentured servancy in the colonies to freedom in the western settlements, generations had survived on skills brought from the Scottish borders - smithing enough to forge a kettle, steering clear of governance, and, when in need of trade, whiskey making. Benny's father Daniel had continued the family pattern by following the Sappony and Cherokee trails along the rivers west through the Blue Ridge to squat for farm land in the newly claimed Valley of Virginia after the 1761 Treaty of Long-Island-on-the-Holston.

As soon as Preston's stallion disappears south into the fall woods, a tall dog with a hanging belly trots over to Benny's side. Well Queen Charlotte, guess we'd better check out the progress of our latest recipe.

They hightail it up the trace along a little creek, his stride racing the fading light. The chirping of crickets cranks up as he lopes up the steepening hollow. With each huff, he whistles a line of God Save The Queen, the words chiming along in his head.

The tan bands on Charlotte's legs catch the last light, leading Benny on as they pick their way up the rocky slope in the now pitch black night. True to the Reed proclivity to poetry, he breaks into song and her tail wags along:

Dog save all dressed in green

Long live our noble Queen

Dog save the Queen

Send her victorious

Happy and glorious

Long to reign over us

Dog save the Queen

At some point during this bastardized homily he realizes he'll need a score of oak barrels for the Virginia militiamen, but suddenly both the coonhound and his plotting of a trade with a cooper over in Tazewell are halted by a raucous call up ahead.

Chapter 2: A Droplet Of Red

After a moment of silence following the raven's call, Charlotte gives a soft whine and looks up at Benny. He tilts his head and, hearing that she senses no danger ahead, waves his hand forward. She trots up the rocky trail and he follows soundlessly, feeling each bootfall before placing weight on it.

He skirts the log lean-to he'd hewn into the hillside of the narrow hollow five years before, his hatchet at the ready on his right shoulder. Beyond a little clearing along his still race, he creeps up a last rocky ledge and peers over a boulder at a spring-fed pool below a tiny waterfall.

At first there are only feint rippling reflections on the water. Benny whistles a short tweet in mimicry of the parakeet that flits in these Appalachian forests. A movement by the pool lifts his hatchet to the ready, but then tan pumpkin-seed spots approach through the dark and the tall dog arrives with tongue wagging and tail beating. Benny lowers his throwing arm and runs the fingers of his other hand in the places she likes behind her long black ears. That's when he hears the keening of a girl's song.

Settlers in the central Valley of Virginia were well aware in 1780 that the Cherokee would breach the supposed boundaries along the Blue Ridge to the southeast and the Alleghenies to the northwest. The tribe had only recently been displaced from ancestral towns and hunting grounds in the broad and well-watered grassland between the peaks. While the Chickamouga Wars with settlers farther to the southwest were ongoing, small local bands from newly formed Kentucky county would sometimes drift over high Clinch passes to revisit their former haunts.

Benny Reed was well acquainted with these overmountain visitors. Though he was too young to remember his father's demise in a 1762 raid, the fear from that awful night of hiding in the springhouse with his shivering mother's hand across his mouth still coursed through his veins. Jane Vaughan Reed had hung on in Tazewell for ten years with the help of neighbors. Then in the spring of 1772, when Benny turned an independent thirteen years of age, she had climbed on their old horse and followed the creek down to the New River, over to the Dan, and all the way back to the Vaughan farmstead at the inland tip of Albemarle Sound.

Benny stills the coonhound with a hand on her back and they listen, entranced, to the soft wail. It goes on for what seems like hours and is somehow both sad and happy. Then a flash of full moonlight cracks the ridge to the east, illuminating sleek blue-black locks hanging down the back of a girl squatting beside the shimmering water.

She stands quickly and stares straight at his blaze of shining red hair showing over the ledge. The hatchet clambers down the rocks as Benny lunges and misses. When he looks up again, she's gone.

Bloody hell Lottie, did you see that?

They step over the rocks to the spot where the native girl was bending over the pool, the big dog sniffing a droplet of red at water's edge.

Chapter 3: A Bit Of Female Advice

Sorry your majesty, the next batch is spoken for.

So says Benny to a diminutive and foppishly dressed man under the arching branches and browning leaves of the Tradail Oak, his escort of two redcoats watering their horses at a nearby hollowed out log.

Well Mister Benjamin Reed, that delivery had better not be to any of the Virginia militias. My master is called Bloody Ban for a reason, and I'm just his valet so your obsequiousness won't work with me.

Tell you what mister footman, you can have one cask for a bit of female advice.

After accidentally witnessing the menarche ritual, Benny had been obsessed with the Cherokee woman. Ever since his mother had departed from the Tazewell settlement seven years before, he'd been so focused on keeping his deceased father's copper forge running that he'd skipped the usual teen rites of passage. He'd completely missed the occasional square dance, having finished schooling in smithing before she left, and there were no debutante balls in those early days of the American frontier before tobacco and slavery had made it over the Blue Ridge.

By age twenty, however, Benny's trade in copper and booze had provided him with enough food and clothing that he was beginning to daydream of nighttime company. The moonlit images of long black hair and a glistening stare beside a tinkling waterfall were distracting him from maintaining the fires that kept his businesses running.

The jack-a-dandy's master was an officer of the British Legion only recently transferred to the southern campaign. Banastre Tarleton was already notorious in the backcountry for his having taken no quarter after a victory at the Battle of Waxhaws, his Raiders ignoring the white flag of surrender and dispatching a detachment of Virginia militiamen.

Heigh-ho mate, laughs the valet. I'm the wrong sort for that kind of advice, but I'll take a stab in the dark if my prevarications might relieve Banastre of his nightmares.

I've fallen for this Cherokee girl, Benny blurts.

Well now, my molly-house down in Charlotte has a few wenches.

Not that! I need to decide if I should follow her across the ridge.

“Young men’s love then lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes,” as the Bard warned Romeo once upon a time.

In that case, I'm seeing a jaunt into Kentucky.

Then you must also perceive that the savages take more than Tarleton's quarter.

Much obliged, your highness. Just send your henchmen over there to pick up the keg beside the trough in the morning.

Chapter 4: Black And Tan

Lottie girl, don't you go getting attached to those pups, Benny warns as he pours flaked maize into heated creek water in a copper mash pot.

She lays upwind of the fire pit and is curled around four wriggling balls of black and tan, each latched onto a nipple. The little clearing beside the gurgling stream is edged by deciduous trees just beginning to turn in late September.

Those pure-breds will be ready to trade for twenty barrels in the time it takes this mash to mature, he explains while stirring in the barley malt.

