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Musselwhite: A Case Study in the Development of Modern Legend in the American South

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by

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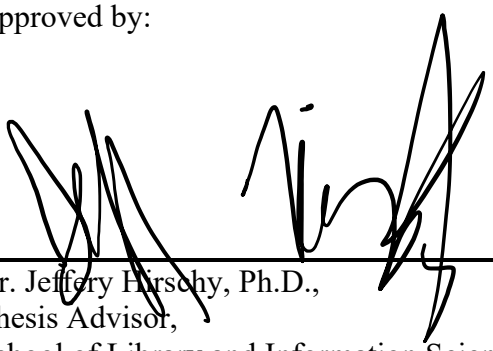

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ABSTRACT

The development of modern legend is widely researched, and there are many theories on the involvement of rumor and truth in the creation of folk stories. However, there are often few opportunities to look at the development of a modern legend in detail from beginning to end. The legend of Luther Musselwhite is unique in that it begins at a relatively fixed time, and the generations present during that time are still available to interview. This case study traces the development of this modern legend in Mississippi and analyzes the possible motivations for the spread and development of modern legends in the American South. The analysis concludes that modern legend reflects community and societal issues, and that the boundary between rumor and legend lies where the story began to be used for a specific purpose separate from rational warning.

Keywords: Modern legend, folklore, crime, oral history, urban legend, adolescent horror stories.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Virgil Price, a man at whose expense the story of Musselwhite developed and whose memory is disappointingly sparse in the historical record.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was completed with the aid of the University of Southern Mississippi Honors College, which guided the research process and facilitated the development of scholarship and the skills needed to complete a thesis. Dr. Jeffery Hirschy mentored this project and helped it develop into the best work that it could be. Finally, the oral histories and perspectives of Dr. James Walters, Lucy Parkman, Nadia and Angela Corder, and Ralph Gordon were of particular value and their willingness to share their stories benefited the research process greatly.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The origins of modern folklore are complex and hard to trace because of their variations and rumor-like qualities. Most people have encountered these stories in their hometowns, and in the age of the internet it has become easier to spread these stories across the world. Though it may seem that some urban legends are not contemporary in origin, the development of legends is very much an active process. With the technological and social innovations of the past century we are more and more able to trace these developments through media and oral history, leading to greater insight into the motivations behind the creation of legends and their beliefs. This thesis outlines one such story and offers an analysis of the possible reasons for the persistence of a local legend years after its inception.

What are Modern Legends?

There are a variety of adjacent folklore terms that are used interchangeably in everyday conversation that, while distinct, could lead to confusion in an academic context. It is important to define these terms for the purposes of this paper. *Folklore* is used as a much broader term under which *urban legends* often fall, but there are many variations in definition. Michael Carroll (1987) describes urban legends as "stories which circulate widely in industrialized societies, which are believed to be true by those who pass them on, which are usually localized in a place familiar to the teller, and which—upon investigation—almost always prove impossible to verify" (Carroll, 1987, p. 216). This definition stresses the more modern component of urban legends and their development as a result of larger population groups within the past one hundred and fifty years. These urban legends are a genre of folklore derived from contemporary problems

and storytelling from the twentieth century onward. As technology has progressed and online communication has made way for internet communities, urban legends like chain-email horror stories have been shared across the world within e-mails and public forums. Carroll's (1987) definition also notes that those who share legends believe in them, and Danielson (1979) specifies that they do not contain supernatural elements. The media has played a predominant role in the development of some of these stories, as evidenced by the 1980's Satanic Panic. Best and Horiuchi (1985), in their discussion of the legend of malicious persons commonly hiding poison and razor blades in Halloween candy in the second half of the 20th century, compile a definition of an urban legend as contemporary oral stories typically containing non-supernatural themes and reflecting the conflicts of everyday life in industrialized society (Best & Horiuchi, 1985, p. 492).

Rumors have been distinguished as a separate phenomenon from legend, and although the focus of this paper is not on the spread of rumor, it would be inaccurate to say that rumor does not play a part in this story. In fact, rumor could be integral to the development of legend both through media and word of mouth communication. In his discussion on rumor theory and the modern legend, Patrick Mullen (1972) suggested that the relationship between the two, in certain contexts, is often a matter of origin. "Legends are merely conventionalized accounts of what was originally a rumor," which concludes that rumors spread amongst communities can coalesce over time into what might be considered a legend (Mullen, 1972, pp. 96-98). This is not to say that all legends must begin with "true" stories, but that the rumor acts as a catalyst developing into modern legends as they become solidified in a community's culture or folklore, and rumors and legends are often shared in similar ways. There is also evidence to suggest that the

existence of a threat within rumors creates the illusion that it is more credible and therefore more likely to be spread (Boyer & Parren, 2015), which is another possible factor for why there are so many legends in which a threat or fear is the focus.

There are some details within these definitions, however, that do not apply to some legends that might be referred to as "urban legends," such as whether every person who passes on an urban legend believes in them or that they are entirely non-supernatural in theme. Some folklorists have even moved away from specifying these legends as "urban" at all. Mullen (1972) describes the use of the word "urban" when referring to these legends as misleading, and instead chooses to refer to them as *modern legends*, explaining that while some modern legends certainly do derive from urban environments in the modern day, many do not (Mullen, 1972, p. 95). Henken (2002) also prefers to use a broader term, choosing to discuss the contemporary legend, or even simply legend, rather than the urban legend in her analysis of danger escalation (Henken, 2002).

For the purposes of this paper, the term *modern legend* will be used, defined as a contemporary story that is shared throughout a community, often reflecting concerns within that community through the story's content, in which the source is unidentifiable and vaguely credited or has no one specific source. Following this definition, the legend of Luther Musselwhite in Mississippi falls into the purview of a modern legend. It is contemporary in that it originated in the early to mid 1950's, was and is shared throughout communities in Mississippi and possibly beyond and has no apparent source within the legend itself once separated from reality.

Why do People Share Modern Legends?

There are many theories as to why modern legends develop and whether people believe in them. There is evidence to suggest that the more a story is repeated throughout time, the more credibility it has among those who hear it. Fox Tree and Weldon (2007) found in their study of the factors influencing the retelling of urban legends that "repeating a story increased its credibility…[and] repeating also increased the story's importance, scariness, and likelihood of retelling" (Fox Tree & Weldon, 2007, p. 459).

But why do these legends develop in the first place? In a way, modern legends are similar to conspiracy theories, with Best and Horiuchi's fear of the "Halloween sadist" being reminiscent of the 1980's Satanic Panic (Best & Horiuchi, 1985). Many parents were fearful of this mysterious sadistic or satanic figure harming their children or guiding them astray from morals through popular media like Dungeons & Dragons. It is easy to conclude then that legends and conspiracies have some of the same motivators, such as fear, and it is hard to separate many of the era's modern legends from fears related to satanism in late 20th century America. People are much more likely to share stories when there is a negative outcome, suggesting that people "circulate urban legends in order to communicate negative information involving moralistic stories possessing an ironic twist" (Donavan et. al., 1999, p. 23). This fear, specifically for the safety of children and their morals, dominated the cultural sphere in the west and is a perfect example of how community concerns can shape legend.

One of the drivers of the intensity of these fears is the media. Many people still believe that they are at risk now more than ever, which Altheide (1997) explains is a result of the way that media and communication in the modern day is incentivized to

share negative information. In short, it is often more interesting to people. Crime and the reporting of crime is considered one of the most entertaining topics discussed through television documentaries and true-crime podcasts. The distortion of crime in the media has only led to an increase in the perception that crime is prolific.

These fears are reflected in legends in part by encouraging the listener to partake in or avoid certain actions. “Traditional belief legends and most contemporary legends aim to modify the actions of the listener directly” (Ellis, 1994, p.70), which is true of much of folklore, including tales intended to scare children into complying with prescribed behaviors. Cantrell (2010) explains that for those that believe in modern legends there is also some degree of emotional gratification when they tell a story that aligns with previously held biases or fears, and even for those who do not believe in the legends they are sharing there is some purpose in retelling them. This is either because they are intending to encourage an action (or inaction) of the listener, because it gives them an opportunity to socialize, or simply because it’s entertaining (Cantrell, 2010). Though there are many factors to the development of modern legends, fear, entertainment, and social issues stand out as the most prominent.

Why Musselwhite?

