"SILENT NIGHT"

In 1924, when I was eight years old, my family moved from Portsmouth, Ohio to a farm in the village of Hanging Rock, about twenty-five miles farther east. The house on the farm was built about 1840 and was as cold as ice in the winter. There was a fireplace in each room except the kitchen, which had a large coal burning cooking stove. My father, Ike Harrison, had to repair the fireplace in the living room when we moved in. It burned, but never seemed to put out any warmth. We spent most winter evenings in the dining room where the fireplace was bigger. We closed the door to the living room to make it cozy. Daddy was a carpenter and now worked for a furniture manufacturer outside Ironton, four miles away. He brought home wood flooring to rebuild all the floors. That stopped the drafts from the cracks in the old floor. The dinning room had a big table made of dark wood with six chairs. Daddy kept his rocking chair in there and Mama's sewing machine sat under a window so she had good daylight to work by. The radio was in that room as well. The living room had a hard divan and two soft chairs, a bookcase and library table that Daddy made. And there was this awful rug. There was no pad under it so it didn't feel soft. I hated cleaning it. We dampened corn meal to coat the rug and after the corn meal dried we swept it up. Seems like it took all day to clean up that blackened corn meal. I always wondered how much dirt was embedded in the rug that the corn meal didn't soak up. At least the surface was somewhat cleaned. The stairway to the second floor went up from the dinning room to a hallway, washroom and two large bedrooms. The one I shared with my sisters had two beds, one double bed and one larger bed left by the previous owners. In the winter we used featherbeds on the mattresses for warmth. I shared the double bed with my older sister, Charlotte so we could whisper into the night. Our little sister, Harriet, slept in my parents' room.

The ceilings upstairs were built low to keep the rooms warmer. But the low ceiling caused the window to reach almost to the floor, creating a draft that made the floor really cold.

Our farm wasn’t big but we raised enough for ourselves with lots left over to sell. Every summer we sold strawberries, blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries and enough vegetables to buy other supplies. There was a large, walk-in closet under the stairway where Mama stored food. Every summer, week-by-week, she canned and took the money we made selling and bought flour, sugar, meal and coffee, until by late fall the closet was full. Daddy had a smoke house where he stored the meat that was butchered in the fall. We had chickens in a small chicken house with its own wood stove. Mama killed a chicken, as needed, summer or winter, and gathered eggs every morning.

Back in Portsmouth both my parents had gone to Methodist churches, Daddy to Trinity Methodist and Mama to Mount Park. I never knew why she wouldn’t go to church with Daddy. Since I was old enough to remember neither one of them took us girls to church. When we moved to the farm Daddy drove to Haverhill to the only Methodist church there. Mama didn’t go anywhere. While we were living in Portsmouth Daddy belonged to an organization called “Sons of America,” known for its affiliation with the KKK. Most of the men in his church belonged to the SOA and he often went to political meetings at the church. In Portsmouth they mostly harassed Jews and Catholics. I went with Daddy to a cross burning once. There were so many people there, all in white hoods, singing “The Old Rugged Cross.” It was spooky and I never went back. After we moved to the farm Daddy didn’t go to political meetings anymore. I guess his attitudes changed or Mama changed him. She kept a crucifix in her jewelry box so I suspected she had been Catholic once. There was no Catholic Church in Hanging Rock. The local Catholics drove to Ironton for Mass. They were our neighbors and friends so he could

hardly wage war against them. Mama wouldn't have embarrassed Daddy by going to Mass, exposing the difference between them. I guess she considered his leaving the Klan behind a victory. Jews were off limits, too. From the time she was sixteen until she married at thirty-two, Mama had worked for a Jewish tailor in Portsmouth. He and his family were very good to his employees especially Mama, because she was so young and lived away from home. Mama remained friends with the Wiseman family and wouldn't have tolerated any bad talk about them. It seems my parents put their political and religious views aside for the happiness of marriage. She was almost an old maid and he a bachelor for life until they found each other. They weren't boisterous, talkative people. They were quiet, steady, hard working and loving. Well suited for one another I would say.

Life was good on our farm. It sat between the Ohio River and the hills and hollows north of the highway. Our farm was elevated just enough to not take water in the house when the river rose above flood stage. We had good neighbors, the Schillings and Bauers, one generation removed from Germany. Christian Shilling and John Bauer were opposites in personality. John was cold, proud and stern. Christian was laid back, friendly and generous to a fault. There was Elizabeth and Joseph Goldman. He was from Austria. She was born in Poland. They had met in a refugee camp in 1918 when they were teenagers. They were both Catholic and had started a big family. There were the Turners, Kellens and Davises who had been in Ohio for generations. Mama had worked with Maggie Davis for fourteen years at Abram Wiseman Tailor Shop in Portsmouth. Daddy and Whitt Davis had worked together at Breece Manufacturing Company in New Boston, just outside of Portsmouth. The Davises had moved to Hanging Rock first and told Daddy and Mama about the farm when it came up for sale. They were very good friends and since the Davises had no children, they doted over my sisters and me.