The coonhound looks up and whines as Benny completes his soliloquy. We'll just give it a whirl every now and then before mixing in the yeast.

The breed was a recent cross between a bloodhound and a Virginia foxhound. It's large size, tracker's nose, and imperturbability made it ideal for scaring up bears, wolves, and cougars in the early Appalachian settlements. It just so happened that the cooper's shop in Tazewell was ideally situated to stock settlers venturing into the high hollows of the southern Alleghenies.

Benny had tagged along to his father's still as soon as he could toddle up the hollow. From feeding the fire as a young boy, stirring the pot when a little older, and tending the fermentation bucket at age ten, he'd learned the whole process from his mother by the time she returned back east to her family home in Albemarle.

Well sweetie, we're ready to crank up the still and get warmed up, Benny resumes two weeks later to the grieving dog already positioning herself beside the fire pit next to the tumbling headwaters.

The forge site is now brimmed with deciduous yellows, oranges and reds while the surrounding high ridges are topped by the cyan of spruce, hemlock, and white pine.

First drops are poison foreshots that we let go, he explains to the big dog silently watching his every movement.

Stinky heads are next, my dear, and they go back into the creek too.

Then it's the hearts to collect in our kegs, old girl, he concludes as he rolls a barrel down to the tip of the copper tubing.

The tall dog jumps up and trots beside the oak cask, nudging it along with her strong neck.

Whoa darling, don't knock it into that worm again. Preston's back tomorrow and I don't have time for another weld.

Chapter 5: Fair Trade

If it isn't old Benny Reed and his best girl, greets a dirt-covered militia officer standing beside the brown-leafed Tradail Oak as sunlight beams over the eastern ridge in the cool October morning.

His white quarter horse along with two mules are lapping from the nearby log trough.

Aren't we the merry-andrew, laughs Benny right back, his black and tan trotting beside the wheelbarrow carrying two oak casks.

Aye, we surprised Ferguson on King's Mountain and routed the whole lot.

Whewee, Colonel Preston, you done good. As for my best girl, these are the last of the kegs and then Lottie and I are heading over the hill to find her.

Well young man, you're one barrel shy of that score you promised, but all my silver went to provisioning the Fincastle volunteers and they're mighty thirsty after that battle.

The Battle of Kings Mountain was a surprise victory of a cobbled group of about eight-hundred patriot militiamen against a force of over a thousand redcoats and loyalist militia. British Major Patrick Ferguson and his army were on their way to join a large force under General Cornwallis in preparation for an invasion of North Carolina. After days of marching, Ferguson decided to camp for a few nights on the largest of the foothills at the border with South Carolina. His defensive site on the high ground became a corral as the overmountain men surrounded the hill at dawn.

After an hour of thrusts up the wooded hillsides and bayonet parries from above, the mountain was taken and Ferguson killed along with three-hundred of his soldiers. The rest were marched north to patriot strongholds in Virginia. It was the first major victory for the colonists in the south, akin to Washington's taking of Trenton in the north, and it contributed to a British retreat from the interior.

Sorry Colonel, Benny stammers. A British officer sent his man and two redcoats for that missing keg.

Now that's a gift horse if I ever saw one, Preston retorts. Tarleton's Raiders never showed to back up Ferguson. I might owe you more than a few pounds.

How's about one of them mules for my trip over the ridge?

I need them both for the wagon team. What say you take my old horse and I vouch for your aid in that battle?

Much obliged, but that's more than I can take for a run of whiskey.

Listen young man, Tarleton getting that lost barrel may have helped to turn the tide. Spies sent word that Cornwallis has left Charlotte and is on the road back to Charleston.

Well taking sides is no good for business, but being on your list might come in handy if'n your Whigs manage to win.

Indeed, a war pension would get you the acreage for a copper forge and a corn field to boot. My family needs hard-working settlers on our land in Kentucky.

Mama always told me not to count my chickens before they hatch, but at least that white horse is a pretty fair rooster.

Ha, it's settled then, Preston concludes, clapping Benny on the back. One more word to the wise: On the other side of Clinch Mountain the creeks run east to the New River, north to the Big Sandy, and west to the Licking River. There are settlers on those first two drainages, but Virginia's claim is not yet recognized by the Indians to the west.

Chapter 6: Over The Hill

Oh Lottie, Benjamin Reed mumbles as he awakens into the mid-October chill from a fitful dream of following his mother around the bend of a flooding river.

The black and tan just moans in the pre-dawn shimmer of a slivered moon and curls tighter into her sleep ball.

Benny rolls over on his bunk, pulling tighter into a woolen blanket as he tucks against the earthen back wall. The tinkling of the nearby creek is lulling them both back toward sleep when startled by a raucous "cruck-cruck-cruck" echoing down the hollow.

Dang, it gets light early up there, he groans as the white horse tethered to the outside of the lean-to cabin snuffles loudly. Righto Ajax, might as well get going.

Benny slips his buckskin hunting frock over linen undergarments in the semi-darkness. Skipping the usual stoking of the fire, he grabs a saddle stowed beside the stone chimney and begins loading it onto the old quarter horse. The coonhound has already sniffed out the clearing and is lapping from the creek as Benny stuffs the blanket into a saddlebag already loaded with hardtack, shot, and a clean pair of socks. He'll take his water from the streams he's planning to follow down into Kentucky.

Slinging his long rifle over a shoulder, Benny hoists himself into the saddle and gives a squeeze with his heels to start the old stallion walking toward the creek. The dog is already running ahead as he reigns the horse toward the little path up to the waterfall where they follow the hound over to the red spot on a flat rock beside the pool.

Follow this trail, he commands, scratching the dried blood with a fingernail and reaching it up for Ajax to sniff the distinctive metallic scent.

It had been a busy two weeks since Colonel Preston's first visit. Benny had kept the still running nearly continuously to fill the twenty cask order. His only breaks had been to negotiate with Tarleton's valet, trade puppies for barrels, and restock the cracked corn. The three members of the little cavalcade were equally excited to start the journey over the hill.

Benny had been to the top of Clinch Mountain once before as a thirteen-year-old seeking the source of the creek he'd grown up beside. Imagining a mountaintop lake or

gushing spring, he'd instead found that each successively smaller branch traced back to a trickle out of the hillside. There were hundreds of sources, and, slurping from one of them, Benny decided that most of life was like that. Each little moment confluenced to form subsequent ones.