The modern legend this thesis discusses is that of the elusive Musselwhite, a man known to most only by his last name and a few supporting details related to the crimes he committed. The purpose of this research is to collect qualitative information and develop a case study in which there is a unique opportunity to trace the beginnings of a legend through multiple generations into the present, and where those who were alive during the initial development of the legend are still alive to talk about it today. It is then possible to

discuss the ways in which this case study reflects its community, the ways in which it aligns with academic understanding of modern legend, and the ways it is unique. Though many urban legends are untrue, some do have truth to them, and the story of Musselwhite is a prime example of how assigning "true" or "false" to a modern legend is quite complicated. Rather than struggling to ascertain whether every detail lines up with events that really took place, it is more important to have a conversation about what these varying tales tell us about the people sharing them.

Methodology

This research project focused on gathering qualitative data through two avenues: historical records and oral histories. All data collected were organized by type, then location and date (ex., a newspaper clipping from Alabama, March 15, 1954, or a state supreme court verdict from November of 1951) along with a summary of the contents and stored in a secure Google Drive. Historical records collected were largely comprised of newspaper reports on events having to do with Luther Musselwhite as well as court records of proceedings regarding the initial murder trial and appeals thereafter to the Marion County Circuit Court and the Mississippi State Supreme Court. The method of collection involved searching through the Mississippi Digital Library, Mississippi State Supreme Court records published publicly online, the Marion County Archives, and newspaper databases.

To gather oral histories of those who knew of the legend of Luther Musselwhite, or "Muscle White," interviewees were found through word of mouth and online public social media posts requesting information on the subject. Each person who sat down to give their oral history was told clearly that they would be recorded using a mobile phone

that was in plain sight and was made aware that their oral history was being collected for the purposes of thesis research. The purpose of the thesis research was explained both before and during the recording, and they were informed that if at any point they did not wish to have their history shared they were free to contact the researcher. Each person gave their oral consent multiple times, both during and outside the recorded oral history. Though there were some guiding questions for the interview, the interviewee was mostly free to discuss what they wished about the subject and what they knew. In total, four oral histories were collected across three generations, two of which were experiences of children in the 1950's and two of which were briefer, more recent accounts of experiences with the legend. Supplemental statements were gathered from public social media posts where several people shared brief experiences as well. Institutional Review Board oversight was not required, as any interaction with human subjects was considered the collection of oral history and therefore exempt under federal regulations governing the definitions of research.

CHAPTER II: MISSISSIPPI IN 1950: COLUMBIA IN CONTEXT

The story of Musselwhite starts in a small town in southern Mississippi called Columbia, and at the heart of this story is the community through which it spread. It is nearly impossible to trace the development of modern legend without understanding the people that tell the legend, and there is a fair amount of context needed to understand the world the people of south Mississippi lived in that is unique to their location and history. Mississippi's laws and legal precedent regarding capital punishment and incarceration are of particular importance. This chapter describes the legal, social, and geographic context under which people were living in Mississippi during the 1950s so that the legend of Musselwhite might be better understood.

Mississippi and the Death Penalty

Mississippi's relationship with capital punishment is a complicated one. When the state joined the union in 1817, executions were carried out through hanging, the first of which is documented in July of 1818 when George Harman was hung for the theft of a slave (Cabana, 2021). By 1940 the state was the first of what would only be two states to implement a portable electric chair, which would customarily travel to the county and courtroom in which the conviction had taken place before being used to execute the criminal (Cabana, 2021; "Wheeler dies in the chair," 1954). There had been difficulty designing such a device, and the story of Luther Musselwhite begins amid efforts to implement a gas chamber at Parchman Penitentiary as an alternative execution method, but this would not be put into effect until 1955 (Cabana, 2021). Had Musselwhite been

captured after his 1954 escape and had been declared sane, the method of execution would likely have been the gas chamber rather than the electric chair.

Race and the death penalty have been heavily correlated, especially in the American South. Most executions in the United States since 1977 have taken place in the South, and from 1910 to 1950 about three fourths of all execution were of black citizens (DPIC, 2013; EJI, 2024). It is worth noting the racial disparities in the demographic spread of recorded executions in Mississippi. The Mississippi Department of History notes that of the 810 documented executions since the state joined the union, "642 have been Black males, 130 White males, 19 Black females, 2 Native American males, and 16 individuals not completely identified either by gender or by race. No White females are known to have been executed by the state" (Cabana, 2021). If Lisa Jo Chamberlain, currently a death row inmate convicted in 2006 of two counts of capital murder, ever exhausts the long series of appeals most death penalty cases incur she would become the first known white woman in Mississippi history to be executed by the state (Mississippi Department of Corrections, 2024).

The count of 810 formal executions does not include the thousands of racially charged lynchings known to have occurred throughout the South, a practice in which white community members would hang, torture, or otherwise murder an accused black person and denying them any formal trial or due process. In 1950 it would not have been uncommon for this form of public 'justice' to take place. In fact, it would only be five years later that the lynching of Emmett Till would be credited with leading to the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and '60's (Ray, 2024). The NAACP records Mississippi as having the highest number of lynchings in the United States at

nearly 600 deaths during the period of 1882 to 1968; of the 35 men executed in the gas chamber during the period from 1955 to 1989, 27 of them were black (NAACP, 2024; Mississippi Department of Corrections, 2024; DPIC, 2024). Of about 800 capital convictions for rape since 1804 only 2 were white men (Cabana, 2021; DPIC, 2024).

Criminal sentences were considerably more lenient towards whites in Mississippi, and it is clear that there was a bias towards black Americans for capital convictions that is not consistent with state population demographics. In the public eye, race was intimately connected with crime, and extra-legal punishment was common. Even for a white man, if the public outcry for his alleged crime was severe enough, it would not have been surprising to see a lynch mob form.

A Century of Prohibition: Mississippi's Fish Camps

Another long and storied legal history in Mississippi involves alcohol. Though national prohibition only lasted just over a decade, in 1950 the state of Mississippi was still about fifteen years from legalizing the possession of alcohol (Ownby, 2018). The state had enacted prohibition laws 12 years before the nation passed the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, and by the mid 1960's had only lifted prohibition in part. Local governments gained the ability to decide whether they would allow alcohol possession and sale in 1966, but the state was still technically "dry" (Ownby, 2018). It would not be until 2020 that Governor Tate Reeves legalized the consumption of alcohol in every Mississippi county—over a century after state prohibition laws were first ratified in 1907. To this day the sale of liquor is not legal in every county since each has the ability to decide whether or not they will allow it (Ownby, 2018).

As seen under nationwide prohibition, legal ramifications only slightly diminished the consumption, production, and sale of alcohol in Mississippi (Ownby, 2018). One only needs to scan the literature of Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, or Richard Wright to see that the consumption of alcohol was alive and well in the state during the first half of the twentieth century. Though it may have been illegal, bootlegging whiskey was a lucrative business, and it was not uncommon for members of law enforcement to turn a blind eye in certain circumstances. Fish camps were one such circumstance.

Fish camps are small restaurants, typically located along rivers or other bodies of water usually serving fish and southern style fried food like catfish plates, hushpuppies, and coleslaw. These small local establishments were also common along the Pearl River and any waterways where fresh fish was easily available, and many fish camps exist across the South today (Ivey, 2024). In 1950, however, it was a place where one could easily find a drink without the fear of law enforcement. “There were quite a few of those fish camps along the [Pearl] river because it was where men could go and drink whiskey and the sheriff didn’t come there,” Lucy Parkman explains, “probably because he didn’t want to go there. The fish camps were a common thing” (Appendix A). It was clear that some of these establishments were seen more like bars or clubs, with more than a few contemporary newspapers referring to a fish camp as a “night club” (“Musselwhite to be,” 1951; “Marion County man’s,” 1951). While the role of fish camps and in bootlegging or drinking during prohibition does not seem to be documented, the role of rivers themselves and shacks that popped up along the rivers to sell liquor is documented (Tracy, 2015). People visited these fish camps with the express intention of drinking away from the eyes of the law. Mississippians responded to prohibition laws by working

around them, ignoring them, and creating establishments where it was possible to evade the law.

Columbia and the "Other Side of the River"

Columbia, Mississippi is nestled along the edge of the Pearl River in Marion County about 85 miles south of the state capital in Jackson. It has a modern-day population of just under 6,000, relatively unmoved from 1950 when Columbia was home to just over 6,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 1950). The town, dubbed the "City of Charm on the River Pearl," temporarily served as the Mississippi capital in the early 1820's and, like many larger communities in the Pine Belt, got its start in the lumber business (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2021). The city remains home to various manufacturing businesses today. There are several smaller communities surrounding Columbia, namely Goss and Morgantown, but the community that is most closely related to the legend of Musselwhite is Cedar Grove, about 3 miles north of Columbia.

