

'Hangman's Oak' the scene of Surry's last lynching

The oak tree from which Tom Allison was hung over 85 years ago stood in the middle of the highway right-of-way one mile from the Dobson courthouse. The tree was known as "Hangman's Oak" and was cut down in the early 1960s as it became rotten and decayed; it had long stood as a reminder of Surry County's last lynching.

Reprinted from The Yadkin Valley News, July 28, 1892:

It was done on Saturday and in broad day. Allison is caught and is now on trial for his life.

On last Saturday evening on the Main Street of this city was enacted one of the most horrible tragedies that this section has ever witnessed.

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turers, had for some time been boasting of his superiority as a marksman. He had also entertained the determination to take the life of W.H. Brown, shipping clerk for Messrs. Sparger Bros. The true reason for this is not exactly known, however there are witnesses who declare that they had heard him express himself that way.

It seems that Allison tried to pick at Brown in several ways to have a chance to carry out his hellish desire. He told Brown he bet he could beat him in a foot race. Brown said he couldn't. Allison wanted to bet \$2.50 on it and challenged Brown to meet him at a livery stable Saturday afternoon. Brown thought no more about it so we learn, and being a heavy man probably took the idea of him running a foot race

as absurd. Anyhow Brown did not go. After a while Allison met Brown and they began talking. Allison told Brown he wasn't a man of his word and then they passed some sharp language. They were walking along in front of the Allred Block when Allison cursed Brown, the latter resenting it with his fist. Allison hit Brown with his cane. When Brown caught the cane Allison pulled out his pistol, stepped back and shot twice with deliberate aim. He pulled down again but it failed to go off. The two shots had taken effect, one in his chest and the other in his side and Brown reeled and fell dead.

Hardly had he fell before the whole Main Street was on fire with excitement and people went wild yelling "catch Allison, catch him!" It was a wild and desperate chase, Allison running for his life. Mr. Mart Griffith made a short cut from behind Graves' warehouse and nabbed the murderer just as he was turning down Rockford Street. A crowd soon had him and he was, after some preliminaries, taken to the calaboose where he was chained down.

Brown's bleeding body was taken to the rear of Taylor & Banner's Drug Store and bathed and dressed.

The Knights of Pythias, of which order he was a member, spared no pains to care for the corpse of their dead brother. They had a nice coffin purchased and he was placed therein. The funeral services were conducted by Rev. L.R. Pruett at the Baptist church Sunday afternoon and there was a tremendous crowd present. He was laid to rest in Oakdale by the Knights.

Mr. Brown was a clever, kind and well-intending gentleman. Was no one's enemy. He came from here western Virginia but was originally from Georgia. He seemed to have no parents, but had an only sister in Alabama. Though among strangers he died among friends.

Allison has long been known as a scoundrel, having previous to this killed two men. He is now on trial at Dobson for his life

Sept. 15, 1892:-The Yadkin Valley News: The Murderer of Three Men at Last Pays the Penalty of his Crimes—It was all Done in Secret

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Dobson. The rain was pouring on him." This was the rest of the information. All we could get.

But the News was not satisfied with this, and after inquiring from those who had seen the jailer and Coroner we were enabled to give the following impartial and of course vague report:

About one o'clock on Monday night last a posse of men supposed to be about twenty in number went to the county jail. The crowd made out they had a

prisoner. One of the number played off that way. Part of the crowd seemed deputized to keep guard around the jail while the rest entered. They knocked on the front door and said they had a prisoner. Jailer Reid, who tried to do his duty, went to the door, and on opening it, was seized, his lamp being shaken from his hands. The key to Allison's cell was demanded and Reid refused, whereupon they made threats and after a

while found the keys. They made the jailer go with them. Allison and McKnight were in the same cell. McKnight said, "O God, they are after me." Allison replied, "No they are after me." One of the posse said, "We ain't after you, Mack." They seized Allison in his night-clothes and took him out. Despite of his pleadings they hastily rode away.

The jailer, true to his duty, rushed over and rang the Court House bell, but nothing of note could be

done. After some search the body of Allison was found swinging to the tree.

It is needless to conjecture who composed the posse. There are some who think one way and some who think another. There are rumors that Georgians did it. There are rumors that say Mount Airy did it. 'Tis true some horses were taken but who did it the wild waves will have to answer.