In the current moment of swaying on a horse following a dog following a scent up a diminishing deer trail, Benny began to see that his father's death, childhood apprenticeship, mother's departure, and teen years of smithing and distilling had led him to this lonely sojourn to start his third decade of life.

That might could show us the way, Benny calls out to the animals as the rim of a rising sun peaks the Blue Ridge.

They've crossed the deciduous line into evergreen forest and are scaling pine needle strewn switchbacks up the steep trace. Cresting the ridge, they emerge into a narrow granite gap.

Hang onto your hats, he commands as a chilly wind comes racing through the rocks and they forge on.

Emerging from the gap and into the rolling hills of the north slope, they're stopped in their tracks by a tumbled mass of dark clouds roiling toward them.

Uh-oh mates, he exclaims as they're pelted by the first cold raindrops.

He jumps down from the startled stallion and the old horse just turns her rump to the wind as man and dog scramble under a nearby rock ledge.

So much for my blood trail, Benny sighs as the coonhound curls into a ball at his side to wait out the storm.

Chapter 7: Second Sight

Better use that triple sight, young fellow!

Benny stumbles back from the cold fire circle in a frantic search for the unexpected voice. Then he sees the coonhound wagging her tail and staring up into a white-barked sycamore behind the abandoned campsite. The white horse turns his big head to briefly glance over his haunches from the nearby engorged stream before resuming slurps of muddy water.

What the devil are you? Benny blurts, flabbergasted by the sight of a dark-skinned man sitting on a thick branch, his deer hide moccasins and leggings dangling below a burgundy woolen breechcloth. Most astonishing of all is what appears to be a frizzy black hat unlike any Benny has ever seen.

Don't you mean where is she? the man laughs, his grin triggering a round of wags from Queen Charlotte.

People of African descent were just beginning to be brought over the Blue Ridge to the Valley of Virginia as household servants and farm hands in the eighteenth century, but most of the homesteads in the hollows and hills were small family farms. Native American dress on an apparently free person of color would have been so unexpected as to conjure up the supernatural.

European settlers venturing into the more remote mountains of western Virginia and Tennessee would soon find they weren't the first non-natives. Free blacks, former indentured servants, and escaped slaves had been moving into the hills for over a century, sometimes forming communities with the remnants of native American tribes. Towns with such a melange of peoples came to be called Melungeon communities by those who came into the mountains after them.

Most of those late comers were of Scotch-Irish descent. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the English monarchy had forcibly sent the clans from the border area across the Irish Sea to work the flax plantations around newly claimed Belfast. After a generation or two of tenant farming or worse, many of these Ulster Scots departed for better prospects in the American colonies.

Supposing I do mean where is she, Bennie queries right back at the apparition in the browning leaves of the old sycamore. How did you know?

Well now, you Irish with the wild eyes aren't the only ones with the second sight.

A lot of good it does in the here and now.

Look with that darker eye and you'd have seen Goldie Gibson going back to Royal Town.

Do what? Benny stalls before formulating the question he needs answered. Which trail?

Just head west and follow the creeks until they become the river that runs to the licks.

Much obliged, Chief Red Pants, Benny recovers enough to regain his sarcasm. Now Lottie, Ajax and I will be taking that triple sight over to that Licking River.

That's more like it, laughs the Melungeon medicine man. Just don't you go counting on her being home in that here and now of yourn. They done lit out for the salt licks for curing winter stores.

Chapter 8: The Letter

Vaughan, NC, Oct. 1, 1780

My Dearest Benjamin,

Sincerest greetings from what has just become Warren County, North Carolina in honor of a Dr. Joseph Warren who died at the Battle of Bunker Hill. I suppose you should know that my family along with most others in our beloved former Albemarle have sided with the colonies. I've heard that your deceased father's kin down on Currituck Sound have stayed with the mother country, though their land, such as it is, unsuited for tobacco, now falls within the newly formed Gates County, also named for a colonial war hero. We shall see whether it is my Vaughans or your Reeds that keep their claims in these eastern regions.

Shifting allegiances not withstanding, I write to you now of loyalties of another stripe. My second cousin Charity Vaughan is coming of age and in need of a suitor for the dumb supper on Hallow's Eve. Supposing, as I am, that companions of the female sort are still scarce on the frontier, we are requesting your midnight appearance at her dinner setting.

Charity is a sturdy and hard-working young woman eager for a life and family in the west. She too lost her father, in her case more recently and to the crown at Camden Court House. I believe she would be a good match for your industriousness, and there's nothing that would make me happier than to see you settled into a farmstead somewhere along the Great Wagon Road.

In that regard, it is with regret that I inform you that your father's claim in Tazewell is no longer valid. My petition with the colony of Virginia was rejected, ostensibly because there is no homestead or orchard on the premises. I suspect that the one-hundred and sixty acres fell within another larger claim of one of the royal magistrates. I only wish that I had understood the implications of not rebuilding after the raid and fire that took my beloved.

Though the mail is prohibitive through the United Colonies Post and uncertain with westward travelers, I'll trust this missive's arrival and await your appearance on All

Saints. It's my sincere hope that you'll grant me this small act of charity by accepting Charity as your companion and wife.

Yours truly and forever,

Sarah Vaughan Reed

Chapter 9: Unbeholden

Yo Mr. Ferryman, Benny calls as he follows Lottie and leads Ajax off the cable ferry that had just pulled them across a placid stretch of the New River. Can a fellow hire a delivery?

Bill Ingles is the name, replies the old guy tying off the heavy hauling rope in the early dusk of late October. That would depend on the job, young fellow.

Taking this here cask to William Preston, Benny answers with uncharacteristic directness as he hands Ingles some silver coins. It had been a long day of riding the fifty miles from his cabin in the Tazewell hills.

Just so happens that my son Thomas is coming through in a few days on the way to Smithfield, Ingles assents, barely hiding his amusement at the cavalcade of black and tan coonhound, white quarter horse, and brownsmith moonshiner.

Benjamin Reed had decided to make the one-hundred-fifty mile trek in three days to get to the arranged mating of a dumb supper in Albemarle because the journey also allowed him to make good on what he was beginning to think of as a war debt. Colonel Preston had mentioned the one missing barrel during his pick up after the battle of King's Mountain, and his Smithfield Plantation was just north of the New River crossing at Ingles Ferry, which in turn was just north of the mouth of what would become known as Reed's Creek.

In colonial times the farms and mills of the lower Shenandoah Valley followed the waterways that replenished the bottomland, and the roads followed the commerce that sprang up along those rivers and creeks. The trail from Tazewell to Smithfield became wider with each eastward mile, but Benny could have slept and the horse's memory still would have taken them back to it's former home in what is now Blacksburg, Virginia, even with a pony keg of whiskey strapped onto the tandem saddle.

