

ASBURY SPICER STORY, CIRCA 1910, AS TOLD TO ME BY LEVI SPICER, IN 1947.
 [Levi was the nephew of Asbury Spicer, brother of Asbury Fugate Spicer, and son of Jim “Buck” Spicer, and Sarah (nee Howard) Spicer]

My parents, John and Edna Riley, served as Missionaries for the Free Methodist Church in Breathitt County, Kentucky, from 1932 to 1936. Most of the time was spent at Rock Lick Mission surrounded by the Crawford clan. There was, initially, a lot of antagonism toward these “Furrineers” as they called the Rileys. Many people thought that John was in “cahoots” with the “Revenueers” who were looking for illegal stills. Stones, from slingshots, were fired through the window, and whizzed by him as he preached. Shots were fired under his horse as he rode the circuit. A blasting powder bomb went off under the front of the church during “altar call”. Momentarily the front of the church was lifted off its supports. Finally, the Rileys gained the love and support of the local people. Some became their life-long friends! John kept a diary for forty weeks, during that time he recorded over forty people being killed in feuds in Breathitt County. I, Paul Riley, was born in the mission house 9 January, 1935. (My Birth certificate says Key, Kentucky.)

In early January, 1938, my family left for South Africa. There we were trapped by W.W. II until 1946. In 1946 we returned to Kentucky and John, my father, was appointed pastor of the Oakdale F.M. Church, but the next year his Mission Board decided to send the Rileys back to South Africa. John and Edna had to move out of the Parsonage, and then travel to raise money for their support. My older brother, David, and younger sister, Lois, were permitted to stay in the School Dormitories, but Miss Anderson, the principal, said that my 8 year old brother was too young, and I was too wild to stay there, because, with my dad’s permission, I had stepped off Campus!. However, boys who had access to moonshine, tobacco and guns were permitted to stay there. But being a preacher’s kid, I should know better than leave the Campus without permission from the Principal.

Fortunately, Levi and Nannie Spicer, who lived about half a mile from Oakdale Vocational School, agreed to keep me and my younger brother, Tom, so we could continue our education. The previous year Levi was dying from Tuberculosis. But, when the pastor with a few Church Members, had a healng service at Levis home. Levi was instantly healed! Levi, Nannie, and their adopted teen age daughter Geneva, were very honest, upright and caring people. Levi Spicer told me and Tom, this story, plus other stories, about life in “them thar hills”, where he had lived all his life.

In June of 1910, eight year old Levi and his older brother, seventeen year old Asbury Fugate (AF) Spicer, were walking together minding their own business. For a long time AF had been repeatedly harassed by his twelve year old cousin, Charley Spicer, son of “Big Asbury”, who was the brother (some say half brother) of Jim “Buck” Spicer. Jim was father of AF and Levi. Charley may have been disrespecting his cousin, claiming that AF’s father, forty two year old Jim, was the bastard son of Bryant Spicer, whereas Charley’s thirty eight year dad, Asbury, was the legitimate son! Charley may have felt superior because Jim and his large family were “share croppers” on land owned by Big Asbury. As the two boys were walking past a deep mud puddle, Charley raced his horse through the puddle splashing them with mud. That was the last straw for AF! He sprinted forward and grabbed Charley and pulled Charley off his horse and gave him a “whuppin”. Charley threatened to get his dad involved as he got back on his horse and raced to tell his dad, Asbury, about how he had been abused and humiliated, in front of other people, by his older cousin.

Big Asbury was a notorious murderer and a hired assassin. He started his life of crime seven years previously being hired by Judge James Hargis to kill any political opponents, including James Cockrill, Dr. B.D. Cox and Capt. Bill Strong. He may have killed twenty people in his lifetime. For one hundred dollars he would kill anybody. He had even shot Revenue Officers who were looking for illegal stills. He used a 30-30 Winchester repeating rifle loaded with “exploding bullets”. It was also fitted with special “sniper sights”. Most of the other men just used muzzle loading “hog rifles” for hunting, they could not afford the new rifles with more expensive cartridges! (I think the name “hog rifle” was because these guns were used to kill hogs when they were butchered every fall or early winter. Money was saved because the lead bullet could be retrieved from the hog, melted down, recast, and reused!)

AF and Levi then walked home. Like most other houses, their house was built on the hillside. The flat bottom land was needed to grow corn, tobacco, alfalfa, and other crops. When they got home, AF started walking down to the bottom of the hill to join his father, Jim Buck, who was working down in their field. Jim also kept bees. Levi and his mother stayed at the house. Neither AF, nor his dad had any weapons with them; they did not know that Big Asbury and his sixteen year old daughter, Gertrude, were hiding in the bushes just below their house. After AF had passed them Asbury came out and cut off any retreat. AF suddenly heard Asbury’s threats, then he saw the gun, so he started running and zig-zaging, trying to dodge the bullets and reach the safety of the woods, but one of the bullets shattered AF’s leg. Levi and his mother, Sarah, were watching. She grabbed Jim’s loaded .38 revolver and ran down the hill to give it to her husband. Suddenly Gertrude, Asbury’s daughter, stepped in front of her and shot her twice in the chest with a .32 revolver. Levi’s mother never stopped running and gave the gun to her husband, Jim, who then started shooting at his brother who was out of ammunition. Asbury started running, zig-zaging and tumbling trying to dodge the bullets. He apparently was hit by a bullet but disappeared into the woods. Levi’s big brother and his mother were carried back to the house. No medical help was available. Some “religious people” came and prayed. They told Jim that his son, Asbury Fugate, would die, but his wife Sarah, would live! They were correct. The 30-30 “exploding” bullet (maybe a hollow point, or a Dum-dum) had made a mess of AF’s leg!

