

Haunted Woods

Haunted Woods

Bernice Anderson Poole

Copyright © 1995, 2014 by Bernice Anderson Poole

**Published by
Biblio Publishing BiblioPublishing.com
The Educational Publisher Inc.**

ISBN: 978-1-62249-211-4

*I dedicate this book to my daughters,
Trena, Scarlet, and Sonia.*

1

It was a summer Sunday evening in 1953, in a little country town in the deep South, called Bird Song, North Carolina. We were all sitting laughing and talking on the front porch of Uncle John Duley's brand-new house built on the old haunted Batts place. We four girls: my sister Clara, me Grace Andrews, and our cousins, Anna Lee and Dolly, were squeezed into the old porch swing like sardines in a can. The swing creaked back and forth, and our heads moved in unison. Out at the edge of the woods the birds were singing, and we were happy.

We didn't care if people kept saying the place was haunted, and that they saw the ghosts of Mr. and Mrs. Batts, on cloudy days and at dusk, down where the birds were singing. We knew they were probably just saying that because *they* didn't have a brand-new house of their very own.

Uncle John was extremely proud these days, walking around with his shoulders back, because

he and Mr. John Bean were the only Negro sharecroppers in Bird Song to own their own homes. As far back as we could remember, not one single relative in the county had ever owned land or a house.

For over forty years Uncle John had dreamed of his own home. Now living in Aunt Rainbow and Uncle John's house were Uncle Nedro Duley, Uncle John's brother, and his four children, Anna Lee, who was fourteen; Dolly, thirteen; and their two older brothers, Wilson, twenty; and Ned, eighteen. Added of course to these every summer were Clara and me. We came down from Raleigh every year the minute school was out, to help harvest, or barn, the tobacco and earn money to buy school clothes for the following year. But each year at the end of tobacco-selling time, after his debts were totaled up, Uncle John never had two dimes to go toward buying land and building a house. It would have been impossible for him if the Batts place hadn't been haunted.

It had begun last summer, just before the tobacco-barning season was over, when it was almost time for Clara and me to leave Anna Lee and Dolly and go back home to Raleigh. We were all sitting at the kitchen table in Uncle John's tenant farmhouse, talking about the big barbecue Uncle John had every year at the end of the barning season. Uncle John suddenly said to Aunt Rainbow, "You know, that old Batts place would

be a good place to build a house." Everybody at the table stared at Uncle John, thinking he'd lost his mind.

The old Batts place was located just up the highway across a wide field. The path that the tobacco trucks traveled led from the highway, past Mr. Tucker the overseer's house, on back through a thin grove of pines, and on to the Batts place.

Before Mr. Tucker, Mr. Batts had been the overseer of the Haynes farm, on which Uncle John had lived and farmed for most of his life. When Mr. Batts grew too old and feeble to oversee the Haynes farm, he bought a piece of land from Mr. Haynes and built a house for himself and his wife.

Then many many years ago, the house burned to the ground. Practically every old person in Bird Song remembered the night the sky was lit up with that house burning and how the bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Batts had never been recovered.

Soon after that, young boys sitting on the backs of loaded tobacco trucks, or driving their mules to the tobacco scaffold, began to report seeing old Mr. and Mrs. Batts' ghosts down at the edge of the woods. Over the years the rumor had spread around the countryside that the old Batts place was haunted. And for all those years that land had lain idle. Mr. Haynes couldn't *give* it away.

So that Friday evening of last summer, when Uncle John mentioned building a house on the old Batts place, we were all shocked. But then some-

thing happened: we began to feel happy for Uncle John and agreed with him, all of us finding something good to say about the Batts place.

I remember seeing the lines across Aunt Rainbow's slanted forehead disappear. I thought she probably felt the same as we did — that this was Uncle John's only chance. She smiled at Uncle John.

"They say the water on the old Batts place is sweet and crystal clear."

My cousin Ned said, "Lots of apple and peach trees on that old place. Peaches big as your fist and sweet as sugar."