In 1950, Columbia residents were just moving on from the United States' involvement in World War II. Most people at least knew of one another or their families, and it was a close-knit environment. Lucy, a previous resident of Goss who describes her childhood in 1950's and '60's Columbia, explained that there was a perceived boundary in the area: the river. "It was later that I knew whiskey stills were (I thought) on the other side of the river. The 'bad' side of the river" (Appendix A). She describes growing up thinking that *her* side of the river was where the "good Christians" lived, and the Pearl River was a dividing line between lawlessness and morality.

> All my childhood, if there was somebody that had escaped from somewhere, especially the training school in Columbia—the Columbia training school, those kids would bolt out occasionally, which they had a right to—for some reason they would follow the river. I guess to know where they were. So honestly during my childhood and high school years I can remember my daddy and grandmother and I going into town to stay with relatives if training school kids were out because the river seemed to be where they would go" (Appendix A).

The "into town" that Lucy speaks of is Columbia. In 1950 the existence of fish camps, where along the Pearl River people could escape the confines of the city to drink without fear of persecution, could only have added to the sense that the river was what kept debauchery and crime away from those "good Christians." Of course, things are never so simple. There was no real separation between lawlessness and order in Columbia, and the river did not keep danger and immorality away from the surrounding communities. Christians drank at the fish camps as often as anyone else. In 1950, a brutal murder would be a shocking reminder to Columbians that crime could, and did, occur in their communities as well.

CHAPTER III: MURDER AND MANHUNT

Murder at Breakfield's

Luther David Musselwhite attended school in Greenwood, Mississippi and enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps in 1942 when the United States entered World War II ("Greenwood boy joins," 1942). Not much is known about his experience fighting in the Pacific, but it seemed to make quite an impact on his life. His experience as a jungle fighter is cited often in newspapers as an explanation for his violent behavior because of the violent and guerilla style battles that took place, but descriptions of his personality are the only real indicator of any violence prior to the murder of Virgil Price. Stocky in stature and confrontational in spirit, Musselwhite was nicknamed "Runt" by his peers and described himself as an "ex-Marine and mean as hell" ("State court saves," 1952; "Slate force," 1952).

In August of 1950, Luther Musselwhite was 30 years old and was working at a car service station in Columbia. Lucy Parkman explained that the service station he worked for was on the edge of town in Columbia in the same direction as Breakfield's fish camp. She recalls a relative telling her that Musselwhite worked at the service station that same day: "As he said, it's not often you can say you have employed one of the FBI's ten most wanted in Columbia, Mississippi" (Appendix A). Some time on the evening of August 13, 1950, Luther Musselwhite made his way to Breakfield's fish camp accompanied by Luther Turnage, a slightly older man in the community ("Second venire is called," 1952; "Witnesses testify in," 1952). The fish camp was located in the Cedar Grove community about three miles from the city of Columbia. Turnage and Musselwhite were both described as trade-school students, though it is unclear if this was a description of their

past education or occupation at the time ("Columbia men charged," 1950). It is not clear whether he was good friends with Luther Turnage or simply an acquaintance, but after that violent August night in 1950 the two would be inextricably linked as accomplices.

As with many crime stories widely publicized by the media, more is known about the offender than the victim. Little information could be found about Virgil Price outside of census data and what sparse details were reported in newspapers. What is known is that he was a long-time resident of Columbia, he was white, he managed J. I. Breakfield's fish camp, and he was about 65 in August of 1950 (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951; "Columbia men charged," 1950). Price and Musselwhite are said to have argued multiple times that evening over weapons on Musselwhite's person including a knife, a pistol clip, and a blackjack, a type of small handheld weapon similar to a baton, which were confiscated by Price ("Musselwhite denies killing," 1950; "Musselwhite case will go", 1950; "Musselwhite will be fed," 1952). At some point the argument over the pistol escalated into an assault against Price, at which point Luther Musselwhite began beating him with his fists (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951; "Witnesses testify in," 1952).

Though the gory details are shocking, they are important to understanding the crime that occurred and the public perception of Luther Musselwhite's brutality. Across all the variations of the story in the media, everyone agreed that over the course of an hour or two Musselwhite continued to fight the elderly man with his hands until Price died from his injuries (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951). Price was knocked through the door at one point, and brothers Bob and Harland Alford engaged in a fight to restrain Musselwhite outside the building, but with the help of Luther Turnage, Musselwhite entered the building again and continued his assault (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951). If at

any point Price became incapacitated or passed out, Musselwhite would revive him with a wet rag and ice water before he continued to stomp and beat Price ("Columbia men charged," 1950; "Brutal murder is laid," 1950). The beating was severe enough that Musselwhite was reported to have broken his hand in the process ("Musselwhite to be," 1951). Neville Patterson, the Marion County Deputy Sheriff who later arrested Musselwhite, stated to newspapers that he was informed of a particularly sinister aspect of the beating:

> "According to witnesses, Price begged for mercy as Musselwhite hammered him with his fists and stomped him with his feet, Patterson stated. After Price was knocked unconscious, Musselwhite took a butcher knife and threw it at the wall above where the old man was lying, witnesses were reported to have said. The knife would fall to the floor in a pool of Price's blood and Musselwhite would pick it up, wipe the blood off on Price's neck and then throw it again…" ("Columbia men charged," 1950).

Regardless of the truth of this account, or any of the accounts, the important thing is that this is the story the public knew and understood. Luther Musselwhite was portrayed as a crazed murderer who beat a defenseless elderly man and answered his pleas for mercy with more violence. News of the brutal assault quickly made its way across the state and was front page news from Hattiesburg to Jackson to Biloxi ("Columbia men charged," 1950; "Brutal murder is laid," 1950; "Marion County man's," 1951).

It is unclear how much of the violence Luther Turnage participated in, if any, because there are varying accounts of his participation in the media and witness statements. After the scuffle outside the building with Musselwhite and Turnage, Ed

Polk, Charles R. Davis, and Bob and Harland Alford all testified that Turnage said "It's a one-man fight" and kept the other customers from interfering or fetching the authorities by waving Musselwhite's pistol at them (*Musselwhite v. State,* 1951; "Witnesses testify in," 1952). Some papers reported that Turnage aided in reviving Price and in beating him, though these details are absent from court records and only appear in media ("Columbia men charged," 1950). Ultimately, Luther Turnage was acquitted for his accessory in the crime and his involvement in the legend and infamy that followed the case was mostly forgotten by the public ("Jury finds Turnage," 1952).

Trial and Sentencing

It did not take long for Musselwhite and Turnage to be arrested by the sheriff's office in Marion County. Luther Turnage's bail was set at $10,000, which is nearly $130,000 accounting for inflation in 2024 (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 34). Vernon H. Broom and Henry E. Pope represented the defense in the case (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 68). The two were well known lawyers in Columbia and continued to work on Musselwhite's legal defense throughout this story (Appendix A). Due to the heavy publicity and widespread knowledge of the incident in Marion County, the defense filed a motion for a change of venue which was overruled by Judge Sebe Dale of the Marion County Circuit Court (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 42). The court went through a total of 263 veniremen to finally acquire a 12-man jury in December of 1950, and Luther Musselwhite pled not guilty to the charge of murder (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 32; "Jury convicts Musselwhite," 1950). Musselwhite's composure was said to be stoic during the trial, and his main defense was that he acted in self-defense against Virgil Price ("Jury convicts Musselwhite," 1950; *Musselwhite v. State*,

1951). He also argued that he had not been the only one to fight that evening, but admitted that he had argued with Price, and spent over an hour on the witness stand giving his own version of the events that transpired on August 13 ("Musselwhite case will go," 1950). Luther Turnage invoked his fifth amendment rights on the witness stand via his legal counsel and did not testify (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951).

As one might expect given the evidence, Musselwhite was found guilty by the jury beyond reasonable doubt, and when asked by Judge Sebe Dale if he had anything to say prior to his sentencing, Musselwhite answered that he had nothing to say ("Jury convicts Musselwhite," 1950). He was sentenced to death by electrocution in the state electric chair on January 26, 1951, which was quickly stayed in lieu of appeals filed on Musselwhite's behalf as he was transported to the Hinds County Jail in Jackson (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, pp. 71-78). It took nearly a year for the Mississippi State Supreme Court to uphold the Marion County Circuit Court's ruling, finding that there was no merit to the defense's arguments, and they set a new execution date for December 21, 1951 (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1951).

Though it may have seemed that everyone was content with the sentencing, the topic of capital punishment weighed heavily on others. Lucy Parkman recalls that after Musselwhite's initial conviction and sentencing her uncle, a jury member, returned to the store where he worked in town and "put his head in his hands and cried and cried because of the thought of putting someone to death" (Appendix A). The topic of the death sentence, and in particular the execution of the insane, would continue to be a common theme throughout Musselwhite's appeals.