I'll give him two pieces-of-eight for taking it to Smithfield and a third on my way back if he hands it directly to Colonel Preston, Benny offers the ferryman as the downstream riffles gurgle in the background of their conversation.

Who shall Thomas say this delivery is from? Ingles asks by way of accepting the deal as he helps slide the little barrel off the horse.

Just say it's owed him and leave it at that, Benny calls back as the trio trod on into the chilling evening under a nearly full hunter's moon in search of a suitable campsite for horse, dog, and man.

Bill Ingles lets out a chuckle when he hears old Benny Reed break into a fading song: *Dog save all dressed in green, long live our noble queen, dog save the queen....*

Second Death: October 1832

Chapter 10: The Varmint Of Cow Creek

Jesse, no Jimmy, no Lewy, stammers Charity Reed attempting to call her grandson who's rolling jacks beside the woodstove in the chilly pre-dawn of an October morning. Go get the milk from the spring house so's I can start the biscuits, will you honey?

Yeah Mamaw, answers the four-year-old already running for the back door of the two story log house, a flop-eared hound at his heels.

Lewis and his twin brother Jesse loved to play in the low stone structure built over the nearest of the many springs that formed Reed Branch. Tucked up into a shady nook on the north slope above the cabin, the spring house was cooler than the outside air in the summer and warmer in the winter. The clear water tinkling down a moss-covered aquaduct muffled the boys exclamations about Indian raids or panther attacks. Or so they thought.

At seventy-two-years-old, Benjamin Reed spent many a morning on a log chair perched on a sunny overlook above the spring. He had passed the forge on to his eldest son James who spent his days smithing down at the confluence with Cow Creek, his nights in the upstairs master bedroom with wife Alicy and three young children. The whiskey still way back in the dark reaches of the branch went to second son Daniel who had the other upstairs bedroom with wife Patsy, the twins, and newborn James. At least daughter Nancy, on her way to Missouri Territory with new husband James Lewis, had just moved out of the increasingly crowded house that her father and two brothers had built ten years before.

What's that, Jack? worries Lewis as the tall mutt named after President Andrew Jackson bristles, head cocked toward the chilly fog that thickens with each step up the little path to the spring house.

"I feel it too" echoing out of the low cloud startles the boy until he sees Jack's wagging tail.

Aw Papaw, I'm not scared a no varmint.

You'd best be, warns Benny Reed stepping down into view. There's things in these hills that even the Indians are afraid of.

Chapter 11: Canebrake

If I was a snake I'd have bit you, blurts old Benny to a lithe young woman hacking her way towards him in the noonday sun finally cutting through the fog on the upper reaches of Reed Branch.

So sorry, she blurts while stumbling back and dropping the blade from her right hand and a bundle of thick stems from under her left arm.

Cane's free for the taking down on Cow Creek, he offers, scrambling to gather up the brown stalks.

Tis our first harvest this side of the ridge in many a year, she explains, wiping a sweaty brow on the sleeve of her plain linen dress.

Benjamin Reed had selected these particular three-hundred acres as his land grant from the vast Preston holdings in the mountains of western Virginia and Kentucky partly because of the thick canebrakes. Dried stalks of the native bamboo plentiful along waterways were used for roofing and fencing, and the leaves were delectable forage for bison, elk, and deer, not to mention the horses and cows he and Charity planned to husband.

The native Americans of the region also valued the stands of *Arundinaria gigantia* for arrow and spear making. As with other grasslands, the canebrakes were often shared by different tribes as a hunting resource, and larger patches were burned every few years to remove shrubs and trees that were less fire resistant.

The Kentucky canebrakes disappeared quickly with European settlement. Overgrazing was common initially, and failure to recognize the importance of controlled burns allowed field crops of corn and sorghum to spread into the bottom lands. Within a generation the canebrake ecosystem was mostly gone.

Well take these and a few more from here, Benny concedes, reaching her the shoots she had already cut. Get the rest down below.

Much obliged, answers the tall teenager while squatting to retrieve the cane knife from the chaff. I'll get ma back yonder.

What's your mother's name, young lady? the old man queries, stretching his tall frame by standing on tiptoe to attempt and fail to peer over the grass tops and adding "I'm Benjamin Reed from this here branch."

We're Sizemores from over at Licking Station, she declares, giving him a tentative smile and pointing her blade over the hill to the east. Ma's Sally and pa back over the ridge is Goldenhawk.

It's when she turns to look back through the vertical bars of bamboo that Benny notices a long black braid trailing down her back and glistening in the last rays of Indian summer.

Chapter 12: Lost Ox

I ain't seed Quincy since Nan left, observes Benjamin's son Daniel as he stacks a barrel onto the family's ox cart in the cold drizzle of a low cloud settling up against the ridge.

Come to think of it, I heard your mom say she heard a ruction up the hollow, old Benny replies while helping to heft the next keg for tomorrow's drive down along the Licking River to Covington. That old ox has a hankering for cane so I'll take a gander up there.

Good, cause I'll need two teams for getting a load out of these hills in this mud, Daniel calls as his father strides up the hill.

Two teams of oxen is exactly what Benjamin Reed had used ten years earlier to transport his family and their belongings the hundred and fifty miles from the rim of the Shenandoah Valley in Tazewell, Virginia to the Appalachian foothills of eastern Kentucky. Back then John Quincy Adams, at four-years-old, was the lead ox in the front twosome of the four that had pulled their overloaded oxcart over the rugged hills on both sides of the Cumberland Gap. Now at fifteen, the one ton castrated male was still a formidable beast of burden, though no longer motivated to pull the other three oxen along. He'd rather spend his days browsing with the milk cows in the fields of big bluestem or moseying over to the canebrakes to munch on the sweet leaves.

Like many early settlers in the mountains, the Reeds rotated their oxen stock, keeping two experienced ones for a lead team and two younger ones to follow behind and learn the literal ropes. When a new male calf arrived in the spring and survived into fall, it might be set free as a bull for the herd if particularly strong, beautiful, or assertive. The mild mannered ones were instead castrated and trained to turn a millstone or pull a plow or cart. As a young ox joined the cart team, one of the older oxen would be butchered for the fall harvest and winter stores.

Quincy had been saved from that fate by a fruitful first year in the bluegrass region. There were three surviving males, allowing Benjamin the luxury of keeping his lucky ox that had led the family to a new land of earthen prosperity.

