

dead boys walking

FORT OGLETHORPE, GEORGIA

Young men fight our wars because they believe death will not claim them. Three teenagers maintained that sad illusion for 145 years until they met a man from another century who pointed the way home.

It was a clear night on Park City Road north of the Chickamauga battlefield. Mike Moore was visiting his friend Karen at her mobile home at the foot of the wooded ridge south of GA 2A in Fort Oglethorpe.

Karen had told Mike that during the anniversary of the battle fought September 19 and 20, 1863, you could hear the clanging and hoofbeats of men riding horses across the hill just north of McFarland Gap. At other times of the year, a phantom woman in early-twentieth-century dress would walk down from an old homeplace on the ridge and into Karen's yard.

Mike was curious about the supernatural occurrences, but that evening was *not* the likely time to hear the phantom horsemen. Nor was the ghostly woman walking. It was late summer in 1999, and all seemed quiet. At two o'clock that morning, Mike and Karen ventured outside to enjoy the evening. The luminous moon was making its way across a silent sky above the sounds of crickets and occasional traffic in the distance. It was so still they heard the gentle thumps of early acorns hitting the ground.

That's when the spirits came. A small white sphere appeared in the thick grove of oaks nearby. Unlike the steely moon beyond, it glowed pale and translucent. Karen turned to Mike, stunned. "There's your ghost!"

"It was like a basketball sitting in the top of an oak tree, but it was white like an orb," says Mike. "It looked like it was rolling around the limbs. It would land on a limb, and once it came off the limbs, it started falling like a waterfall. And about halfway down the waterfall, it started turning into two more waterfalls."

When the waterfalls reached the ground, three human-sized figures appeared and stood within a few feet of Mike, who had moved toward them as they took shape. Keeping a safe distance, Karen saw the apparitions, too, but only as three formless white mists.

A powerful psychic energy rushed toward Mike from the three entities.

"I felt—and I don't know if this was real—that they were three young men in Union uniforms. These guys were already dead, and they were heading toward Chattanooga. They were kids, just little boys," he says.

Mike pauses, visibly distraught as he recalls the sad sight. "One was a poor little nineteen-year-old with a bullet hole in him that big." He presses his hands, stretched in a circle six inches wide, against his stomach. "The others were carrying him, and they weren't in much better shape. They were dead, but two of them were *staring* at me."

Mike describes the figures as white, but not ghostly white. “They were white because they’d lost so much blood. They’d lost all their blood running up through there. They were in shock. The strongest one of them, who had his arm around the weakest, he never did look at me. He kept looking back, so I knew the Rebels were in pursuit. He never did pay any attention. The other two had that open look.”

Did the spirits see him?

“Yes,” he says firmly. One in particular seemed dumbfounded. “He may have felt like he was seeing a ghost by seeing me. He was soon to die. They were lost. They were so lost.”

Mike isn’t sure what they thought of the encounter, but he feels the soldiers wanted an answer from him. They had to learn the truth of their deaths. “I had to tell them.”

He said aloud, “You’re dead. It’s time for you to go.”

“I told them that they died a hundred years ago, that they were mortally wounded at the Battle of Chickamauga. I told them, ‘Follow the light.’ After I told them to go to the light, it vaporized back into the ball. As it was clearing the trees, it was gone.”

Since that night, Karen has moved away, and Mike has not returned there. He heard two years later that a neighbor committed suicide within twenty feet of where the apparitions formed. But he believes and hopes that the three lost souls he saw that summer night went on to find their peace.

The never-ending clash of battle continues for untold numbers of less fortunate soldiers lost in the forests and fields around Chickamauga. The roads, byways, and rough trails leading out of the area witnessed—and maybe still do—the passage of routed Yankee regiments desperate to reach Chattanooga.

“All along the road, for miles, wounded men were lying,” wrote Union general John Beatty of the retreat through nearby McFarland Gap. “They had crawled or hobbled slowly

away from the fury of the battle, become exhausted, and lay down by the roadside to die.”

When they found the main avenues of retreat—such as McFarland Gap—clogged with their fellows or held by the enemy, they broke and fled like ants from a fire, each man for himself, over the rolling ridges and through ditches and wild tangles, in a desperate dash for safety. Some never made it out.

How many are there yet?

Maybe too many. “There are still tales that you can hear the horses and the cavalry coming across that hill,” says Mike.

But three blue boys on foot have found their way home at last.

RELUCTANT SEER

Mike Moore is the picture of rural north Georgia manhood—a good ol’ Southern Baptist boy, cattleman, and former railroad hand with a knack for transforming rusty wrecks into classic cars. At home behind the wheel of a four-wheel-drive pickup, shotgun in tow, he wrestled for years with the incongruity of an inherited—and unwelcome—ability to sense ghosts. Believing in ghosts, not to mention having contact with them, was at odds with all he understood and held dear about himself and God’s creation. Now, he accepts it, although he feels his understanding of the phenomenon is limited at best. “I’m just a first-grader,” he says.