On Strike: The Insanity Plea in Mississippi

Luther Musselwhite's execution date was immediately stayed by then Mississippi Governor Fielding L. Wright. On July 20th of 1951, shortly before the state court verdict, the jail alerted the Marion County Circuit Court that Luther Musselwhite had "become so mentally disturbed that it is recommended…that said Luther Musselwhite be committed to Mississippi State Hospital, Whitfield, Mississippi, for observation in an effort to definitely ascertain his mental status…" (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 153). Following the new execution date, Governor Wright felt that it was best to delay the execution until medical staff at Whitfield could determine that Musselwhite was sane enough to be executed ("Execution stayed for," 1951). As soon as Musselwhite was to be deemed sane, the state court would issue another execution date. On September 18, 1952, Mississippi State Hospital informed the Marion County Circuit Court that they believed Musselwhite to be well enough to be put back into the care of the jail, and "requested that such be done immediately" (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 319). The new execution date was set for October 31 ("Musselwhite will be fed," 1952).

Immediately following his return to the jail, Musselwhite began a hunger strike, and by October 6th he had refused food and drink for 10 days and appeared to be "unconscious" ("Columbia man on," 1952). The Marion County jailor, Ephram Pittman, told papers that he would occasionally bring him a spoonful of water in an attempt to rouse him to no avail, and that Musselwhite kept falling from his mattress ("Columbia man on," 1952). The mattress was subsequently placed on the floor, after which he did not move. Judge Sebe Dale of the circuit court was notified and made the decision to send Musselwhite back to Whitfield so that he could be properly taken care of, noting

that it was “for the chief purpose of having his physical health protected, with such commitment in no wise suggesting or adjudging a mental disorder…” (Marion County Courthouse, 1952, p. 321). Judge Dale added that “It is a decision that the hospital at Whitfield has the setup to care for him and feed him” (“Slayer Musselwhite,” 1952) and that “The man spent several months at Whitfield, and after detailed investigation, has been declared sane. We only want to see that he does not die of self-imposed starvation” (“Condemned Columbia slayer,” 1952). The irony of expending efforts to save the life of a condemned man was not lost on the public. The news of the hunger strike made headlines across Mississippi once again, even going so far as to photograph the man allegedly comatose in the back of a police vehicle as he was being transported to the state hospital:

(Bingham, 1952).

Some speculated that "truth serum" might be injected to cause him to lose his determination to refuse food and drink, or that he would be fed intravenously, but in the end, he was fed a mixture of "cream, eggs, heavy protein and amino acids" through a tube through his nose ("Doomed man rallies," 1952; "Condemned Columbia slayer", 1952). Dr. W. L. Jaquith, the director at Whitfield, stated that he did not feel that Musselwhite was insane, or even truly unconscious ("Doomed man rallies", 1952). He commented cynically that "He hasn't crawled off the bed onto the floor as he did at the Columbia jail, either….Our floors are colder than the jail floor, apparently" ("Doomed man rallies," 1952).

Many who dealt with the case, including Governor Hugh White, felt that Luther Musselwhite was not insane in the slightest and was only doing his best to avoid his execution. Ephram Pittman expressed that he felt Musselwhite had "made up his mind to cheat the electric chair" ("Slayer Musselwhite," 1952). Governor White told papers that he refused to intervene in the case because he felt that there was no question of Musselwhite's sanity, stating that "nobody can tell me anything that I don't already know. Musselwhite will be executed on the date I have set" ("Musselwhite will be fed," 1952). The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Disabled American Veterans of Columbia also made it clear that they provided no official support of Musselwhite despite his former service and any petitions put forth to stay Musselwhite's execution were not representative of the organizations ("Condemned Columbia slayer," 1952). Despite many professionals feeling that Musselwhite was faking his insanity, Judge Sebe Dale granted him a hearing following Henry Pope's new petition for a sanity hearing on the grounds of a writ of error *coram nobis*, though with no jury this time ("Second insanity plea," 1952;

"Slayer given new," 1952; "Musselwhite: judge," 1952). At the time, if someone was declared insane in Mississippi, the law stated that they could not be executed, even if they had not been insane at the time of the crime (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1952).

With such a pressing decision on the line, a classic example of dueling experts unfolded. The chief of staff at Whitfield, Dr. Thomas L. Young testified that Musselwhite was "experiencing a distressed condition as the result of an overwhelming fear. When the threat of execution is removed, we feel he will improve" ("Slayer given new," 1952). Two psychiatrists for the defense, however, stated that they believed Musselwhite to be schizophrenic, mis-attributed in the newspapers as "split personality disorder", which was indicative of the lack of understanding of mental disorders of the time ("Musselwhite gets another," 1952). When Dr. Young was asked whether he believed Musselwhite would understand what was going on if he were to be executed then, he admitted that he would not ("Musselwhite gets another," 1952). Dr. Young testified before Judge Dale that he believed Musselwhite's hunger strike to be staged due to his fear of execution, a "reaction to this great fear that drove him into psychotic behavior" ("Experts disagree," 1952). Dr. M. B. Bond, a psychologist for the defense, testified that Musselwhite had catatonic schizophrenia, and that the medical staff at the hospital had earlier diagnosed him with the disorder ("Experts disagree," 1952). At one point in the hearing Henry Pope asked Dr. Young if Musselwhite was "possum-ing", and Dr. Young "answered that there are some animals, when overcome by extreme fear, feign death or a coma. 'In that respect, you might say, he is acting like an o'possum'" ("Musselwhite's execution," 1952). Dr. Bond insisted that fear had nothing to do with it.

In the end, Judge Dale seemed moved by the situation despite feeling that Musselwhite was guilty. In "a moving philosophical discussion of capital punishment for a man judged insane," Dale denied the writ of error coram nobis and found that while he believed Musselwhite to be insane, did not personally feel that it was enough to avoid punishment ("Musselwhite's execution," 1952). As such, he stayed the execution until the Mississippi State Supreme Court could make a decision ("Musselwhite's execution," 1952; Marion County Courthouse, 1952, pp. 324-325). Luther Musselwhite was not made aware of this decision, but while awaiting this new verdict, he tried to break free from the hospital by breaking two windowpanes and tearing apart a window screen before being caught by attendants for making noise ("Musselwhite will not," 1952; "Musselwhite tries hand," 1952).

On November 10, 1952, the Mississippi State Supreme Court finally ruled that Luther Musselwhite was insane, and therefore could not be executed by law until he was judged to be sane again (*Musselwhite v. State*, 1952). He would remain in Whitfield, ending the saga of hunger strikes and insanity.

"Musselwhite is Out"

Luther Musselwhite's next headlines reached at least as far as Ontario, Canada. On the evening of October 16, 1954, Musselwhite escaped along with three other inmates at Whitfield after punching a ward attendant and stealing their keys ("Columbia and Marion," 1954; "Renew search," 1954; "Search continues," 1954). The other three inmates were captured within a few days, but Musselwhite remained at large ("Renew search," 1954). He was first tracked to Scott County near Forest, Mississippi after a couple noticed that their deep freezer had been robbed of nearly 140 pounds of frozen

meat as well as clothing items and cooking utensils ("Musselwhite believed hiding," 1954). Officials quickly tracked him into Gum Springs, where they found some of the stolen items, but no sign of Musselwhite. Another resident found an abandoned campfire under a bridge, and a woman reported that a ragged looking man had knocked on her door but eventually left when she refused to allow him inside ("Musselwhite believed hiding," 1954). Similar sightings and robberies led to an extensive manhunt in the Hillsboro area involving a communications truck with a radio system, bloodhounds, swarms of Highway Patrol cars, an Air National Guard helicopter, and almost fifty patrolmen ("Officers hunt," 1954). The hunt was on.

The Mississippi State Hospital at Whitfield, perhaps a little too late, petitioned the public for donations to acquire the equipment to photograph its inmates properly. After the escape of four inmates, they felt that they required better equipment in their identification department ("Whitfield needs photos," 1954). The facility noted that during the Hillsboro manhunt there were no quality photographs available of Musselwhite to assist in the search, and "the only picture used at all was torn from an old newspaper which showed Musselwhite lying on a cot—a bad angle—and he needed a shave" ("Whitfield needs photos," 1954). This was presumably the photograph taken by Cliff Bingham of Jackson's Clarion Ledger previously shown from 1952, which is ironically still the only photograph to be found of the man (Bingham, 1952). Musselwhite was careful to avoid being spotted with his beard, going so far as to use razors in the homes he burglarized to shave his face because the only photo available was the newspaper image where he was unshaven ("Wherever he is," 1957).

