

"GRANNY BECK--THE WITCH OF CANEY FORK"

by Dan Johnson



Genealogical research often reveals some interesting, even contradictory characters and such is the case with "Granny Beck" Aiken. Nothing is known about her childhood or youth. Although the census taker for Jackson co. in 1880 declared that Rebecca was born in NC (**NOTE:** according to the 1900 census --she was born in May of 1831--and most probably in Transylvania co., NC) her parents were born in SC.¹ Family tradition says that she was born a Hoxit (or Hogshead: both forms being used interchangeably at the beginning of the 19th century). Linda Raxter, a historian of Jackson co. theorizes that Rebecca was born to a Cherokee mother and a white (or mixed) father. Jack Hoxit, likely Rebecca's brother, is thought to have been married to a Cherokee himself, with some interesting stories surrounding his involvement and suffering during the Indian removal of 1838.²

Rebecca's first documented appearance is in the 1850 census of Henderson co., NC. She is listed as 'Rebecca Galloway' and enumerated with Thomas Aikin and 2 year old Lewis P. Aikin.³ Was Lewis Thomas' son? Or was he fathered by a Galloway?

From family lore we have concluded at this point that Rebecca/Becky's first 'spouse' was a Galloway, they having been married about 1846--i.e. if they were married at all. Their one and only child was Lewis Perry. What became of Mr. Galloway? Did he die? Did he abandon his small family? Or was he possibly an already-married man who after a brief relationship with Rebecca, returned to his original family? So far we can do nothing but speculate.

The 1860 census finds Rebecca in Henderson co., NC, Cherryfield township, as the head of household and with the following children: Perry (13), Sarah (11), Arch (9), Benj. (7), John (5) and Hannah (3).⁴ Thomas apparently had

left and possibly already begun another family.⁵

As we continue to track Rebecca, by 1870 she has established herself at Caney Fork township in Jackson co., NC where her legendary fame began to form. Her previous children are all present, with the exception of Hannah who has probably died: P(erry) 18, S(arah) 16, Arch 15, B(enjamin) 13, and John, 11. Interestingly there are also two more children carrying the surname Aiken: Mary 5, and Jackson, 3.⁶ These last two children, although they took the Aiken surname, had different fathers.⁷ Had Rebecca and Thomas formally divorced? Or were they even married in the first place?

By 1880 Rebecca's older children have married and moved on. John, though he was still single, had set out on his own and was preparing for an early fall wedding, getting his home ready for his bride (Nancy Coward) and her two daughters born out of wedlock, each having a different father, but neither being John's child.⁸ Rebecca is still head of her household and her only child at home is Jackson, 14. Mary having died by this time. John Hannah/Hameat 65, is enumerated with her, and listed as a 'farm hand.'⁹

Eight years go by and with all of her children gone, Rebecca is left alone with John Hannah/Hameat. She is approximately 57 years old and he is 77. During the fall term of 1888, the state of NC brought charges against the couple of 'fornication and adultery.'¹⁰ It seems that the new morality of today isn't so new after all! These charges were not uncommon, as several unmarried couples were accused of the same thing. It doesn't seem to have been as scandalous as it sounds, as the only action taken was that having failed to appear in court, they were obliged to pay court costs.¹¹

Did this embarrassing incident provoke them to marry? In the 1900 census they are living as man and wife, declaring to have been married for some 15 years.¹² However to date, not one marriage license nor divorce record has been located for Rebecca: not for her Galloway spouse, not for Thomas Aiken, nor for John Hannah/Hameat. Common law arrangements were often formed for convenience, and it is the opinion of this author that what started in her youth, was continued throughout her lifetime as a habit. Between her poverty, her temperament, her ignorance, illiteracy and probably stubbornness, there were ample reasons to not have to fool with courthouses, judges, ministers, papers and the like. The disdain or fear of the law, gives credence to Linda Raxter's theory of Rebecca's Cherokee origins.

Where do these 'witch' stories come in? The author can remember his great-grandmother, Flora Cook, and one of Granny Beck's grandchildren, delightfully recalling with a twinkle in her eye, memories of Granny Beck:

'She was little--tiny. She used to dance and twirl about and pat her head at the same time. She used to make us laugh.'

Her poverty forced her to beg food and milk from her neighbors at times, and probably because of her temper, such requests were not always responded to. Stories are told of her getting mad upon being refused, and calling down curses upon the offenders. Superstition and exaggeration painted her bigger than life, attributing to her the ability to 'curdle' milk when she was within walking distance. One version even states that she could transform herself into a calf at will, jumping fences and quickly transforming back into herself! Another story tells of one poor soul who had cross words with her and found himself changed into a squirrel! The next day he found himself at home, a man once again, but covered with burrs and pine needles, and finding nuts in his pockets!

It seems that there was one incident involving a man at Judacullah Rock¹³, a strange local rock with some sort of Indian hieroglyphics written all over it. It seems that Granny Beck had lured this man to Judacullah Rock, had put some kind of spell on him, and was insisting that he turn his back on Christ and give his heart to Satan, as she went about her incantations. The version I heard is that he somehow broke away, and freed himself from this devilish plot. You can imagine how this mysterious stone provided wonderful fodder for ghost stories; but combined with Granny Beck Aiken, many a child must have had their hair raised--and not a few adults as well!

