

## Big John's Haunt

Every once in a while we hear strange noises in our house. The floor will creak or a window rattle as the friendly ghost who lives with us does his thing.

In the mid to late 1800s "Big John" Richardson, a bachelor, lived and farmed here on the east side of top end of the north branch of Buck Lake. His nearest neighbour, Elijah (Lige) Vankoughnet, lived opposite on the south branch with his wife and many children, not far from where the culvert is now. As Big John was reclusive, abstemious, industrious and successful, Lige was a gregarious, hot-tempered, light-fingered drunkard who lived from hand to mouth and was disliked, even feared, in the small Buck Lake community. The two had nothing in common. But often times when Lige would ride his pinto pony home from the taverns of Westport or Newboro he would be irritated to find Big John at his kitchen table having tea with Maria, the missus.

According to George Norman (who told us this story shortly after we had purchased his brother Bruce's property on Neva Lane), Lige's jealous animosity toward Big John came to a head in mid- August 1881. Maria gave birth to a child with a cleft palate. Big John had a cleft palate! Lige put two and two together, got five, grabbed a shotgun (which, ironically, he had stolen from Richardson a few days before), rode over to Big John's, called him out and, in the yard midway between the house and barn, shot him dead.

To cover up his crime, Lige then set the place on fire. But before doing so he swapped his pinto pony for the fine bay horse Big John had in the barn. When John's body was discovered a few days later, the police turned over the body of the horse found in the burned-out barn, saw it was a pinto, and the jig was up! It was found out later that Lige had sold the bay horse in Elgin for \$27 (four gallons of whiskey sold at the time for \$1) and had disappeared. Subsequently, using candy as a reward, the police found out from his children that Lige was hiding out on Birch Island; Maria rowed out there every evening to bring him his meals.

Lige was caught, tried twice (the first was declared a mistrial), and was sentenced to death. He was hanged in the jailhouse in Kingston on 27 June 1882; the last man hanged in Frontenac County.<sup>1, 2</sup>

Some months after George Norman told us this story, we were at home with Tom, our middle grandson, then only 5 or 6, when the wind caught a door and blew it shut with a loud bang. Startled, Leona and I exclaimed, "what's that?" Tom, sounding just like George Norman, turning from his play said matter-of-factly, "Oh nothin'. It's only Big John Richardson!"

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Clare. Elijah Vankoughnet's devilish tale of jealousy and murder, Kingston Whig Standard, January 13, 2000

<sup>2</sup> Christian Barber with Terry Fuchs. Their Enduring Spirit, The History of Frontenac Provincial Park 1783-1990. Quarry Heritage Books. 110