The first confirmation that the man sighted across Scott and Newton County was indeed Luther Musselwhite was the identification of a set of fingerprints taken from a refrigerator after a home was burglarized in Newton County ("Renew search," 1954; "Musselwhite fingerprints," 1954). While inside the home, Musselwhite "fried almost a dozen eggs in a tea kettle, consumed a large quantity of milk, and ate almost a quart of preserves" before he stole two quilts and some clothing ("Elusive, escaped," 1954). He was also spotted by two young boys who came across him in the woods sitting on a log and eating a sandwich ("Mississippi still looking," 1958).

By March of 1955 authorities had traced Musselwhite to the west of Meridian, Mississippi, just across the state border into Alabama. Residents in Nanafalia, Sweetwater, and Myrtlewood had encountered a "tramp" who entered their homes and fed him ("Convicted killer," 1955; "Escaped murderer," 1955). Musselwhite was known to continue burglarizing homes where he would eat, clean himself, and occasionally steal other items ("Mississippi still looking," 1958). Officials reported that he would clean the dishes and razors he used, would always steal preserves if they were available, and they "determined that he would lurk in the forests and watch a home for hours, sometimes days, before sneaking in while everyone was away" ("Mississippi still looking," 1958). It was also believed to be his habit to enter homes when only women were there ("Convicted killer," 1955). After this initial sighting in Marengo County, Alabama, he was not conclusively spotted again.

Newspapers across Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and even Canada reported on the manhunt, but as time went on and leads dried up, the story fell out of the wider consciousness. Occasional articles were run in subsequent years

chronicling the story. A Louisiana article dubbed Musselwhite the “phantom of forests” in 1958, but by then it had been almost four years since Luther Musselwhite had been conclusively spotted (“Phantom of forests,” 1958). This article, along with others across the continent, were published that December in what may have been an attempt to garner public interest in the case again as Luther Musselwhite was still the first on Mississippi’s list of most wanted men (“Murderer eludes,” 1958; “Mississippi still looking,” 1958). His success in eluding capture was credited to his experience in the Marines as a jungle fighter in World War II, while some believe he died in a forest fire (“Murderer eludes,” 1958; Gordon, 2021). Regardless of the reason for his disappearance, he remained at large. As of 2024 Luther Musselwhite has never been located, and it is highly unlikely given the amount of time passed that he is still living, even if his story persists in the communities he terrorized.

CHAPTER IV: MUSSELWHITE WILL GET YOU

In the spring of 2021, the *Newton County Appeal* ran a two-part story chronicling the story of Luther Musselwhite. The author of the piece, Ralph Gordon, compared Musselwhite's legacy to that of Jimmy Hoffa and D. B. Cooper as he recounted the murder of Virgil Price, the trials, the hunger strikes, and the eventual escape that followed (Gordon, 2021). Gordon recalls the time after Musselwhite's escape as being filled with hysteria, and that "pranksters delighted in playing on it. Musselwhite jokes and graffiti were very much in style" (Gordon, 2021). People across Mississippi knew of this elusive killer. As time progressed the memory of Musselwhite remained in communities in Marion County, Scott County, and Newton County, the settings of important events in the Musselwhite story, and to children in these areas he was a real life boogey-man.

The Man with No First Name

Lucy Barnes Parkman spent her early years living in Goss, a small community near Cedar Grove and Columbia in Marion County, about 45 minutes west of Hattiesburg. Though it has been over fifty years since she first heard the story of Musselwhite, the name still brought back the childhood fear she remembered:

> "When I was five to six, we really lived in a rural area, so we didn't have real real [sic] close neighbors. Apparently, all of this happened with Musselwhite, and he escaped, well word immediately went out—some way, we didn't have phones—that Musselwhite had escaped. That triggered a lot of fear because a lot of tales had been told, and [when] my parents and…their relatives came to visit, they were always talking about the Musselwhite story then. My parents didn't have a

> lot of training in good parenting, and my cousins tell me the same thing: their parents and mine would say that you better get on in the house before it gets dark, you know Musselwhite's out. That's how they put it: Musselwhite's out" (Appendix A).

That simple name and warning was enough to convince most children to come inside, no matter how unlikely it would be for him to hunt down small children. It is easy to conclude that these warnings were initially out of a real fear for children's safety. Parents repeatedly asked for their children to come inside closer to them later in the evenings, because there was a convict on the loose. Musselwhite really was "out," and as Parkman suggested, there were some in the community that felt he might return to Columbia and exact revenge on those who had sentenced him to death (Appendix A).

However, Musselwhite was not just a fearful figure to those in Columbia and its surrounding communities. He also became a legend to those living in other communities he had contacted, Newton and Scott Counties in particular, where citizens had no need to fear that Musselwhite would come after jury members or witnesses. Newton and Scott counties are located adjacent to one another directly west of the city of Meridian. Gordon suggests that one factor for Musselwhite's infamy was the uniqueness of his surname, titling his two-part story "Musselwhite: the man with no first name" as a nod to the way people referred to the fugitive (Gordon, 2021). These articles are an important source of evidence for how the story existed in those communities. Gordon's description of Luther Musselwhite in his community's memories is indicative of the type of figure Musselwhite was to them, regularly using terms such as myth, legend, and boogey-man:

> "The real Musselwhite probably never had a clue of the power that the larger-than-life and mythical Musselwhite possessed….The aura of mystery which surrounded Luther Musselwhite gave rebirth to an old booger every kid has been warned of at one time or another as "Musselwhite will get you" became a metaphoric warning to children" (Gordon, 2021).

To some children, he was hiding under bridges in Union, and to others he was lurking at the edges of the woods at twilight, waiting for a chance to snatch them (Gordon, 2021; Appendix B). He had become a spooky figure in the minds of local children rather than a real man on the run.

The Elusive "Muscle White"

Parkman and Gordon were not the only ones to remember warnings of "Musselwhite's out," and while Musselwhite was probably a real man to many children across Mississippi in the 1950's and '60's, to others he was just a legend adults used to encourage them to behave. The more time passed, the less real it became. Not everyone who heard the tale knew that there was any truth to the story.

Dr. James "Bubba" Walters spent a portion of his childhood with his grandparents in Scott County near Forest, Mississippi, in the early 1960's. Just down the road was Gum Springs, the believed hideout of Musselwhite for a period after his escape in November of 1954, and the site of a substantial manhunt ("Musselwhite believed hiding," 1954; Appendix B). However, Walters never knew about the manhunt or Musselwhite. The stories he heard as a child from his aunts, uncles, and grandparents were of a man he remembered as "Muscle White" that hid in the woods:

> "[Our grandparents] would tell us…the later it got in the afternoon, it's a little twilight out and we were still running around… 'well, Muscle White's gonna getcha," and boy we would all straighten up and run back on the porch. "Who's Muscle White?' Well, he's this big ole man, he only wears a long-sleeved white shirt, and you can look to the edge of the trees over there in the distance and see that little white moving around…" (Appendix B).

Walters explained that although the stories he heard from his relatives varied somewhat, certain core details remained the same: Muscle White was an escaped prisoner in the forest who had not been caught yet, but he was probably close by (Appendix B). It was clear this story had departed from the fear of a fugitive on the run into a mythical ghostly figure, even if based in truth. Walters explained that the tale was so effective that their guardians did not need to threaten to punish them for them to comply with their wishes to come inside when it got late (Appendix B). The story of Muscle White was more than enough to bring them back. As Walters grew older, he and his cousins believed the story less and less, even going so far as to ease the fears of their younger relatives by telling them that Muscle White was made-up (Appendix B).

When he had children of his own, Walters used Muscle White to spook his two daughters. Angela Corder recalls memories of her father scaring them with the story of a bogeyman of the woods, with no real details but enough mystery to keep them in line:

> "My dad would say 'you don't want to go too far into the woods because Muscle White's out there and he's gonna come out and get you.' Now what 'get you' meant, we didn't know, we didn't have to ask what that meant, we just imagined that it meant something terrible" (Appendix C).

In her case, Muscle White was used both as a scary story and as a cautionary tale. Though during her childhood, she and her family spent time in places all over Mississippi, both rural and more urban, she remembers that the story would change to fit the location (Appendix C). Musselwhite could be anywhere at any time, lurking in the dark to commit crimes against children in the country or in the city.

The story continued through to the present generation as well. Angela Corder's daughter, Nadia, recalls her grandfather telling her and her cousins tales around the campfire at the edge of the woods in Petal, Mississippi (Appendix D). In her memory, the story of Musselwhite had changed even more drastically from the real Musselwhite:

> "I remember him saying that he was dressed in all white, and I have a vivid picture of him just being completely white. His hair white, his eyes, his skin being really, really white. And then him telling us that Muscle White lived in the woods, and he would roam the woods, and to scare us he would tell us that he was after little kids, and he would tell us that he got out…. I remember feeling scared of that because I thought that I was gonna get taken by Muscle White" (Appendix D).