Dang, what happened here? Benny mumbles to himself, briefly puzzling over a muddy smear leading up from the marshy back of the last canebrake into a dense stand of rhododendron, the dark green leaves reaching up in the mist.

Following the trampled earth up a narrowing path into the thickening fog, he just glimpses a lighter colored horn sticking up from a mound of dirt back under a mountain laurel.

Varmint, my eye, he cries, squatting to unearth the head of his lost ox.

Chapter 13: The Cache

Where'd she put my horn at? Benny mumbles, loading a few lead balls from the top shelf of the dry larder into a leather satchel and throwing his old long rifle over a shoulder.

You old goat, you ain't shot a gun since last Samhain, Charity scoffs as she pulls a baking sheet from the stove.

Should be up here with the shot, he groans in the flickering candlelight while straining to reach the back of the shelf.

Might be hanging right where you left it last week, she chides with a nod over to the whiskey barrel. Best take a passel of these biscuits to get you through.

Won't need em, he answers while strapping the powder horn over the other shoulder. That varmint'll come to me.

Don't count your chickens before they hatch, she cautions as she slips a tin into his bag.

You don't know what I seed up there, Benny calls by way of goodbye as he heads out into the orange glow peeking over the eastern ridge.

Apex predators were largely gone from the southern Appalachians by the 1830s, hunted by settlers as competition for livestock or chased to the most remote ridges. Benjamin Reed had done his share so he knew it was easier to let the varmints come to him. Otherwise, the hounds would run it all over the mountain before tiring it out. Then they'd come out of the kill torn to pieces, if they survived at all. He just needed the right bait, and stumbling upon the buried ox carcass the prior evening had provided just that.

Bears, panthers, and wolves all cache their prey when too much of a meal for one sitting. They usually drag the carcass to some inaccessible place and dig it under dirt and leaves to mask the smell. Then they den up within eye, ear, or scent sight to protect their larder from hungry scavengers.

Rightio President Andrew Jackson, Benny encourages the flop-eared mutt trotting gleefully at his side as they skirt the upper corn field in the reddening sky. Just keep that trap shut!

He'd trained his favorite hound to stay at his heel and to only howl on command, so he was sure this dog wouldn't spook their prey. The canine scent might even help to draw in the beast.

"Ten green bottles hanging on the wall..." Benny begins to sing as they creep up the steepening hollow in so-called silence, but then catches himself and laughs as Jack glances up with raised ears.

The dawn chill seems to last forever on a western slope, and that's just fine for the old woodsman now breaking into a sweat as they climb the trace past the last canebrake. Jack soon catches the scent and leans into his leather lead, his back bristling into a peak as he leads them into the darkness of the rhododendron grove.

Benny lets the hound do a little digging around the ox carcass while scanning the area in the growing light, spotting a rock outcropping on a steep hillside about fifty yards to the south. He sticks a finger into his mouth and holds it up, soon satisfied that the cold side is upwind from his planned perch.

He gives the leash a little tug and motions the hound to heel with a downward hand signal before they pick their way through the brush and over the rocks to his perch.

Chapter 14: Backfire

Five sharp caws from a big black bird glistening in the sunlight atop the tallest fir on the northern ridge announce Benny's climb up through the rhododendron thicket to a sandstone outcropping above the cache site.

He skirts behind the ledge and sets his satchel on a narrow foothold strewn with pine needles. Removing the biscuit tin, he levers off the top and hands one to the hound, signaling him to lie down. Jack happily complies by curling into a circle and chomping into the buttery dough.

Next he removes the three lead balls and places them in a nook on top of the rock. Then he slips the gun strap off his shoulder and leans the long rifle against the back of the rock, the end of the barrel reaching to the shoulder of his six foot frame. He unclips a ramrod from under the barrel, leaning it beside the gun before squatting down to pull a greased leather patch from a little box built into the stock. Finally, he slips the powder horn cord over his head and sets it on the ground.

Only when all the parts are at hand and the dog settled with another biscuit does he peer over the rock. The sunlight has finally cracked the eastern ridge, highlighting evergreens and a scattering of yellowing poplars atop the hill to the north. Benny watches the big black bird swoop down from the ridge, settling on a bare oak branch opposite the cache before belting out four more calls. Answering caws float in from the surrounding hills and he smiles, satisfied that the arrival of scavengers will alert the varmint.

With all in readiness, Benny squats down and thumbs the wide cork from the mouth of the old bison horn, gasping when he sees a splash.

Utensils for carrying liquids were sparse and unreliable in the early settlement days of the southern Appalachians. Leather pouches leaked and animal bladders ripped with repeated use on daylong hunting trips. Metal flasks were uncommon since most homespun clothing didn't yet have pockets. What was common was for someone in a liquor-making family to commandeer an old powder horn.

The small bore Kentucky long rifles only required a pinch of gunpowder poured down the barrel and packed tight by lead ball and ramrod. A shot burned off much of the

powder, but some unspent residue would dust the inside of the barrel. In a pinch, thrifty backwoodsmen could scrape enough powder back down to get a second weaker shot.

Hair of the dog, Benny whispers before taking a swig of the family recipe and jamming the ramrod into the end of his rifle.

He angles the metal edge of the rod tip and slides it repeatedly in and out to scrape the grooved bore. Taking a second sip before slinging the horn over his right shoulder, he places a patch over the hole and pushes a ball into it, reinserting the rod to push lead and leather to the bottom of the barrel. Ready at last for his one shot at the beast, Benny stands, leans into the ledge, and positions the rifle over the rock and against his left shoulder.

A steady chorus of caws accompanies the sunlight creeping down the mountainside. From cyan firs at the top, the illumination drops into ochres at the deciduous line, then to viridian rhododendrons in the hollow. Benny greets each color change of the lengthening day with another nip and a slow grin. The old woodsman is also suffused, but with moonshine-induced warmth even as the hues begin to blur.

The caws suddenly cease, jarring Benny's sight into focus on a reddish motion at the cache. He fires and a blast of smoke and heat flash into his face, tumbling him back over the edge of the ledge.

Chapter 15: Seeing Red

Tarnation, exclaims the prostrate and still tipsy Benjamin Reed lodged atop the rhododendron thicket.

He moves a shoulder attempting to roll and quickly pulls back, the weight shift threatening to dislodge him from the precarious perch at least twenty feet off the ground. He tries lifting a foot with the same result and remains stuck after attempting to move all four limbs, but at least he knows his arms and legs are still working.