As to the affair we have nothing to say.

THE CORNER'S VENDIOT

W. J. McCuffin Writes the News About the Allison Lynching

Dobson, N.C. September 19th --As you have been informed, on the night of the 12th inst., between the hours of twelve and two our town was aroused from its slumbers by the ringing of the Court House bell, and in a few minutes the information was spread that Tom Allison was taken from the jail by a crowd of masked men who were armed and who overpowered the jailer, Mr. H. J. Reid. About two or three o'clock I was informed of all that had transpired that "Allison was lynched, that citizens of the town had followed on in the direction of the lynchers and that they had found the lifeless body of Allison hanging to the limb of a white oak tree about one mile from the Court House on the public road leading from Dobson to Mt. Airy." I took no steps in the premises until daylight, at which time I proceeded to hold an inquest. From the fact of the lynchers going in the direction of Mount Airy rumors began to float around that the people of Mt. Airy did it, or were at least responsible for it. I summoned such persons as the jurors desired and as I thought could throw any light on the matter. We continued the investigation until Wednesday when we adjourned until Saturday, during which time I summoned several citizens of the town of Mount Airy all of whose testimony was carefully taken down and thoroughly weighed, and from the testimony of some thirty witnesses there was no development sufficient to warrant the jury in coming to a conclusion as to who the guilty parties were. So that their verdict was that "T. H. Allison came to his death by hanging at the hands of masked men to the jury unknown." In this matter I tried to discharge my duty as a county official and I think my jury did also. And not withstanding this man Allison was considered a dangerous, reckless man, having taken the lives of two men, he was at the time in the strong grasp of the law and doubtless deserved confign punishment at the hands of the law. I greatly deplore the fact of this assumption of authority by private individuals and were these offenders of the law citizens of Surry Co. then there is certainly an abnormal state of society greatly to be lamented.

Allison : Hangings
Tree

Yachin Valley
12-2-12

TOM ALLISON LYNCHED

A Mob Swings Him to a White-Oak Tree

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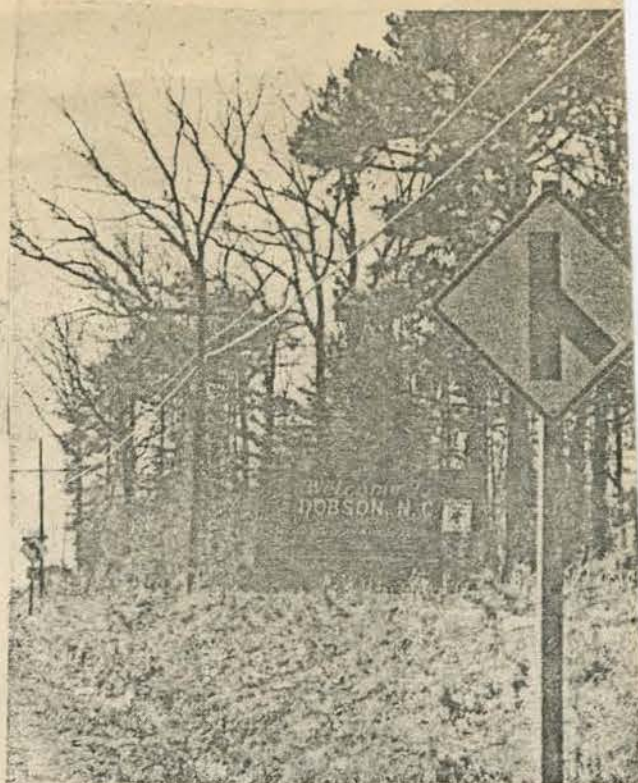
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As to the affair we have nothing to say. We are for peace, and opposed to lynching, but it is to be hoped that Surry courts will hereafter keep this in mind when prosecuting capital cases, and learn a lesson therefrom.

The body of Allison was taken to Statesville for interment.

The Allison Tree



The Allison Tree stood between the road sign and the "Welcome to Dobson" marker.

DOBSON — Do famous old trees have ghosts that can be made friends with?

If they don't, it might pay Haden Wood to close up his Allison Tree Service. For, they say, a ghost, when in a crabby mood, can bring you to ruin.

The Allison Tree Service (not an organization of tree surgeons, but a filling station) is located on old U.S. 601 and stands close by what used to be the best known tree in Surry County.