Her mother admits that although they had not been the first to tell Nadia the story, it was so effective at getting her to come inside when it got dark that she and her husband would warn "Muscle White's out" and she would immediately run inside (Appendix C). The story felt real to Nadia, but only because she was a child who believed the scary tales her grandfather would tell her around the campfire. However, Musselwhite had been a real person, with a very real story of escape, burglary, and murder.

Three generations changed the story so drastically that Musselwhite became a myth. The rumors and media reports morphed into something almost entirely different than the real story of the man convicted of murder and sentenced to death in Marion County. Instead, Musselwhite became a reflection of the communities he affected.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Modern Legend as a Reflection of Community

Musselwhite has undeniably become a modern legend but tracing the development of his story into legend allows analysis of the motivations for its development. There is a fair amount of misinformation across newspapers both on the topic of the murder, trials, and escape. Media also played a role in the way the public understood the case, regularly using terminology like "elusive slayer" in headlines and fear mongering, and media reporting influenced public perception of the events. However, word of mouth rumor played a part in the creation of this modern legend as well, possibly to a much greater degree.

Race made its way into the story even if it seemed to have nothing to do with the incident between Virgil Price and Luther Musselwhite. Lucy Parkman recalls hearing one version of events in which Price was not a white manager at all, rather a black waiter at Breakfield's fish camp:

> "[Her cousin's] mother told her…They were having catfish to eat at the fish camp that night along with their drinking and gambling.…A black man had been hired to serve them and Musselwhite started harassing the black guy because he wasn't serving them fast enough…you've probably seen in old country stores the metal ice chest, and it might be made by Coca Cola, that holds a lot of ice. Back then if you had one of those in your store you probably had blocks of ice from the ice plant in Columbia because that would last longer. So, I'm imagining it had blocks of ice in this ice chest that probably were chipped up some and I don't know what drinks were in there. But Musselwhite continued to harass this black man…He

> finally got up and that's who he started beating…. I think he beat him for a very long time. [She] said that that ice chest had blood all in it on that ice. So, it gives quite a bad picture" (Appendix A).

Though it is possible the details about the ice chest were grounded in truth, Virgil Price was an elderly white man, not a black server. Regardless, such a vivid and gory description of the murder was shocking enough to spread as a rumor even within Columbia. In the tumultuous period in which the story took place, imagining the murder victim as a black man might have reflected real conflicts that existed in the American South leading into the Civil Rights Movement. It would only be a year later that Emmett Till would be murdered in Money, Mississippi, jump-starting the movement and bringing a wider public consciousness to the racial violence that existed in these communities.

It is logical, then, that the legend of Musselwhite might have been a malleable way for the communities to display their fears and concerns. When Ralph Gordon describes Musselwhite as a legend, he describes him as being able to morph into whatever setting the story was being told in:

> "Musselwhite the myth was not unlike the evil troll living under a bridge which would spring out with giant hands and blazing eyes, and snatch little children on their way to school, or to granny's house. Or like a demon lurking behind every tree, every building, or anywhere else he could hide, waiting for the chance to pounce on his next victim" (Gordon, 2021).

Angela Corder stated that when she and her sister heard of Musselwhite as children, when her father said "Musselwhite will get you" there was no specification as to what exactly that meant, leaving them to imagine what awful things Musselwhite could be

doing to the children he captured (Appendix C). The vague warning of "Musselwhite's out" told even to children who were aware of his real existence like Lucy Parkman seemed to leave enough up to the imagination that the listeners would apply their own fears to the figure that was Musselwhite. The story could be changed to suit the needs of the storyteller or to match the environment that it was being told in, intrinsically reflecting the fears, concerns, and setting of the communities in which the stories were told: a boogeyman under a bridge, a white man willing to brutally murder a black man, or an insane convict lurking in the woods.

Truth Into Legend

Finding the exact place where the story of Musselwhite changed from rumor into legend is an interesting and complex problem. The stories told of Musselwhite vary widely both contemporarily and over time, providing many examples of modern legends that sprung from real events, but this variation makes it difficult to pinpoint where in time a distinction between rumor and legend could be made because it likely occurred multiple times across different stories.

One could not simply state that the boundary lies in the separation from reality because rumors usually contain falsehoods, and Musselwhite legends all contain strains of truth. The legend of Musselwhite contains many "untrue" facets, but Musselwhite as a legend stemmed from factual events. There was a real story that spread into rumor and then into modern legend in the form of preadolescent and adolescent horror stories as well as stories used as a method of control and entertainment by adults. Though varied, there are some commonalities throughout the Musselwhite legends that are typically related to what really happened. Lucy Parkman and Dr. James Walters both mentioned in

some way that the stories they heard from adults, at their most basic, were always the same, and these details were all factual (Appendix A, B). Musselwhite always seems to be connected to his identity as an escaped patient of a mental hospital or as an escaped convict. His identity as an ex-Marine is often used, as is his habit of hiding out in the woods. Even the concept of Musselwhite stalking homes at the edge of the woods was originally grounded in reality. There are multiple accounts of law enforcement informing the public that they believe Musselwhite would stalk homes for several days if not weeks before determining that it was possible for him to enter and steal food and supplies, only entering the residence when it was empty or when the only occupants were women ("Murderer eludes", 1958; "Convicted killer", 1955).

Arguments could be made that the change between rumor and legend occurred once the story separated from the knowledge that Musselwhite was a real person and then became "untrue." However, there are instances of children spreading stories related to Musselwhite while understanding he was a real person. Ralph Gordon recalls one woman from Union, Mississippi explaining that she and her childhood friends used to be terrified that Musselwhite was hiding out near their home:

> "Rumor had it that Musselwhite actually lived under the bridge between their house and the store where she and her friends used to buy candy and popsicles. The very thought of crossing that bridge was terrifying. And when they did get up the nerve to cross the bridge, they closed their eyes, held their breaths, and dashed across as fast as their legs would carry them" (Gordon, 2021).

This specific story has all the hallmarks of a modern legend, and while it is highly unlikely that Luther Musselwhite is still hiding out under a bridge in Union, it was likely

true at one point. Prior to the manhunt that occurred in Newton County, one of the many details and sightings that led to law enforcement swarming the area was an abandoned campfire underneath a bridge suspected to be left behind by Musselwhite ("Musselwhite believed", 1954). It is also worth noting that the children who heard these stories usually believed them, even if their storyteller did not. Dr. James Walters was unaware that Musselwhite was a real person, or even how his name was spelled, but his children and grandchildren believed the legend wholeheartedly (Appendix B, C, D). Nadia Corder stated that "I thought it was real because [her grandfather] had told me," suggesting that she was willing to believe these ghost stories as a child (Appendix D). The story of Musselwhite was directed towards children, and young children were likely to believe and be fearful of the white figure in the woods.

This case study suggests that the boundary between legend and rumor lies where the story of Musselwhite began to be used for a specific purpose separate from rational warning, either to scare the listeners for entertainment or to encourage them to behave. When Lucy Parkman was warned by her parents in Columbia that "Musselwhite's out" in the late 1950's, there was likely some real fear that the man was stalking somewhere nearby (Appendix A). It is even possible that Dr. Walters' family members still held some fear of Musselwhite's presence in the 1960's. However, by the time Dr. Walters was telling the story to his own children, and possibly even when he was easing the fears of his youngest cousins as an adolescent that Musselwhite was just a spooky story, there should have been no rational fear of his presence (Appendix B). At that point the tale was being told for entertainment and as a method of control and had fully transformed into a legend. In the case of children sharing stories among themselves as in the case of the

bridge in Union, the purpose was not as a method of control but rather as an adolescent horror story, and it too had separated from rational fear that Musselwhite was truly still in the area, even if it had once been rational.

Conclusion

The story of Luther Musselwhite is unique in that generations who first heard the story are still living, and it was possible to trace the development of the legend directly by word of mouth and oral histories. Given time limitations, oral histories could only be sought out for a period of about four months and only five were collected. Of those five, four were within one family, and one was of a woman from Columbia. Though stories were gathered from Ralph Gordon's telling of the Musselwhite story, the sample is relatively limited compared to the variety of Musselwhite stories that exist among those of their generation and afterwards. There also were few sources able to be gathered on the existence of the Musselwhite story in more recent generations, even if it is evident that they exist. More time would be needed to collect a wider array of experiences for analysis.

