

Old Mystery Is Cleared Up

Identity Of Woman Who Danced Self To Death Finally Established - Or Is It?

After three-quarters of a century, the exciting mystery of the unknown lady who "danced herself to death" at historic Graham Springs, Harrodsburg, has been solved by the revelations of an aged Lexingtonian who only recently learned accidentally that there had been any mystery at all about the lady's identity and was sur-

seph W. Adams, of Lexington, happened to mention the incident recently to James Rupp who lives on Loudon Avenue. Mr. Rupp said "Why, I know who she was - you say nobody has found out in all these years?" and then the story was unfolded by Mr. Rupp.

"When a boy about 10 years old, living at Tazewell,

whom his wife had been living, was quite wealthy, and Sewell frequently had an urge to travel and see the world. He said his wife, Molly Black, had a small son at the time of her death, who was probably brought up in Laurel County, Ky., as Millie(?) Black was born there."

So the mystery is solved, and if there is space on the monument over the "long grave" at Graham Springs, the word "unknown" may be erased and "Mollie Black, wife of Joe Sewell, Tazewell, Tenn.

The above article was taken from a newspaper clipping in the Harrodsburg Historical Society library file. Although the newspaper was not identified as to name or date, it was possibly a Lexington paper sometime in the early 1900s.



prised to learn that the world had been in the least excited about the dramatic incident of antebellum days, and least of all that it was a mystery.

In front of the hotel at Graham Springs, on the expansive grounds that surround that beautiful resort is an old monument telling about the "unknown lady" buried here who in the gaiety of one of the nightly social functions held there before the '60s, dropped dead on the ballroom floor while dancing. The crowd that gathered around the beautiful lady was amazed and mystified to discover that not only did her escort not know who she was, but no one present knew her. All that was known was that she had come from "down South, and during the long years since, she has been referred to as the "unknown lady" and her grave as the "lone and mysterious grave."

The solution of the mystery after all this time came as unexpected as did the death of the young lady. Jo-

Ann., Joe Sewell, who was 40 years old then, told me about his wife 'dancing herself to death at Harrodsburg.' Her maiden name was Molly Black and she was Sewell's second wife. I think they were estranged at the time, as Sewell had a spirit of wanderlust and at the time of her death he was on the road with a show, he told me. It seems that she had gone to the famous springs to enjoy the gay whirl of the social life of those days, as was the general custom in the South. Today with modern news facilities, such a mystery would be solved in a few hours, of course, but in those days of slow travel and communication it is easy to conceive that her folks probably thought she was on an extended visit to relatives and long afterward learned of her disappearance only to attribute it to her sudden death in some out-of-the-way place unknown to them.

"Sewell's mother, whose name was Ann Kelly and with

A 160 Year Old Missing Person Case

(Editor's Note: The following was received from an investigator in Tennessee who is interested in identifying the unknown girl who danced herself to death at Graham Springs more than a century and a half ago. Any reader who may have information, clues, etc. is encouraged to contact him.)

In 1998 I worked the 30 year old Tent Girl case in Scott County. It took 10 years to find the missing link to that case but was finally able to positively identify the girl.

For more information on this case, go to <http://www.angelfire.com/tn3/masterdetective2/> Since then I have become involved with a group of people called the DoeNetwork (www.doenetwork.org) and we work unidentified cases throughout the world.

I first learned about the Harrodsburg case in late June. I was looking for an adventure in Kentucky and this one showed up in the search. And she was right up my alley! A Jane Doe... in Kentucky - more than a century ago!

"The Lady Who Danced Herself To Death" is about a 160 year old case! By far the oldest Jane Doe case I have ever encountered. Fitting she should be in Kentucky's oldest town of Harrodsburg -- Buried at the edge of Young's Park. She will be, by far, the oldest case soon to grace the files of the DoeNetwork.

There are several clues left behind as to who she might have been... alias, Virginia Stafford ... maybe Mollie Black Sewell? As I communicated with the Mercer County Public Library and a member of the local historical society ...I learned about her registering as Miss Virginia Stafford, a fictitious

name. She claimed to be the daughter of a Louisville Judge... but it seems this particular judge didn't have a daughter. Might there have been a clue left behind in Louisville folklore?

And years later ... Mr. Joe Sewell in Tazewell, Tennessee allegedly claims that estranged wife, Mollie Black Sewell, was the mystery woman. Even further rumors that she had a child who grew up in Laurel County, Kentucky. Maybe even unaware of his past? Maybe something that local historians from those areas can help lend a clue.

I have uncovered a clue that a man named Joe Sewell did exist during that time period in Tazewell ...but I have seen nothing on Mollie Sewell or a Mollie Black. And since none of the family ever officially came forward to verify any of the pieces to this mystery, this leaves her with a tentative ID at best.

The initial lure to the tale for me was the ghost story. I indeed did spend an evening at the park. I hoped to catch a glimpse of the girl ... who in Dr. Lynwood Montell's book, *Ghosts along the Cumberland*, ...still haunts the park. Could a clue lie in the southern tales of apparitions dancing in the park? Try as I might ... she and I did not cross paths that night.

But are there those out there that have seen what they

think to be the spirit of the "Girl Who Danced Herself To Death" at Graham Springs ... around 160 years ago?

I have to wonder how time has distorted the tale ... what really happened that night at the hotel? Why did she use a fictitious name ... and I venture further to say ... is she still here among us?

On a case like this one, a different approach is required. I can't find a private investigator ... or check driving records or the NCIC. We have to go back a bit more ... folklore, ghost stories and genealogy records. I hope anyone out there that might have information of any kind on the case would share it with me.

I will also be getting in touch with the good people of Laurel County and Jefferson County in Kentucky as well as Claiborne County Tennessee.

If you have any information about this case please contact me at: Todd Matthews, 121 Short Street, Livingston, TN 38570, 931-397-3893, or email me at jtmatthews@twlakes.net