The Allison Tree.

Lynch Mob Victim

Where Tom Allison, victim of a 19th century lynch mob, dangled from a rope.

Nobody seems to be able to keep the Allison Tree Service going for long. For some reason or another, they move on. But Haden Wood and his wife, Rosella, who took over the operation last May, have every intention of trying.

They're sprucing up the place.

"It was just a junk yard when we came here," said Mrs. Wood. "But we've been cleaning and I have 40 rose bushes and 20 silver lace vines on order, and I already have 400 different kinds of German bearded irises and lots of canna lilies — red, orange, yellow and speckled."

She's not pessimistic at all about Mr. Allison's ghost.

"We've had a lot of people stop here from out of state, even from Canada, looking for that old tree," she said, "but it's not here anymore. It's done died and been cut down."

"But everybody in Surry County that's 20 years old can remember that tree," said Mr. Wood.

Hanging Limb Died

"The hanging limb died first and fell off the tree," said his wife.

Last summer, Mr. Wood continued, an old gentleman in his 80s came up from the Sandhills just to see the tree and picked out an oak that he thought was it. "I didn't

have the heart to tell him any different."

Mr. Wood noted, that from what he has been told, Mr. Allison had a habit of carrying a gun and people were plenty afraid of him, especially when he was drinking.

According to verbal tradition, Mr. Allison was accused of murdering a Mount Airy man, and a group of the dead man's friends came over to Dobson riding horseback and carrying guns. They persuaded the jailer to hand over the key to the cell.

Whereupon they put Mr. Allison on a horse, took him to the tree (about a mile from the jail), placed a rope around his neck, tied the other end to a limb, led the horse out from under him and departed the scene.

A farmer, so the story goes, was curing tobacco nearby and watched Mr. Allison struggling to free himself as he dangled and could have lended a helping hand had he not been afraid that one of the Mount Airy men might still be looking and turn a weapon on him.

Mrs. Elbert Shelton, who lives with her husband in a house within sight of where the tree used to stand, allows that Mr. Allison must have been "a pretty mean man for them to have hanged him."

But, she pointed out, the incident happened so long ago that it is rarely discussed anymore. "There's not many people around now that ever mentions it," she said.

Several years back, her husband owned and operated the Allison Tree Service for a while but finally sold it. The tree, she said, was cut down around 1960 and never was a good drawing card for the business, anyhow.

"Why," she said, "that filling station has changed hands a half dozen times."

Did Tom Allison's ghost have something to do with it?

Well, Mr. and Mrs. Wood aren't making complaints about any disgruntled spirit. So far, you might say, they and Mr. Allison's ghost are getting along on good terms.

Main Street Shooting Recalled

—From Yadkin Valley News—
Aug. 25, 1892

Shot Down In Cold Blood

Tom Allison Kills W.H. Brown
On Main Street (Mount Airy).

It was done on Saturday and in broad day. Allison is caught and is now on trial for his life. On last Saturday evening on

the Main Street of this city was enacted one of the most horrible tragedies that this section has ever witnessed.

Tom Allison, the receiver for Messrs. Forkner, Oliver & Co., tobacco manufacturers, had for some time been boasting of his superiority as a marksman. He had also entertained the determination to take the life of W. H. Brown, shipping clerk for

Messrs. Sparger Bros. The true reason for this is not exactly known; however, there are witnesses who declare that they had heard him express himself that way.

It seems that Allison tried to pick at Brown in several ways to have a chance to carry out his hellish desire. He told Brown he bet he could beat him in a foot race. Brown said he couldn't. Allison wanted to bet \$2.50 on it and challenged Brown to meet him at a livery stable Saturday afternoon. Brown through no more about it so we learn and, being a heavy man, probably took the idea of his running a foot race absurd. Anyhow, Brown did not go. After a while Allison met Brown and they began talking. Allison told Brown he wasn't man of his word and then they passed some sharp language. They were walking along in front of the Allred block when Allison cursed Brown, the latter resenting it with his fist.

Allison hit Brown with his cane. When Brown caught the cane, Allison pulled out his pistol, stepped back, and shot twice with deliberate aim. He pulled down again but it failed to go off. The two shots had taken effect, one in his chest and the other in his side and Brown reeled and fell dead.