Less than a year after the stock market crash Daddy's job at the furniture plant in Hanging Rock disappeared. The plant closed down and the owners moved away. He got a job driving the school bus. Things were tight, but we had the farm and grew about everything we needed to eat. Mama made all our clothes from the cache of cloth she had stored in her cedar chest. Charlotte was Mama's helper in the house. I was Daddy's farmhand and loved it. Harriet was our pet, too young to be much help. My parents were industrious, loved us three girls and each other.

"If you work hard, take care of your loved ones and obey the law", Daddy would said, "You'll get by in the hard times. Laziness and bad deeds have a way of coming back on you. If we keep working and storing up what we need, God will take care of the rest." Others didn't have it so good.

Just before Thanksgiving, in 1931, there was a rash of thefts from the smoke houses in the area. The sheriff, C. E. Burridge, didn't get too interested until the thieves hit the Kellen's smoke house. The Kellens were descendants of the original founders of Hanging Rock and owned a big farm at Kellen's Landing, on the river. The thieves left no tracks or clues, so C.E. was stumped. Things were quiet for a couple of weeks and then meat started disappearing again. About two weeks before Christmas snow began to fall late at night. It fell hard and fast. The next morning there were tracks from Whitt Davis's assaulted smoke house. C.E. recruited Daddy and Whitt to help him follow the tracks. They walked about four miles up Pigeon Hollow Road, then through the woods to an isolated cabin covered in a blanket of white with a swirl of gray smoke coming from a metal chimney. C.E. paused a moment looking over the house and yard then warned Daddy and Whitt to stay behind and be quiet. He walked softly through the snow to a place where he could get a better look at the house. Eyeing the variety of footprints from the

front door to the back, he motioned for Daddy and Whitt to keep watch on the front door. The cabin was wide and built close to the foot of a hill. Between the back of the cabin and the hill was a root cellar that had been dug into the hillside. The roof of the root cellar extended to the back of the house making a covered entrance, probably to keep rain away from the door. The snow on that part of the roof wasn’t smooth like on the house, but tamped down and lumpy. C.E waved his hand for Daddy and Whitt to go back into the trees and he followed. He said he needed more men. He was familiar with who lived there. There were several men in the family and he didn’t know who might be in the house, or if they were armed.

The next day C.E., two deputies and four state troopers went back to the house on Pigeon Hollow and found the meat right where C.E. thought it was, on the roof of the root cellar, packed under the snow. He arrested Charles Miller and his brother, Thomas “Tennessee Tom” Miller. They were taken to Ironton because the jail at Hanging Rock was extremely old and too cold to use in the winter. Besides, C.E. didn’t want to deal with all the Millers who would come to the jail to see the brothers and protest their being locked up. The meat that was left was returned to the smoke houses. The men who had been robbed didn’t know anything about the Millers and their situation, but C.E. knew the brothers to be drinkers and quick to start a fight.

C. E. said that Charlie and Tom Miller had been ore haulers for Hanging Rock Iron before they cut back the workforce when the depression hit. Tom had worked and traveled in Tennessee in his younger years bringing back a little money and a reputation. Their father, Charles Sr. and two other brothers had also worked for the iron company. “Charles Sr. was a tough old bird, a heavy drinker in his youth, and not much of a farmer.” C.E. told Daddy. It was his wife who kept a small kitchen garden according to C.E.’s account. He and his boys preferred to hunt for meat and buy whatever else was needed. Charlie Sr. had retired in 1920 with a back

injury. He owned the cabin and the small farm plot in Pigeon Hollow and had looked after himself and his wife without difficulty until his boys lost their jobs. Two years without wages had made their situation desperate. Brothers, Robert and Samuel had taken their families to Huntington, West Virginia, where they had relatives, and found enough work to survive. Charlie and Tom had moved their wives and nine children into their parents’ cabin, giving up their own small houses in Ironton to the bank according to the Ironton sheriff. In Pigeon Hollow they could venture into the surrounding hills to hunt, but everybody knew game was scarce. Charles Sr. had long since used up any savings to help his sons. The small farm didn’t raise enough to last the whole winter and spring.