Rock of ages cleft for me, he sings with a sigh, resigned to using the one movable part that doesn't risk a tumble to the death:

Let me hide myself in thee;

Let the water and the blood,

From thy wounded side..., is halted mid-verse when his squinting eye catches a reddish motion on top of the ledge.

In later years illicit moonshine became associated with insanity or worse, blindness and kidney failure. In the early twentieth century, as copper sheeting became expensive , a prefabricated still of sorts became readily available. The problem with radiators salvaged from junk cars was that they contained antifreeze residue. An even more insidious issue was the multiple vertical sheets of metal soldered together to increase the heat dispersing surface area. Ethylene glycol and lead-soldered surfaces both help to cool internal combustion, but either can cause a toxic encephalopathy in humans.

The second sight that ran in the Reed family came with a potential down side. Self-generated mental images or sounds can be interpreted as coming from an external source. Benign interpretation can lead to the divine revelations and tongue speaking common in some southern evangelical churches. A less functional expression of such visual or auditory hallucinations can be called psychosis. And then there's being just plain schnockered.

Long time no see, Chief Red Pants, Benny calls up to the apparition on the rock.

Go west, he hears in the wind suddenly whispering through the grove.

West where, you old muckety-muck?

Arkansas, hisses a gust through the rhodendendron leaves.

Fine, fine, I'll go if you'll help me down, Benny bargains, but the Melungeon medicine man disappears when a hollering floats up from down the hollow.

Chapter 16: Lone Wolf

What's the matter Pap, cat got your tongue? a red-bearded young man calls as he and a hound peer down at the gray-haired old man stuck in the top branches of a rhododendron grove.

Wolf's more like it, Benny scowls at his twenty-four-year-old second son, the spitting image of him at that age. You put me here, now get me down!

Hold your horses, Daniel laughs at the reproach and follows the loyal dog from the top of the overlook to the ledge his master had fallen from. I can reach your boot from here.

The footprints in the mud around the cache site had told Benjamin Reed all he needed to know about the varmint of Cow Creek. It's not easy to distinguish wolf from dog tracks, but the ability of a single large canine to drag and bury an oxen carcass told him it was a lone wolf.

The Kentucky Appalachians of the 1800s housed both gray wolves and the slightly smaller red wolf, though that taxonomic distinction was unimportant to the early settlers or their livestock. It was also irrelevant to the two species since they could interbreed resulting in hybrid puppies. The range of gray wolves had moved progressively west and north along with European settlement. Their growing absence in the eastern mountains had opened a habitat niche for the more secretive southerly species with the reddish coat.

Lone wolves who had left or been driven from a pack were especially problematic for farmers. The animals forced to forage alone became desperate for food and company, haunting the hills around farms for stray stock or dogs in heat. Farmers met that threat with equal urgency to hunt and kill a rogue wolf.

Doggone idiot, Benny curses, swinging the horn flask and striking his son in the ribs.

Jesus Pap, Daniel exclaims holding up his hands. Some thanks I get for saving your sorry ass.

Filling my horn with the char nearly got me killed, not to mention losing that wolf.

Shit, I been meaning to tell about pouring the rest of the powder down your old gun to save the last of that keg.

Just don't tell your ma, Benny shakes his head while standing up straight and brushing the black smears from his chest and shoulder. She'll have your hide and mine.

Chapter 17: An Eye For An Eye

Where you off to with that hog's head? Charity scolds from her rocking chair beside the cook stove, the scents of wood smoke and browning biscuits filling the room.

Debt to pay up the hollow, Benny answers, straining to pull on his leather work boots from the three-legged stool by the door.

Bible says an eye-for-an-eye, she preaches as her long gray hair waves with each backward rock.

Wild, he hollers stepping out into the dark blueness of pre-dawn that promised another glorious day of Indian summer. That's the only sermon I need.

Wilderness is what Benjamin Reed was getting less of since his adolescence in the hills above Tazewell, Virginia. The Shenandoah Valley swarmed with settlers after the American revolution was one of the reasons he and Charity had moved their family across Clinch Mountain into eastern Kentucky. Now the next generation was making its way down from the Ohio valley and up through the Cumberland gap into the bluegrass region, and not all were out to build a cabin.

Saddlebag preachers arrived soon after the settlers, their horses walking the Wilderness and Greenbrier trails and then following waterways back into the hills. Sent by their Methodist, Presbyterian, or Baptist circuits, these traveling clergy brought brimstone to remote settlements that were already stoked for the fire, not having seen a church since leaving the east. With mountains replete with vipers and spring-fed dunking holes, eastern Kentucky was primed for an evolving American evangelism.

Blamest thing, Benny exclaims upon his return from feeding the hungry wolf. I run into that dark haired girl at the upper brakes.

You was always running after some Indian girl, Charity laughs by way of recalling his youthful sojourn over the hill before they met and married.

She says some of her people over to Licking Station is going to Arkansas.

Well maybe ye should go too, you old fool.

Maybe I will, he ponders in what she takes as mock consideration, failing to see his darker eye flashing red as the hazel one goes green.

Chapter 18: Arkansas Or Bust

Lewy, Jesse, Jimmy, come see off your Papaw!

So decrees Charity Reed to her grandsons by way of summoning the whole household to the front porch on a foggy All Hallow's Eve morning.

It was fifty-three years to the day since a red-headed overmountain man had sat down to her dumb supper plate at the Vaughan homestead in Albemarle.

Me and Jesse come too, Papaw? Lewis calls as he runs down the wooden stairs for the loaded oxcart only to be collared by his mother Patsy, her other arm holding baby James.

Benjamin was departing Cow Creek for the eight-hundred mile journey west accompanied by eldest son James, his wife Alicy, and their three children. Their path out of eastern Kentucky would take them on the Wilderness Road up to Louisville where they'd sell the oxcart and horse for passage on a steamboat bound for St. Louis. There they'd purchase a Conestoga wagon and team for the Southwest Trail across the Ozarks into the foothills of central Arkansas. They would not be alone on the westward trails.

President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830 initiated the forcible removal of Cherokee communities in North Carolina and Tennessee. Even before the forced march of sixteen-thousand people in 1838 that came to be known as the Trail of Tears, small groups living in the Appalachians of western Virginia and Kentucky had embarked on their own for grasslands set aside for Native Americans in the western half of Arkansas Territory.

Tend your mamaw while I'm gone, Benny enjoins the twins standing between Charity and Patsy as he gives his legs a little squeeze to tell the old white quarter horse to begin walking.

Always a full plate for an old mule, Charity calls, waving with the others as the oxen plod off behind the horse.