Uncle John's eyes had lit up. "I know," he said. "This past spring, them snowy dogwoods and magnolias all over that lot looked a beauteous sight."

Uncle John had everybody's attention then. Even Wilson, who never said much, said, "That old pond back there got catfish and bass long as your arm, jumping right out at you."

Uncle Nedro said, "Old man Haynes be so glad to have somebody living on that piece of land again, he'd probably *give* it to you, and pay for most of the material to build the house."

Uncle John jumped right up from the table. "I'm going up there to Mr. Tucker's house and tell him to call Mr. Haynes so I can talk to him about it right now!"

Grabbing his old brown felt hat with the greasy

ring around the band, Uncle John shoved it on his head. And we knew then the deal was on.

And sure enough, here we were, sitting squeezed in the swing Uncle John had hung on the porch of his brand-new house. Now we had the whole summer before us, living here on the old haunted Batts place.

But I didn't know how my life was going to change in the hot months ahead.

2

Now, sitting in the swing at the new house, I said, "It don't make no sense. Look at all the company we used to have at the old house."

Anna Lee said, "Every Saturday and Sunday evening the house and porch and yard was *full* of folks."

Clara added, "And now, nobody comes. It's a shame, folks acting like that because they're scared of ghosts."

"I think it's jealousy," Anna Lee said. "I think people don't come because they're jealous of Uncle John being in this beautiful little house. Just look out there at them big red roses climbing that white picket fence."

While the girls rattled on, I watched Aunt Rainbow sitting talking on the other end of the porch. Her wire-rimmed glasses had slid almost to the end of her freckled nose, the way she always wore them when she was too deep in thought to remember to push them up. She and Uncle John had

no children of their own, but they had raised three sets of children from broken homes in the family.

Aunt Rainbow ran the household with an iron fist, constantly using her pet word, "ass," to describe our back end, as she warned us to get it moving and stop wasting precious time. Those of us living here, including Uncle John, would have sooner jumped into the old bottomless well in the backyard than disobey her. I knew, however, that Aunt Rainbow's strict rules and regulations, her tough laws and orders, were what kept our household running smoothly.

Aunt Rainbow was strict on us girls, which was why Mama didn't mind us spending the summer each year. Mama was strict on us at home, too, more so than Daddy. And Daddy was bad enough. I won't mention how strict Uncle John was, but to give you a good example, he bought Anna Lee and Dolly a combination radio-record player and put it in his and Aunt Rainbow's room, to keep us girls from dancing with boys in the front room . . . even though Dolly and me were thirteen, and Clara and Anna Lee were fourteen.

Now, it was a quiet evening, as all of our evenings had been since Clara and I arrived three weeks ago. The barning season was in full swing. We worked with the same people at the scaffold, except Aunt Twila's daughter, Hazel, who had married and lived in a little house far back in the woods and threw parties every Saturday night.

It was our biggest desire to go to one of Hazel's parties. But that was out of the question with Aunt Rainbow.

Instead, we lived our usual life. We got up with the chickens, Anna Lee and I going to the kitchen with Aunt Rainbow to prepare dinner and supper, Dolly and Clara cleaning the house up. But one thing had changed. We no longer walked to the scaffold because we lived so far back now. Anna Lee drove us ladies back and forth on the wagon and mule. The pet mule named Big Shot had become our main source of travel. Some Saturday and Sunday evenings we four rode down to the general store, about three miles away.

"Seems like Ned and Uncle Nedro are lost without all the company we used to have at the old house," said Clara.

I glanced out across the yard at Uncle Nedro coming up from the pond with a string of fish he had caught.

Aunt Rainbow had her head lowered, peering over her glasses into a Sears & Roebuck catalogue. Her short brown hair was in a ring of curls around her head because it was the weekend. Come Monday morning it would be in the usual three plaits, one swept across her forehead and two in back.

We had been to church with Mr. John Bean's girls, Mable and Roxanne. Then, we'd gone home and eaten dinner and washed up the dishes, and