This research is first and foremost an examination of legend that develops from real events. This means that conclusions on the boundaries between rumor and legend in this context might not be applicable to legends outside of this context, as there are undoubtedly modern legends in existence that stem from rumor but are not based on factual events. Musselwhite as a modern legend also falls into the category of adolescent and preadolescent horror legends as well as a legend of entertainment and control used by adults. Other conclusions in this analysis might not be applicable to legends that do not fall into these categories because the motives of development are different.

There are a variety of paths for future research following this case study. Firstly, there is a level of vague language used in the construction of the Musselwhite legend. It would be beneficial to better understand how leaving aspects of stories to the imagination changes the story over time, and how much that imagination reflects the communities in which they are told. This project has revealed that social context and stressors were relevant in the development of the story, but there may be certain contexts in which social stressors are more or less important.

It is possible location may affect the development of legend in other ways as well. Comparing the development of the Musselwhite legend and other modern legends from the American South to legends from different contexts may be important to understanding how they are unique or similar. Similarly, comparing the Musselwhite legend to other modern legends from the American South might generate further understanding of the effect of social context on legend development. The difference in social context need not be through location only. Difference in time period might affect modern legend development and conducting longer case studies may produce valuable insight. Even the Musselwhite story could be looked at more closely given more time, evaluating the change in the stories through different eras and social movements.

Research should also focus on other catalysts for the development of legends such as real-life events like the Musselwhite murder and escape, and to what degree modern legends tend to revolve around central details or rumors from that catalyst. Musselwhite as a legend has provided this unique opportunity for analysis, and the story will continue to shift to suit the children and families who think they can see a flash of white in the woods.

APPENDIX A: LUCY PARKMAN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

This appendix is a transcription of an audio recording from an interview with Lucy Barnes Parkman on October 24, 2023. This was an informal interview in which Parkman recounted oral history regarding her childhood in Marion County, Mississippi, and recollections of conversations she engaged in with family and friends in the area. The conversation was guided loosely by the interviewer, Ella Lauderdale. The focus of the oral history was on memories related to the community and Luther Musselwhite. Informal language and grammar have been edited as little as possible so that the interview transcript is legible but still carries the same meaning as the original conversation.

[Ella Lauderdale]: This is an interview with Lucy Parkman on October 24, 2023. The purpose of this interview is to discuss oral history related to Luther Musselwhite. And just to repeat things, you understand and are giving me verbal consent to record this, you know that it's being recorded. Only my thesis advisor and I are going to have access to it and if at any point you decide that you don't want me to use this recording you can let me know.

[Lucy Parkman]: I understand.

[Ella Lauderdale]: So, what are your first memories related to Luther Musselwhite?

[Lucy Parkman]: Well, I have to explain where I lived and maybe why I even knew about it when I was probably five years old. I lived at a community, Goss, which was on Highway 13 north of Columbia. I lived very close to the Pearl River. This incident apparently happened farther south I suppose on the river from where I lived, but as you know if you're following the river, it's a short distance. The river has always been known—it sort of defined your community and who you were and maybe gave me the idea too that the bad things happen on the other side of the river, but this did not happen on the other side of the river. I did spend a lot of time during my very young years on the Pearl River, and this incident apparently happened—was near the Goss community on Highway 13, this incident happened in what would be more the Cedar Grove community, which was a bit closer to Columbia, but probably the highway was the same distance from the river as where I lived.

Anyway, I knew that—I mean maybe it was later that I knew whiskey stills were, I thought, on the other side of the river. The "bad" side of the river, and on my side of the river we were good Christians, but that's not…that's the opinion I formed as a child from what I heard. So, when I was five to six, we really lived in a rural area, so we didn't have real, real close neighbors. Apparently, all of this happened with Musselwhite, and he escaped, well, word immediately went out—some way, we didn't have phones—that Musselwhite had escaped. That triggered a lot of fear, because a lot of tales had been told and my parents and you know, their relatives that came to visit, they were always talking about the Musselwhite story then. My parents didn't have a lot of training in good parenting, and my cousins tell me the same thing, their parents and mine would say that

you better get on in the house before it gets dark, you know, Musselwhite's out. That's how they put it: Musselwhite's out.

Very honestly, back then I did not know the outcome of it. I really didn't know much about what he had done. I don't know why. Over the years I realized it happened in what was called one of the fish camps. It happened at Breakfield fish camp on the river at Cedar Grove. But there were quite a few of those fish camps along the river because it was where men could go and drink whiskey and the sheriff didn't come there, probably because he didn't want to go there. The fish camps was a common thing.

Anyway, over the years I never really knew much about it, I just knew the fear of Musselwhite. As a matter of fact, when your mom told Caroline to ask me if I remembered the Musselwhite thing I promise you the hair on the back of my neck stood up. It still brings that…fear to me that I better get in before it gets dark. I've asked my cousins who lived around me, and they had all the same feeling that our parents scared us with it. I had done nothing but worry about this since you brought it up, because I started reading and talking to people.

I called my cousin—my very first cousin, her dad was my dad's brother. We need to go a little bit back about the river. All my childhood, if there was somebody that had escaped from somewhere, especially the training school in Columbia—the Columbia training school, those kids would bolt out occasionally, which they had a right to—for some reason they would follow the river. I guess to know where they were. So honestly during my childhood and high school years I can remember my daddy and grandmother and I going into town to stay with relatives if training school kids were out because the

river seemed to be where they would go. So, I guess that's kind of what people thought. He was going to come back to Pearl River.

So, I called my cousin. She and her family lived closer to Cedar Grove that I did, and there were Breakfields in the community where they lived. And I do not know this person who owned the fishing camp, it was a Breakfield, but I know there were Breakfields in that area. So, I called her, and I said, "Do you remember anything about the Musselwhite case?" And she said, "Oh yes". She said, "My daddy was on the jury". I said "oh?" And she said yeah. Of course, they wouldn't have had telephones then, but she and her momma and daddy had been out of town, came back through Columbia, probably stopped to buy gas or something, and somebody told them that Musselwhite had escaped, apparently that weekend. My uncle, she said, "When we got home, he went in the house, got a pistol and put it in his pocket" because he had to go out that night to the barn to feed his cows or something. She seemed to think the jurors had been threatened. I don't know that that part's true, but she did say she was told that when they did that conviction and the jury gave their opinion, and they were dismissed from court, that my uncle went to the store where he worked in town and sat down and put his head in his hands and cried and cried because of the thought of putting someone to death.

Anyway, I do know that that's factual. She told me that, and then I talked to a friend in Atlanta—he's actually a relative too. His dad owned a service station on the north end of town. He said that his dad employed Luther Musselwhite. He didn't seem to know where Luther Musselwhite came from or how long he'd been around because the person telling me this would have been five years old when it happened too. But that service station was on the end of town going toward the fish camp where it all happened.

Actually, he said that Luther Musselwhite worked that day at his daddy's service station. As he said, it's not often you can say you have employed one of the FBI's ten most wanted in Columbia, Mississippi.

Then I called another cousin who's a friend, and she lived on that end of town too, the part of town that was closest to Cedar Grove. She said that she did not remember it happening, so she didn't get the parent scare tactic, but that her mother told her—here's the story her mother told her. They were having catfish to eat at the fish camp that night along with their drinking and gambling. And apparently, they could hide their whiskey under the banks of the river there. So, they were having catfish, gambling, drinking. I don't know how many men where there. A black man had been hired to serve them and Musselwhite started harassing the black guy because he wasn't serving them fast enough. She said—I don't know, you've probably seen in old country stores the metal ice chest—and it might be made by Coca Cola—that holds a lot of ice. Back then if you had one of those in your store you probably had blocks of ice from the ice plant in Columbia because that would last longer. So, I'm imagining it had blocks of ice in this ice chest that probably were chipped up some and I don't know what drinks were in there. But Musselwhite continued to harass this black man. Now this is what she was told. He finally got up and that's who he started beating. I don't know if I read this or someone told me that the victim would try to get up and Luther Turnage, Luther Musselwhite's brother would hold him up so he could beat him some more. I think he beat him for a very long time. My friend who's telling me what her mother said, said that that ice chest had blood all in it on that ice. So, it gives quite a bad picture.

Everybody else that I've talked to has really told that same story—not about the black man and the blood on the ice—but everybody tells the same thing. I've been very surprised that a lot of people don't know what I'm talking about. As a matter of fact, there was one person in that community that I asked about it and I know he would know something, but he said he didn't, and I think that he said that because his uncle probably murdered the sheriff a few years later.