The court clerk, Alice Bruce, knew Charlie’s wife had given birth to a baby girl in late October. The early onset of winter had given her a chill that turned into pneumonia. She died on November eighteenth. She figured Charlie was determined to find a way to cheer up the family and fill their stomachs. When he picked up the death certificate, she asked Charlie about the family. He said Thanksgiving had been good. They had plenty of ham and biscuits with gravy. They must have lifted the flour from a store in Ironton when the owner went to the back for stock. The owner reported the theft of two twenty pound bags, saying his son saw two men wrap their coats around the bags and run the best they could with twenty extra pounds apiece. It probably didn’t take long for fifteen people to go through forty pounds of flour.

After the arrest, the Miller brothers were kept in jail until their hearing, and then afterward until their trial could be set. They couldn’t make bail and the approaching holidays had delayed the courts. Charlie and Tom begged the sheriff in Ironton to let them out for Christmas. Their families had no way to get to Ironton to visit, they explained, they were worried about the children and what they would eat. They had never been away from family on Christmas. The

sheriff in Ironton didn't know anything about the Millers, except that they were thieves, and one of the people pressing charges was Albert Kellen. He didn't care to know more.

Two days before Christmas, at six in the evening, the jail was closed, locked and left unguarded for the night. This wasn't the usual situation, but the deputies all wanted to be somewhere else. I heard later that sometime after ten o'clock Robert and Samuel Miller came down from West Virginia and used a truck to pull the door off the jailhouse, found the keys and freed their brothers. They drove them to the end of Pigeon Hollow Road and quickly returned to West Virginia before they could be detected. Early the next morning the escape was discovered and the Ironton sheriff called C.E. Burridge. It was Christmas Eve and as far as he was concerned it could wait until after Christmas. C.E. and his deputies were on their own. One of C.E.'s deputies had gone home to Portsmouth to spend Christmas with his mother, so C.E. had to solicit help from Hanging Rock residents. Daddy, Whitt Davis, Joseph Goldman, Christian Shilling and John Bauer were asked to be deputies and bring weapons. Daddy and Whitt Davis had hunting rifles, John Bauer had a revolver left over from WWI, Joseph Goldman and Christian Schilling had shotguns. C.E wore a handgun on his hip and carried a shotgun, as did his one real deputy. C.E. wasn't in a good mood. His prisoners had escaped from someone else's jail and he had to come up with the money to fix the door. "Those boys made a fool out of me," he said. "And I've got to get to church services. My mother-in-law is visiting with us. My wife is going to kick me out for sure." C.E. had a wife with a reputation for wanting plenty of attention and so did her mother.

The posse first checked the house up Pigeon Hollow. John and Whitt searched outside while Christian stood guard. Levisa Miller came to the door and begrudgingly let Daddy, Joseph and C.E. in to search the cabin. She was bitter and said something sarcastic like "Don't you men

have more to do than badger us folks? I’m sure you must have a big meal and presents to go home to.” Daddy said later the children looked scared and unusually quiet, considering their ages. “I will never forget what it was like inside that cabin,” said Daddy even years later. He said there were two old people there and two women, far too thin and worn out looking. There were nine children, none older than ten or so, all pale, thin and sickly. The house was somewhat warm which was a blessing because their thin, worn out clothing could not have been adequate otherwise. There was only one big room with assorted makeshift beds, a table and wooden chairs. Several of the smaller children sat together on a beds dazed like they just woke up. The old lady sat in a chair near their wood stove and looked like the blanket wrapped around her and the chair was all that kept her upright. Charles Sr. just stared at the men in his cabin, cursing under his breath. One of the smaller children sat in his lap, whimpering softly. Daddy said he couldn’t imagine fifteen people living in that space with no electric and no indoor plumbing. Everything in there was worn out and dirty, even the blankets. The smell was overpowering. Daddy mentioned how the Bible it says the sins of the fathers will be visited upon their children. “These children looked like plenty of sins had been visited upon them, “ he said.

The posse left. They hadn’t thought the brothers would come back to the house yet, but they needed to check. When they were back on the road Joseph Shilling protested against the manhunt saying, “For God’s sake lets go home and forget about it. The meat isn’t that important. Did you see those kids?” It was getting dark. They were all tired and wanted to give up the hunt. C.E. said they would search the woods on the way out of the hollow and then call it quits until after Christmas.

