

AN ANGEL IN DISGUISE? by Paul Riley

My mother, Edna Riley, was frightened. She had stood on the front porch of the small parsonage at Rock Lick in Breathitt County, Kentucky, watching her husband, John Riley, walk down the steps, out the front gate, then turn left and go down the main path carrying his suitcase. She watched him until he disappeared over the next ridge, then she rushed into the house and burst into tears. It was 1934. Two years earlier, John and Edna were married. They were responsible for Edna's brother Alva, age 13, and sister Vera, age 12. Edna's father and mother had both died a few years before so they took Alva and Vera with them when they were appointed Free Methodist missionaries in Oakdale, Kentucky. Their son, David, was born in Oakdale in May, 1933. They then were assigned to Rock Lick, a more remote mission station 5 miles back in the woods from Oakdale. The Mission Station had been closed because the previous Missionaries were chased away by the moonshiners. John then had to leave for several days to travel to the General Conference of the Free Methodist Church in Winona Lake, Indiana. John had to go because he was to be Ordained as a Minister. Since Edna was pregnant with her second child and they had no money for her train ticket, she had to stay behind. Edna had reason to be scared. Breathitt County was a dangerous place at that time. In fact, it was often called "Bloody Breathitt County" because of all the feuds. At least once a week, someone was killed in a family feud. Nearly everyone, even women, carried guns in case they met a rival.

John and Edna had found that they were surrounded by moonshiners. One didn't have to go far into the woods until one came across an illegal still! The local people didn't "cotton on" to "feerineers" as the Rileys were called. Because John was a minister, and preached about the evils of alcohol use, the locals were convinced he was an informant for the "Revenueers", federal agents who were looking for illegal stills. They gave John a warm reception when he first arrived. Shots were fired under his horse hoping the horse would buck him off! Stones from sling shots whizzed through the window, some hitting him when he was preaching. Drunks rode past the house at night singing off color songs or shouting threats and religious slurs and shooting into the air. The Rileys were having trouble sleeping at night! One night a bomb was even set off under the front of the church during altar call. The whole front of the church was lifted momentarily off the pillar supports! Edna now expected that the moonshiner would be bolder once they found that Edna was alone in the Parsonage without John to protect her!

The week before John left, Alva and Vera had returned to boarding school at Oakdale. Now John was leaving Edna alone with David, her son, who was a year old. She was expecting her second child. Their salary was only a few cents a week, and even with John supplementing their income by working for 10 cents an hour cutting and hauling firewood, Edna was left with barely enough money for food. He was now on his way on foot to the railroad station 5 miles away to catch a train to start his trip to Indiana.

Edna had never felt more scared and alone. Suddenly, she heard a loud "woof, woof" from the front porch. She looked out the window, and there was a riderless horse with a man chasing it. Then she saw a huge black dog on the porch. It had scared the horse so badly it had reared up and dumped its rider! When Edna went to the front door the dog became very friendly, wagging its tail and acting like it belonged at that house. As soon as any troublemaker came down the path, the dog would growl and bark. Yet if any friendly person came, the dog would wag its tail and permit them to even enter the house. Horses were especially afraid of the big black dog! The dog alerted Edna when anyone came near the House!

That night Edna slept soundly. The dog was on guard all night. The next day Edna fed the dog but it ate very little and refused to leave the yard. Soon she noticed that none of the trouble makers were riding past the house. Edna enjoyed sitting on the porch every evening with David and the dog.

One day the dog went down the steps, out the gate, turned to the right, and trotted down the path. It entered the woods without even looking back. Edna then looked down the path to her left. There, coming over the rise about half a mile away was a tall figure. As the figure came nearer she noticed it was a man carrying a suitcase. Indeed, John Riley had returned. She looked again to her right but the dog did not reappear.

That night they sat on the porch hoping the dog would return, but to no avail. After a few days they decided

to try to find the dog which must have been a stray. John's ministry included traveling on horseback to surrounding areas. He inquired about the dog where ever he went. Edna also asked the postman and other travelers if they knew anything about the dog. The dog had many distinctive features so should have been easy to find. Whoever they asked gave the same replies; "There hain't no seech dawg in these here parts." or "I hain't never seed, nor heerd tell, of dat dawg."

John and Edna concluded the dog must have been sent to watch over Edna and David and was now elsewhere helping some scared and lonely person.

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