The only setting I'll ever need, he brays as the little cavalcade ambles west along Reed Branch.

As he turns ahead into the chilly mist, Benjamin Reed, still hale at age seventy-two, just glimpses a reddish streak loping along in the woods beside the trail.

Third Death: October 1837

Chapter 19: Hazel Valley

Morning rounds, Pop? queries James Reed from the top of the stairs as his father shuffles for the door of their log house nestled into a cool hollow on the southern slope of the Boston Mountains.

You know what they say about the early bird, Benjamin calls back in the orange glow from the hearth where he had just stoked the fire against the chill of an autumn morning.

You got that worm long ago, the son laughs as he tosses a walking stick to the old man.

The Reeds had settled onto an ideal eighty acres four years ago upon emerging from the Ozarks on the Old Southwest Trail. The lower acreage of short-grass prairie along a clear creek lined by cottonwoods would grow the corn they needed for animals and food, with a little left over for the family recipe. The sloped back forty were graced by an oak and hickory forest that would feed the fires for James's smithy and Benjamin's still.

The father was now seventy-seven years old with a stoop to his walk from the anterior head carriage of his youthful winters of near starvation in Virginia's Tazewell settlement. Benny's gait, though, was still vigorous after his middle years of plenty on the Licking River in Kentucky.

The only remnants of his red-headedness were a small patch in his otherwise gray beard and a hazel eye that only he thought of as the namesake for the valley below their Arkansas land. Like the old dog he was, Benjamin was up and out at dawn to see what the nighttime brought down from the hills above Hazel Valley.

Stop moving and start dying, Benny cautions as he reaches for the brass handle of the newfangled metal latch they had just gotten from the trading post at Cane Hill.

Sure do appreciate you firing up the smithy, Pop, but we've enough of the clear and the char to last the winter so no need to stir that pot.

Never you mind, Jim. I'm heading up to see old man Whitaker today.

Chapter 20: Whitaker Point

Damnedest thing up to Cave Mountain last night, proclaims a wrinkled man from a rocking chair on the front porch of an old cabin sinking into the hillside.

You don't say, Benjamin prods as he gingerly slips back into a neighboring chair and passes the powder horn.

Plumb near tuckered out when I gets to the crag, Whitaker continues, uncorking the makeshift flask and taking a slug. Looked down and seed a herd shuffling along the Military Road.

Whewee, ain't seen a line of buffalo in many a year, Benny marvels, pulling the strap back from the older man and tipping back his own shot.

Benjamin Reed had seen many changes in the four years he'd been in Arkansas. A rapid influx of settlers from the east along with their livestock and horses had driven the formerly vast bison herds farther west. Trading posts had sprouted along all the trails for the farming, hunting, and household needs of the newcomers. Longhorns grazed on the Texas plains were continually rustled north through the Ozarks to markets in St. Louis. The wild territory Benjamin had dreamed of had become populous enough by 1836 to become the twenty-fifth American state.

Tweren't bison them soldiers was ushering west, Whitaker cries, shaking his head side to side in time to the to-and-fro of his creaky wooden rocker.

Why would they be bringing beeves thataway? Bennie wonders aloud.

Not cows or pigs, the older man whispers, bringing his rocker to a stop. Pitiful sight, it was people.

Where you reckon they was heading?

Cane Hill's the next trading post.

I'll be, Benny declares. That's where I'm going of a morning.

Chapter 21: Cane Hill

Woa Marty, Benjamin commands his favorite quarter horse with a little pull on the reins as they approach the spinning mill wheel of the Cane Hill trading post. What in tarnation?

Soldiers are taking them dirty Indians to Oklahoma, a teenager calls up in the steady rain as he offers to hobble the sorrel gelding.

You'd be a might worse off herded five-hundred miles, Benny mumbles as he slips in the mud while swinging off the young horse named for President Martin Van Buren.

Still sir, the boy calls back leading the skittish animal to a long hitching post beside a nibbled down canebrake on the high prairie of the Springfield plateau west of the Ozarks. Cherokee don't belong out here.

That was precisely the problem for the eastern tribes being displaced west since the Indian Removal Act of 1830 - not belonging anywhere. Van Buren had been elected in 1836 and continued the removal policies of his Democratic predecessor Andrew Jackson. The prairie hills set aside for the Cherokee in the northeast corner of Oklahoma Territory were still shared bison hunting grounds for Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, and Osage peoples.

A more immediate issue for those already on what would become known as the Trail of Tears was the privation that a long foot journey to nowhere engendered. Both the starving old and very young succumbed to the pneumonia, measles, and typhoid diarrhea that quickly spread through huddled campsites. An even more virulent if less age-discriminant European disease had arrived by the time the Cherokee were in the Ozarks.

Seeing as I can't read the small print, would you be so kind? Benjamin asks a shriveled man staring up at a government flyer posted on the log wall at the storefront.

Well now young fellow, the grey-maned elder begins with a wry laugh that breaks into a dry cough. It says to not do what you're doing, fraternizing with the prisoners.

Take these, proffers Benny holding out a burlap sack and a glass jar of clear liquid and nodding toward clumps of people squatting beside the creek. Corndodgers for the young'uns and my recipe for what ails you.

Plenty of firewater traders follow us, the pock-marked old man rasps between coughs, accepting the food and ignoring the jar.

Chapter 22: Busted

Hold your horses, shouts James Reed in front of the still in the chill of a late October morning up in the back hollow.

You...ain't...seen...the evil, his father coughs, his right hand smoothly lifting a hatchet even as his speech is interrupted by hacking.

Benjamin Reed had felt triply ill after his visit to the Cane Hill trading post. Some of the Cherokee risking their lives for a sip of whiskey had been sickening enough. It was made worse by the realization that back country distillers like himself had been preying on hopelessness. Then there was the cough that had now brought out sores in his mouth and throat.

Having lived his entire life on the remote frontiers of western Virginia and mountainous Kentucky, Benjamin hadn't been exposed to all of the European diseases that had rampaged through the eastern Native American communities. Being immune-naive to *Orthopox* and other viruses meant that the illness would be much more severe if he was exposed. By the time he got to Arkansas in the 1830s, old Benny had sense enough to keep a worsening cough away from friends and family.

Don't you go ruining our livelihood, pleads the son holding his arms up to shield the giant pot.

I'll ask...one more...time, Benjamin warns as he hefts the hatchet handle behind his right ear.

You ain't no William Tell, laughs James as the first shafts of sunlight beaming over the hillside glint off the still to appear as a copper apple sitting above his left shoulder.