Pearl Cook, wife of respected Baptist revivalist preacher Ben Cook, insisted that as many times as they tried to trick Rebecca and 'prove' her witchcraft, (by hiding a broom under a porch for example, when they knew she was going to cross it) she would always be privy to such a trick, and never fell for it. This strengthened the community's convictions and suspicions about her, because how else could she have such foreknowledge and avoid a sure 'proof?'¹⁴

Stories about Granny Beck have come down through several family lines:

"...I grew up hearing these stories from my Grandpa Mills. He was 2 years of when Granny Beck Aikens passed away, but his momma and his daddy told him these stories about Granny Beck Aiken, and she was named the 'witch of Caney Fork,' and they say that that probably was because she she had medicine woman ways and healing ways. There are also stories Granny Beck would turn herself into a cat and sit out on the fencepost outside the kitchen window and hear the ladies gossip around the kitchen table and there was stories of Granny Beck turnin' men into horses and making them run all night long. She lived on down below my Grandpa up on Moses Creek at the big mulberry. Uh, one story that actually my grandpa, his momma told him was Granny Beck Aikens came to borrow some corn meal one evenin' uhm so she could bake some cornbread. Well my Grandma Mills, her name was Mel Henry Mills, my Grandma Mills told Granny Beck, she said, 'I only have enough meal for supper tonight, I don't have any that I can borrow you.' 'Well,' Granny Beck looked at her, and she said, 'Well, she said, you're not going to be able to eat that cornbread tonight when you make bread.' Granny Beck went on her way and my granny she proceded to finish cooking dinner and stuff. She made cornbread that night and that night the cornbread was as tough as hog bristle! That's what my Grandpa says. Really, really fun, interesting stories that I wish that I had written these stories down as a child."¹⁵

Her last census entry appears in 1910, where she is listed as a widow, living with son John and family, but still retaining the Aiken surname. Were she and John Hannah/Hameat ever married?¹⁶

Granny Beck doesn't seem to have endeared herself to a lot of her contemporaries, which makes even more intriguing her brief obituary:

"Beautiful were the floral tributes and many tokens of love and esteem which marked the peaceful passing away of Mrs. Rebecca Aiken, whose death occurred Wednesday AM 630. For many years Mrs. Aiken has been a devoted Christian worker. Her death was not unexpected, she having been a suffer for many months. All her sons and daughters except one were with her during the last hours. Her loss is mourned by an unusually large number of friends and relatives. Her remains were laid to rest in Balsam Grove cemetery, services were conducted by Rev. W.F. Cook"¹⁷

Did Granny Beck have a late-in-life conversion? Was she genuinely "mourned by

an unusually large number of friends and relatives?" It is interesting the obituary writer's use of the word 'unusually'-- it causes the reader to surmise that the writer was surprised by such an outpouring. If this were the case, why then are the lingering legends about the fear she instilled in so many of her neighbors, so abundant? Was her glowing obituary simply a reflection of the times, with the writer attributing to her almost saint-like qualities? Or was she the victim of a small scale witch-hunt? Was this obituary penned by a somewhat guilty communal conscience, recognizing in her death, what they had refused her in life, i.e. an appreciation of a sweet and humble soul who simply had some spark to her? It may never be known. But even today, there are many who recall and tell the old stories of Granny Beck Aiken.

One thing is certain--in all of her simplicity, Rebecca Aiken generated a lot of talk, and was one of the most colorful figures of her time in Caney Fork, Jackson co., NC.

FOOTNOTES:

- 1 1880 NC census for Jackson co., 109th enumeration district, household #79, p. 308
- 2 Personal interview with Linda Raxter: 6 July 2001
- 3 1850 NC census for Henderson co., NC
- 4 1860 NC census for Cherryfield township, Henderson co., NC p. 895: August 17th
- 5 See 1880 SC census for Eastatoe township, Pickens co. household #124, p. 96
- 6 1870 NC census for Caney Fork township, Jackson co. p 224
- 7 Personal interview with L.G. Queen 15 July 2003. It is not known who Mary's father was but on her deathbed Granny Beck confessed to 'Jack' that his real father was a Saunders.
- 8 1880 NC census for Jackson co., household #76, p. 308. Taken on 8 June, 1880. Nancy Coward's first child, Meg, was fathered by Worth Hooper, proven by a bastardy bond that was brought against him and later dropped in 1872. Her second daughter Arzela, w a s fathered by another Hooper, (most likely Thomas Hillman ("Redheaded Tom") Perry Hooper) according to family lore.
- 9 *Ibid*
- 10 Criminal Docket for the co. of Jackson, State of NC, Fall term, 1888
- 11 *Ibid*
- 12 1900 NC census for Caney Fork township, Jackson co. household #149, p. 141B
- 13 See 'Qualla: Home of the Middle Cherokee Settlement' by T. Walter Middleton, (1999) pgs. 75-82
- 14 Personal interview with J.B. Cook, Pearl and Ben's son: 5 July 2001
- 15 Interview by Loretta Hoxit Womack, with Judy Rhodes on Stories of Mountain Folk: <http://www.storiesofmountainfolk.com/> 'Decoration Day in the Mountains' Transcribed by Dan Johnson, 27 Feb 2016.
- 16 1910 NC census for Caney Fork township, Jackson co. household #15, p. 8570. She is listed as 60 years old
- 17 Jackson co. Journal, August 16, 1912. Microfilm: Hunter Library, WCU, Cullowhee, NC

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