



By Jake Mueller

Somewhere down in that gorge, somewhere under layers of damp rocky soil and decades of fallen and decomposed leaves lie the remains of four men. I know this because I was there 88 years ago when their bodies were unceremoniously thrown into the shallow ravine one dark night in October.

I've never told anyone this story, despite the reports of hauntings that surface every autumn. The names of the men are Ronald B. Baxter, Martin S. Bale, James E. Mitchell and Kenny C. Dalton. The four men from the hills of Kentucky had no friends up here to speak of, at least far as I can tell.

The year was 1929, and we lived deep in the forest near the small town of Hiles. My sister Karla and I were playing in the woods behind my family's little house on a cool and overcast afternoon. Karla was 6 and I was 8.

"Look, I'm a monkey," Karla had said with a giggle as she hung from her knees from a low tree branch. Her long golden hair nearly touched the ground and she waived her hands and squealed. A prized necklace slid over her face and to the ground. All the fun, however, was short lived. The six-inch branch she chose for her acrobatics had rotted, and it gave way with a loud crack. Karla tumbled to the ground and the thick branch crashed atop her.

"Karla!" I shouted as I ran toward her. "Karla! Are you okay?!"

"I think so," she replied feebly. "But I can't get this stupid branch off me."

Not only had the big piece of tree fallen on her, but it was stuck, wedged between an old stump and a huge stone. Karla was pinned.

I tried mightily to move the branch, but to no avail. I pulled on Karla's arms and legs in an

attempt to free her, but my tugging only managed to make her scream in agony.

"I'll run back and get Dad," I said to Karla. "Don't worry, I'll be right back. He'll know what to do."

The late afternoon was giving way to the edge of night.

"Gayle, no!" she shouted. "I don't want to be left out here by myself."

Just then we heard the rustle of branches as something emerged from the forest. It moved toward us, twigs and leaves snapping under its feet. We froze in fear as the large shape of a human drew closer.

The shape revealed itself as a boy – a giant boy. He wore only a white T-shirt, black boots and an enormous pair of dungarees. His clothes and skin were smeared with mud and dirt. A head of wild red hair was matted with dirt. I judged him to be 10 or 11 years old. He walked over to the branch and with one hand he lifted the wood from Karla. He offered her his hand and pulled her to her feet. Then he retrieved the silver necklace and held it in his palm for Karla.

But Karla didn't take the necklace. She and I just stood staring at the boy – the largest kid we'd ever seen. Finally, I asked him where he was going, and he said he did not know. He'd been wandering the forest for two days and was lost, thirsty, tired and hungry. He said his name was Leon Snelling.

"Let's take him home with us," Karla declared. "Mom and Dad will know how to help him."

We arrived just as darkness fell. Mom and Dad were amazed to see Leon walking along side us. His shoulders nearly brushed against the door frame as he entered our small house. His head, hands and feet were al-

ready the size of a very large man.

He told Dad that he was 10 years old, and he came from a family of big people. His father stood 7 feet, 10 inches tall and tipped the scales at 425 pounds. His mother was 6'-11", and his older brother, Dirk, was 7 foot, 2 inches and still growing. Leon himself was a mere 6'-5" but he towered over my father.

While talking about his family, he began to cry.

Between sobs, he recounted how he and his family were forced to flee a mountain in eastern Kentucky, where a whole clan of big people lived. His father brought the family to Wisconsin to escape Ronald Baxter, a cruel circus man to whom he owed money. Baxter had offered to forgive a \$200 debt in exchange for a year's service to the circus, where the giant Kentuckians would be a main attraction. Leon's father, however, refused to let his family become the objects of gawkers at a circus sideshow. So he used what little money he had and bought four train tickets for northern Wisconsin. The Snellings' departure infuriated Baxter, and he vowed to track them down to the ends of the Earth if necessary. A porter for the railroad tipped him off, and Baxter brought a posse up here from Kentucky to capture the Snellings.

A gang of eight men tracked down and surprised the Snellings as they trudged through an open field just days ago. Baxter's men rode in on horseback with ropes and nets, and they captured Leon's brother, mother and father. As the men worked to subdue the three, Leon slipped away, and he high-tailed it into the forest, where the horses could not follow. He ran as he listened to his family screaming and begging to be set free. After wandering for two days, he came across Karla and me.