Chapter 23: Heads And Tails

I just don't get it, begins a shaky James from his seat on a moss-covered boulder, the saffron-colored leaves of a cottonwood crinkling above his head in the fall breeze. Why bust the pot when it's half full?

Never...you...mind, coughs Benjamin levering the blade from a wide gash in the copper still and swinging again.

Keeping the heads and draining the rest is no way to make money for old rope, the son continues, regaining composure after his father takes a second swing.

Best...to stick...to one's knitting, Benny responds as he heeds his own advice and tears open the rest of the copper pot.

The old man had needed to keep some distance from his immovable son blocking the still. He knew that the itchy red spots emerging on his arms and under his beard were just the beginning. Smallpox could take down a previously unexposed settler family as easily as a Native American one.

Just before Benjamin threw the ax he had gotten a memory flash of a moonlit night beside a creek. Back then the clatter of his dropped hatchet had spooked the long-haired girl squatting at a little waterfall above his lean-to. This time around his throwing arm was unleashed by the sudden realization that he'd spent his life chasing a Cherokee dream.

What are you really up to, Pop? James continues as the warmth of the late fall sun finally reaches the creek. I've seen you saving the heads and tails over this past moon.

Maybe...I aimed...too high, wheezes the stooped old man shuffling back down the hollow.

Chapter 24: The Day Of The Dead

Get away! shouts the old man huddled under a rock overhang on the western slope of Cave Mountain.

Let's go home, James quietly answers while stooping into the dark maw of Benjamin's secret cave.

You all don't want what I have, Benjamin groans as a raven croaks from the steep hillside above them.

Alicy done broke out in chicken pox on the way to Little Rock, counters James reaching a hand down to his father. We'll have hallow's eve at home.

Thinking he was dying anyway, Benjamin Reed had waited for a chance to do so alone. A perfect opportunity arose when his catching of the pox coincided with a family trip for the first fall festival at the newly completed Arkansas State House. After the rest were gone he'd climbed on his young pack horse with a blanket and a horn flask containing his insurance policy, the toxic heads and tails from a moonshine run.

Old Benny had found the small cavern on a trek up to Whitaker Point the previous winter. He'd noticed a shaft of steam rising in the chilly dawn from a spot on the hillside above the narrow trail. Scrambling up to discover the hidden mouth, he'd immediately pegged it as his own private mausoleum, never imagining someone else could find him there.

How'd you track me down way up here anyways? Benjamin asks from atop his roan gelding.

That danged horse of yours knew right where to go, calls James over his shoulder as they pick their way down the rocky slope.

Martin Van Buren always was a good egg, but I sent him home to be by my lonesome.

No sense suffering alone, Pop. When your time comes we'll bury you in Hazel Valley.

That good equine egg settled into a trot once they reached the main trail, and Benny Reed began to whistle in time to the gelding's steps. Soon they were joined by a big black bird flapping along from tree to tree. After another half mile the dying old coot caught a flash of red from the corner of his eye and broke into a song that lasted almost all the way home:

I've come to town to see you all,

I ask you how d'ye do?

I'll sing a song, not very long,

About my long tail blue.

Oh! for the long tail blue.

Oh! for the long tail blue.

I'll sing a song not very long

about my long tail blue.

If you want to win the Ladie's hearts,

I'll tell you what to do;

Go to a tip-top tailor's shop,

And buy a long tail blue.

Oh! for the long tail blue.

Oh! for the long tail blue.

I'll sing a song...

Postscript

Benjamin Reed married Charity Vaughan on December 17, 1792 in Warren County, North Carolina. He obtained land grants for sixty acres in Tazewell, Russell County, Virginia in 1805 and for three-hundred acres in Morgan County, Kentucky (now Magoffin County) in 1824. There the couple raised their children in the Cow Creek community near Stella, Kentucky on the Johnson Fork of the Licking River. This is the extent of the definitive record for my great-great-great-grandfather.

Reed family oral tradition adds that Benjamin had fought in the revolutionary war Battle of King's Mountain, though the surviving soldier rolls for that battle do not list him for either side. There are also recurrent rumblings that the family has Native American blood. The Cow Creek drainage is on former Cherokee land and is just over the ridge from an early mixed race or Melungeon community in Royalton, Kentucky. That land, along with most of eastern Kentucky when it was part of the Virginia colony, had been claimed by the Colonel William Preston family of Blacksburg, Virginia.

The spoken history adds that Old Benny moved on to Arkansas late in life, and this is corroborated by a death record for a Benjamin Reed in Washington County, Arkansas in 1837. Coincidentally or not, Washington County is adjacent to and formerly part of the Cherokee reservation in Oklahoma.

Two professional genealogists, one pre- and one post-internet, reported that the birthplace for Benjamin Reed of Magoffin County, Kentucky was uncertain, though most likely in either Monroe County, Virginia or Gates County, North Carolina. Since Monroe County has since been excluded by a death record on a conflicting date, Gates County on the Albemarle Sound is the most likely birthplace for my family's progenitor.

The Albemarle colony was initially peopled, after the Native American dispersal, by ex-patriots from Jamestown, Virginia. Among the first settlers of Jamestown in 1607 was a blacksmith named George Read who soon disappears from resident lists. In 1622 a James Read, blacksmith and soldier, is listed as having died in Jamestown. These disparate tidbits of history are the basis for parts of this conjectural family origin story.

The Jamestown and Albemarle connections notwithstanding, my ancestor Benjamin Reed apparently had three distinct lives, first in Tazewell, Virginia, then in Cow Creek, Kentucky, and finally in Washington County, Arkansas. This is not an unusual life trajectory for male heads-of-household of the colonial period when women were at high

risk of early death during childbirth. What is unusual is the Jamestown immigration point for a Scotch-Irish family, most of whom arrived in the northeast and traveled across Pennsylvania and down the Shenandoah Valley before settling in the Appalachians. Skilled craftmanship in smithing and distilling would have been welcomed in any community and could have accounted for the Reed family's unusual pathway.

Benjamin's great-great-granddaughter, my own mother, was a sworn teetotaler after an uncle gave her a swig to calm her sixteen-year-old anxiety before a grandmother's funeral. She slept through the important passing and never forgave him or the family recipe that had been passed down through the generations on Cow Creek.

As Benjamin Reed's descendant with bicolored eyes (heterochromia, an autosomal dominant genetic trait) historically associated with psychic abilities referred to as the second sight, his life story as presented here feels representational, so, barring any additional records coming to light, this short story is what I see for The Three Deaths Of Old Benny Reed.