Asbury, the killer, was caught and tried. His defense apparently was that A.F. shot first, Asbury had the bullet wound to prove it! His daughter, Gertrude, said that Levi’s mother had her husband’s .38 revolver aimed at Asbury, her father’s chest, ready to pull the trigger, so Gertrude shot her twice in the chest to save Asbury’s life. Several of Asbury’s cronies kept repeating this story so some people believed it. In 1947 Levi’s dad, mom, and brother Roger “Rodge” were still alive. They lived at Mt. Carmel, near Kentucky Mountain Bible Institute run by Miss McConnel. Several times they walked to Oakdale to visit Levi. I met them. Levi’s dad, Jim, still kept his .50-70 rifle loaded at all times in case his brother, Asbury, would dare show his face again in “those parts”. Levi’s mother, Sarah, still had two bullets in her chest! She was still alive in 1957, at least according to one report!

With the help of his cronies, including the Sheriff, who apparently believed his defense, Asbury who had been given a life sentence, escaped from jail, after serving nine months. A price (?\$1,700) was placed on his head but he was never caught. He was traced to West Virginia where he had changed his name and become a “preacher”! Later on he may have returned to Kentucky but not to Breathitt County. One report says he died a natural death in 1944 and is buried near Williamsburg, Kentucky. However, in 1947 Levi thought Uncle Asbury may still be alive. Asbury’s son, Charley, also met an untimely death a few years

after his cousin's death; he was shot and killed by a Charley Noble! Somehow, Asbury was able keep in contact with some of his friends and family to the very end.

This is Levi's version of Asbury Spicer's story. I did hear it from an eye witness who was almost nine years old when his seventeen year old brother was killed.. His parents told exactly the same story. Now I am writing it from memory over sixty years later!

I am anxious to see 1910 newspaper or court record accounts of the trial of Asbury Spicer. The trial ended in Jackson, Kentucky Friday, November 4, 1910. Asbury was sentenced to life in Prison. But, after escaping, he was never caught, although he was wounded in at least two shootouts with his would be captors. His grandson, Jeffrey, said a chest wound resulted in a collapsed lung which plagued him the rest of his life.

P.S. UPDATE, 10 July 2015. Today I received an Email from Jeffrey Melton, who was born in 1955. He is Asbury Spicer grandson. He said that Big Asbury changed his name to Charles B, Smith before marrying Jeffrey's grandmother, Addie Mae Jordan, when she was sixteen years old. They had a baby they named "Charlie", probably named after Asbury's first son who had started the feud. But Baby Charlie died soon after he was born. Many years later, Addie learned her husband's true identity. Jeffrey's mother was Mary "Smith". Both ladies recalled with horror, seeing Asbury kill a Pinkerton Detective, named Bilbrey, with a straight razor, in their own kitchen. The officer had come to arrest Asbury. Both ladies, even five year old Mary, had to help Asbury dispose of all the "Evidence". They lived in great fear of Asbury. Asbury died in 1944. He is buried on Jeffrey's uncle's farm near Lancing, Tennessee. That is not very far from Williamsburg, Kentucky. I think Jeffrey Melton is the last person alive who really knows what happened to big Asbury. I, also, may be the last person to have been told the story of this tragedy by an eyewitness.

UPDATE:-November 7, 2015. Another Email from Jeffrey Melton:-His grandfather, Asbury Spicer, (alias Charles B. Smith), was born 6 February, 1872, He died 16 December, 1944. Asbury's last wife was Addie Mae Jordan; born 25 December, 1911. She died 29 July, 1990. Asbury is buried on his Uncle Ted's farm. Addie Mae is buried in Potter's Church Cemetery near Lancing. Jeffrey says that besides disguising himself as a preacher, Asbury had posed as a dentist and an optician. When he lived in Tennessee he was also a moonshiner. He and his wife had built their two story house and barn by themselves.

UPDATE:- October, 2015: I received an email from Susan Scheffler, who had found my report while trying to find out details of Little Asbury's murder. Her grandmother, Susie, was Levi Spicer's oldest sibling. Susie was 19 years old when her 17 year old brother was killed. Susie ended up marrying the postman, Al Roberts, who frequently brought her love letters from a suitor. She saw more of the postman than she saw of her suitor! The postman finally convinced her that he was a better "catch" for her. Susan S.'s father was Howard Roberts, son of Al and Susie. Susie's grandfather, Elijah Howard was killed on 19 February, 1906, by his son-in-law, Henry "Longboard" Turner, Her brother, Asbury Fugate, was killed June 1910, by her Uncle Asbury. Then, her cousin, Charley Spicer was killed by a Charley Noble. Finally, Susie son, Matthew, was killed in France during WWII. Susan says that Jim Buck's mother's maiden name was Fugate, hence Asbury Fugate, Levi's older brother. Susan has found a picture of Levi Spicer's grave on line. He was born 5 October, 1901. He died 2 September, 1984. He is buried in Riverside Cemetery in Hazard, Kentucky. Nannie Spicer died in 1986.

PAULM. RILEY MD; FACS, RIVERSIDE, CA Email:-hlinza@ymail.com

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