After we had fed Leon and began to settle in for the night at our house, we heard the unmistakable sound of horses outside. Dad peered out the window and we froze in terror at the sight of four men. Two were on horseback and two were aboard an

empty buckboard. One man held a double-barrel shotgun, another wielded a whip, and the two in the buckboard appeared to be holding a thick steel chain.

They pounded on the door to our house. Dad ordered Leon inside a closet built below the staircase to our sleeping loft. He barely squeezed in, having to hunch down low in order to fit.

"What is it?" my father said to the man holding the gun. "What do you want?"

The man looked past Dad and into the house. "Seen any giant boys running around?" the man asked.

"Nope," Dad replied.

The man's eyes darted about and then settled on a spot near the front door. He'd spotted one of Leon's muddy footprints.

"Kind of big feet you folks have," the man said. "You sure you ain't seen no giant boy?"

With that, he leveled the gun on my father and demanded to come inside. The other three followed. The gunman looked suspiciously at the closet door.

"What's in there?" he demanded to know.

"None of your business," Dad answered. "Now skedaddle!"

"Sorry, but we're not leaving till we get what we came for. Open the closet."

As Baxter walked toward the closet with his shotgun, Karla bolted over from out of the blue and stood between him and the door.

"Karla! Get away from him!" Dad commanded.

"No, you can't have him!" my little sister shouted at the man holding the gun. With the stock end, he knocked little Karla to the floor. He then wheeled on Dad and leveled the barrel at his chest.

What happened next has been etched deep into my memory for nearly seven decades.

The door to the closet exploded open, its hinges ripped from the frame as splinters flew. The door slammed into the back of the gunman's head, knocking him sprawling to the floor. As he fell, he clutched the shotgun with his right hand. Then came Leon's boot down on his wrist; you could hear the cracking and crunching of

bone. The man screamed. Leon grabbed the gun and clobbered him senseless with the stock. The man with the whip drew back his arm to lash big Leon. But the boy easily blunted the attack, wrapped the whip around the assailant's neck and slammed his head into the stone fireplace. The two guys with the chains began to back away, terrified by the giant boy and the volcanic anger that matched his size. But as they turned to run back to the buckboard, Leon snatched them from behind. With one arm, he body slammed one intruder against a jagged boulder outside the front door. The second man cowered on the ground and begged to be spared. Leon lifted a fat stump used as a chopping block and brought it down on the man's chest.

As the four lifeless men lie motionless, Leon stood breathing heavily, realizing what he had done. He then lifted each man from the ground and loaded him into the buckboard. He had the horses pull it for 200 yards or so. He spied a small ravine, and unloaded the bodies. He shoveled dirt onto the heaping pile of bodies before un-

hitching the horses and running them off.

Leon then turned to look at me, Karla and Mom and Dad. He whispered that he was sorry for all the trouble and mumbled something about finding his family. He walked away into the night and we never saw him again.

Father eventually set fire to the buckboard, burned every last trace of it. And to the best of our knowledge, no one ever did come around looking for the four.

I don't know if Leon ever found and freed his family. My father moved us away from the scene of the killings a few months after the incident. Now I'm 96, and I'm only coming back, 88 years later, at the request of Karla, who is bedridden. Just a week ago, she received in the mail a handwritten note, which gave directions to a large maple tree not far from where our house had once stood, and not far from the fateful ravine. My grandson and I followed the directions and easily found the distinctive tree. It was the same one Karla had dangled and fell from all those years ago. Pinned to the bark with a small nail was a silver necklace.

Iron Mtn. Automotive & Karls Used Cars
Brakes, Exhaust, Tires & More



Karl's USED CARS

407 N. Stephenson Ave
Iron Mountain, MI
906-774-1040

www.KarlsUsedCars.com

ASE Certified Mechanics

- Brakes • Exhaust • Factory Scheduled Maintenance • Shocks & Struts • Steering & Alignments • Tires • Wheel Balance & Rotation • Oil Changes • A/C Services
- Wheel Bearings • Oil • Lube • Filter
- Starters • U-Joints • Ball Joints • Seals
- Batteries • Tune-Ups • Alternators
- Tie Rods • & Much More

Complete Car Repairs
33 YEARS

"Same Great Service!"
Your full-service automotive repair center

Your one stop center for quality automotive repairs and maintenance is also your one stop center for seasonal savings.