Going back down the road, stepping carefully through the snow, no one talked. Each man gave a cursory look into the woods on each side of the road. Then John Bauer saw the glow of a

fire about forty yards into the woods. C.E. led them quietly in the direction of the fire. When they were close enough to see the Miller brothers, they spread out in order to come in on them in a semi circle. They were about thirty feet from the fire, still in the trees, when several things happened at once. The Millers heard or saw some of the men in the woods and tried to get up to run. The posse quickly moved closer. Daddy stepped on the far end of a steel trap the Millers had set for a meal. It cut through his boot, and painfully into the back of his heal, and he let out a scream. The clank of metal on metal sounded to Joseph Goldman like a gunshot, he said later, and in a panic he fired both barrels toward the running men, hitting Tom in his upper back and neck. Tom fell face forward into the snow. Charlie didn’t see Tom fall and was stumbling in the snow, trying to run. C.E., standing by Joseph, raised his shotgun to fire a warning in the air while yelling, “STOP.” But Joseph, seeing Tom on the ground, suddenly realized what he had done, and fell to his knees, grabbing for the arm of C.E. just as he pulled the trigger.

Instead of going into the air above Charlie, the blast caught him in the back of the head. Charlie was dead by the time Whitt got to him. Tom was conscious when they turned him over. He was cursing and calling for Charlie. Daddy couldn’t stand on his bloodied foot, so sat in the snow and cradled Tom’s bleeding head in his lap, trying to calm him. Tom was combative until he saw Charlie’s still body about fifteen feet away and saw the wound on his head. He started to cry and moan, continuing to call Charlie’s name, until he began to weaken. Then he mumbled quietly, saying “Jesus, Jesus, what happened to Charlie?” The amount of blood on the snow told the men they couldn’t get Tom back to help in time to save him. “He continued to breathe a little longer,” Daddy said, “and then Tom died on my lap.” Daddy got pale when he told me this. “It was so quiet when he died,” Daddy said. “No one could speak for some time, just silence, the dark and the snow.”

When the others started to talk Daddy didn’t hear what they said, or never remembered it. He didn’t even remember how they got back to Hanging Rock, except there was a truck, and somebody took Tom’s body off him and then pulled him up. He limped to the truck. He woke up the next morning in his own bed, his foot bandaged. Mama told him a doctor had given him a shot and put twenty-two stitches in his heel. He was in a lot of pain and just wanted to sleep.

I didn’t learn the whole story until I was about sixteen, when Daddy was able to tell me about it. He said he remembered it all in slow motion and silence. Before that I only knew the Millers were shot by a posse Daddy was with. All the Ironton Tribune said was the Millers were in jail for burglary, escaped and were shot while resisting arrest. Two days after the shooting Daddy, Whitt and I took meat and other food to the house in Pigeon Hollow. Joseph Goldman and the others added supplies to the truck but couldn’t bear to go back there themselves. Levisa and Marceline Miller were racked with grief and anger and might have cursed the men to hell, but accepted the food for their children. Some months later, when both Charles Sr. and his wife had died, the two widows took their children and left Ohio a neighbor said. They probably went to West Virginia. Nobody knew for sure.

The rest of his life this event tormented Daddy and made him pause before entering the smoke house. That night left him with a permanent limp and frequent nightmares, but he continued to farm and drive the school bus. He stayed friends with Whitt. They spent a lot of time on our porch, sitting quietly, smoking and contemplating the changes in our little community. John Bauer hardly spoke since that night. He would nod on recognition but never greet or shake hands or make conversation. Rumors spread that he was hard on his family. Daddy worried it would change his son who later married my sister, Charlotte. Christian Shilling moved to Flatwoods, Kentucky, just down and across the river. I don’t remember ever seeing

him again. Joseph Goldman used to be dragged to mass once a year by his wife, but after that night he was in the Church in Ironton every time the doors were open. When he had gas money he drove to Portsmouth where he had grown up. The Church there was bigger. Sheriff Burridge didn’t run for office again. I heard he moved to Kentucky to be an officer at the federal prison there. I’m sure his wife was happier. Old Mr. Miller died about six months after his sons were killed. His wife followed soon after. Then the Miller wives and children moved away. Nobody knew where or even when they left. Someone found the house in Pigeon Hollow abandoned.

Once, after working in our fields, Daddy and I stopped at the smokehouse to check the fire. At the door he paused and said to me, “Martha, honey, don’t ever begrudge food to anyone. The price is too high.” He put his hand to his forehead and said, “My God, it was only meat.” He stared in at the hanging meat for a few seconds and then went about his business. I promised myself that someday I would find out what happened to all those Miller children. But I haven’t done it yet. That verse in the Bible about the sins of the fathers being visited upon their children, I understand now what it means.