Hardly had he fell before the whole Main Street was on fire with excitement and people went wild yelling, "Catch Allison, catch him!" It was a wild and desperate chase. Allison running for his life, Mr. Mart Griffith made a short cut from behind Graves' warehouse and nabbed the murderer just as he was turning down Rockford Street. A crowd soon had him and he was, after some preliminaries, taken to the calaboose where he was chained down.

Brown's bleeding body was taken to the rear of Taylor and Banner's Drug Store and bathed and dressed.

The Knights of Pythias, in which order he was a member, spared no pains to care for the corpse of their dead brother. They had a nice coffin purchased and he was placed therein. The funeral services were conducted by Rev. L.H. Pruitt at the Baptist Church Sunday afternoon and there was a tremendous crowd present. He was laid to rest in Oakdale by the Knights. (Note—Brown is believed to have been the first person buried in Oakdale Cemetery).

Brown was a clever, kind, and well-intending gentleman. He was no one's enemy. He came from western Virginia but was originally from Georgia. He seemed to have no parents, but had an only sister in Alabama. Though among strangers, he died among friends.

Allison has long been known as a scoundrel, having previous to this killed two men.

Tom Allison's Lynching

—From "Folk Lore of Early Settlers of America," Vol. III, by W. R. Morris, Fancy Gap, Virginia.

—The Tom Allison Lynching

On August 20, 1892, Tom Allison of Iredell County, N. C., employed by a tobacco warehouse company of Mount Airy, N. C., on the main street of this thriving little tobacco village, and on a short distance from where Sheriff C. H. (Cape) Haynes was standing, shot and killed a very prominent citizen of Mount Airy and Surry County, W. H. Brown.

A deputy sheriff, Mart Griffith, arrested Allison and placed him in the Dobson jail. As told to me by a colored man—John Snow, who drove an ice wagon for an ice company in Winston-Salem in 1925. "When a small boy, he was staying with his aunt just

outside of Dobson on the Mount Airy road. On a cool starry night (in September), he was playing on the bank of the road in front of his aunt's home when he saw a great crowd of men riding horses coming up the road. As they came nearer there got to be more men and horses, growing larger all the time, so it looked to him. They were making no noise as they rode along the rocky road. They had tied sacks around the horses' feet so that they would make no noise. He, being a lad of eight or ten years of age, became frightened and ran for the house.

The front and back doors were open and he ran through the house screaming. His aunt and others who lived nearby ran him down but he was so scared for some time he could not tell what he had seen. About the time he had made them understand what he had seen, the colored population had

gathered to learn what the excitement was all about. As the man on the horses passed back in the direction of Mount Airy in the same quiet way, the older ones became excited and began praying which continued all night. Snow said he went to bed and slept all night and that next morning down the road a short distance a man was hanging on the limb of an oak tree. Tom Allison had been taken from the Dobson Jail during the night and hung. The tree has become known as "Hangman's Oak." This tree stood by the side of the road on Route 601 about one mile northeast of Dobson until it was cut down in the 1960's.

Fisher's Peak

Fisher's Peak, small stream, was named for Fisher's Peak, and Fisher's Peak was named for Col. Daniel Fisher who had charge of surveying the line between Virginia and North Carolina at this point. He took the line across the top of the peak, and the legend is that the exertion killed him and he was buried on top of the peak.

The area along the river was once an old muster ground and is a setting for a delightful collection of stories called "Fisher River Sketches," dealing with pioneers beginning about the year 1820, and authored by a contemporary.

Lynching At Dobson Recalled

—Yadkin Valley News—
Sept. 15, 1892

A Man Swings To A White Oak Tree

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The jailer, true to his duty,

rushed over and rang the Courthouse bell, but nothing of note could be done. After some search, the body of Allison was found swung to a tree.

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The body of Allison was taken to Statesville for interment.

+Note: It was said that Mount Airy townsmen could recognize the horses whose owners had taken them out the night before from the livery stable.

The late Joe Haynes, it is said on good authority, witnessed the hanging when but a boy of

twelve because his father had promised him that he could go and did not back down on his word.

Inquest Held In Lynching

Yadkin Valley News
Sept., 1892

THE CORONER'S VERDICT

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So that their verdict was that "T. H. Allison came to his death by hanging at the hands of masked men to the jury unknown."



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p.167 (the Tom Allison Lynching)

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