Anyway, a few people that lived around me confirmed it and confirmed their fears like I have, and I can almost remember my brother (who would have been eight years older than me), I can almost remember him bringing Musselwhite's name up about three years ago before he died but I can't remember what he was talking about. He was probably being funny with me and telling me Musselwhite was going to get me, I don't remember. But that's how I always felt—Musselwhite was gonna get me. Apparently, he never returned to Columbia after he was gone, and to my knowledge was never captured. Do you have questions?

[Ella Lauderdale]: I guess the only question I have left—you covered all of the others—did you ever speak about Musselwhite to your kids or other younger people? Did you ever use that?

[Lucy Parkman]: No, no. I guess there would be years when I wouldn't think about it. Oh yes, now I've told all of my kids about it. I've called my nephews, because I thought my brother might have talked to my nephews about it. It sounds like a story he would like

for them to know. But one of my nephews said “no, but I’m going to look into this, this sounds interesting”.

So, I can actually read these things that people told me. I've already told you, but I can read it in their words.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Sure.

[Lucy Parkman]: This would be my friend whose dad employed Mr. Musselwhite, okay. “Yes. Luther Musselwhite worked for my dad the day he committed murder, after getting off work. I did not know him; think I was only five when he was arrested. Just heard Dad refer to him over the years. Not often do you have one of the ten most wanted working for you.”

He says that he thinks that he has some more info that he’ll try to find—I guess I deleted it. The one where she was telling me that her mother told her about the blood and it being a black man.

Anyway. His name, the victim’s name, the last name was either Price or Prime.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Price.

[Lucy Parkman]: Price?

[Ella Lauderdale]: Yes.

[Lucy Parkman]: Do you remember the first name?

[Ella Lauderdale]: I think [Virgil].

[Lucy Parkman]: I think that's right. But I think that's just from reading that. Anyway. I've done nothing but talk about it to everyone from around in Columbia. Actually, I will say too that apparently his defense lawyer was Vernon Broom. Have you not read that anywhere?

[Ella Lauderdale]: I have not read that anywhere, but I do know who he is.

[Lucy Parkman]: Vernon Broom was a very well-respected lawyer. I would assume that he was court appointed because he would be—let's see, this was in 1951, he would be—Vernon Broom, if he were living, he would at least be 91. So, he would have been a young lawyer then and probably that's why he was court appointed. Also, the name Henry Pope was involved as a lawyer, as was Kelly Hammond.

[Ella Lauderdale]: What do you know about those three lawyers? Would you mind?

[Lucy Parkman]: I really don't know anything about Mr. Pope, I just remember the name. Vernon Broom was a very well-respected man who later became a chancery judge I believe. Or either circuit judge, I don't remember, just a very well-respected man. I just found out this past week about two years ago if I could have just talked to him. Kelly

Hammond, I just saw that name involved. I just saw that name once; it seems that he might have been a representative or something. What I really remember about him…my dad was in politics. My dad was tax assessor and chancery clerk over the years. I spent a lot of time in the courthouse. On election night you didn't sit home and watch it on TV, and you didn't even go downtown to see it on screen, you went downtown, and I think they announced the votes as they came in. So, election night was always a big night in town. We could go there too to hear my dad's results. And this Kelly Hammond, I don't know why he did this, but he would walk around town—like I said I think he was a representative, maybe he was on the ballot too—he would walk around with this big false nose on his face just being a clown. That's what I know about Kelly Hammond.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Thank you. Is there anything else that you wanted to share that you would want on the recording?

[Lucy Parkman]: I mean, unless you have anything else you want to ask, that's…. now I have people calling me, someone who I'm afraid has totally forgotten it because she has brain cancer was gonna have someone from the Cedar Grove community call me. I had racked my brain to find someone from the Cedar Grove community. If I find out more, can I call you?

[Ella Lauderdale]: Absolutely.

APPENDIX B: DR. JAMES WALTERS INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

This appendix is a transcription of an audio recording from an interview with Dr. James Walters on November 23, 2023. This was an informal interview in which Walters recounted oral history regarding his childhood in Scott County, Mississippi. The conversation was guided loosely by the interviewer, Ella Lauderdale. The focus of the oral history was on memories related to the community and Luther Musselwhite. Informal language and grammar have been edited as little as possible so that the interview transcript is legible but still carries the same meaning as the original conversation.

[Ella Lauderdale]: This interview is with Dr. James Walters on November 23, 2023. And just to reiterate what I said before, you understand that this is being recorded, and you give me consent to use this in my thesis research.

[Dr. Walters]: Sure. That'd be really good, thank you for that.

[Ella Lauderdale]: The purpose of this interview is to discuss Luther Musselwhite. I guess to start off, where did you grow up in Mississippi?

[Dr. Walters]: In Mississippi, from the fourth grade to the middle of the ninth grade, we were in Forrest, Mississippi; that's in Scott County. We were living in the county there for that time in three different places. One of them was with my momma's momma we

called Grammy, and the other was the grandfather and grandmother of my father. The first time I ever heard of Muscle White, it goes back so long I can't remember when, I just remember that all my aunts and uncles and grandparents seemed to tell very similar stories, and they had a purpose in telling us that story. Usually when we were home, to be honest, staying with my momma's momma, Grammy we called her, but we didn't wear shoes. We just didn't, in the yard and things. Both of those sets of grandparents would tell us you know the later it got in the afternoon—it's a little twilight out and we were still outside running around, we needed to take a bath, but we didn't want to just then—and they would say, "Well, Muscle White's gonna getcha," and boy we would all straighten up and run back on the porch. "Who's Muscle White?" Well, he's this big ole man, he only wears a long-sleeved white shirt, and you can look to the edge of the trees over there in the distance and see that little white moving around. Or if you get too far away from the house—doesn't have to be a mile, just y'know, away from the house.

It always worked that every adult that I was with from grandparents to aunts and uncles, they told versions of the story, but they all tended to agree on the basics of what that story was. "This man in the forest escaped from prison and isn't caught yet, don't know where he is, but he's probably close by because you should protect yourself from him. Y'all come on in and get closer on the porch." So, we did that. Yeah. Was that good? Because I could go on about that.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Feel free if you have anything else you want to talk about. I'm happy to listen.

[Dr. Walters]: Well. Again, grandparents, aunts, and uncles, would tell the same story to get up close to us. We never could get them to tell us who this guy was that escaped from prison and got away. It was the same story—it might be changed a little bit, but they all said basically the same thing. Me and my brothers, sister and first cousins were all in the same area pretty much in Forrest, Mississippi, in Scott County. All of us would understand that story because, yeah! He does that to me too, grandpa was..." and I can remember that well, so they'd probably all tell the same story on that. I only remember hearing about Musselwhite used to control us enough to where they knew they didn't have to look the other way. They knew they didn't need to reinforce what punishment they should give us, just tell us that and they would get an instant reaction. We were all terrified of this man. Musselwhite—I thought Musselwhite was in two sections: Muscle, and White was his last name. Muscle and White. I didn't know the spelling then, they didn't care to spell it for me. Didn't need that.

The mystery of who Musselwhite was, turns out that it was, generally speaking, comparable to what my aunts and uncles and grandparents would say. Some difference in newspaper articles in reading that, from Columbia. Musselwhite was used to control us, and all of us cousins, all of us little guys in the family, we all heard pretty much the same story. So, there was that part of it. The purpose they would use it was never conversation, to talk about it, it was always a warning, always a 'be careful' and 'be scared' because he *could* happen.

I'm trying to think. No, I was never shown a newspaper article to prove that there was a Musselwhite. It was enough that all the adults knew it, so it must be true. We never

did question it, we just heard all we wanted to hear in this man in the woods, edge of pastures, long white shirt. Muscle White will get you.

I'm gonna blend it all so much it might be repeat, but that's how it's coming out, so okay.

[Ella Lauderdale]: That's alright. So, do you know around what time period that you were living in Forrest that you remember all of this stuff from?

[Dr. Walters]: We moved and stayed with Momma's momma; we called her Grammy—everybody called her Grammy—I don't know exactly what they said other than that Musselwhite's gonna get you. They didn't show us the facts. Nobody that I knew of outside my immediate family as far as I know, they didn't know anything about this or didn't care. I mean my friends at school, and down the road, and different things, playing and goofing off. I don't remember a single friend or whatever that knew that story. And why my grandparents would tell that, maybe it was just a family secret about something, maybe there were connections between Percy Walters and Grammy and Andrew Jackson, Andrew Jackson Bowler, my Momma's father. The only time we heard about that was with them. We knew the story well, they didn't need to remind us, but if they made a reminder to us about it, it would work. We would all get closer.

So that would have been—I was in the fourth grade so I was ten, so that would be 1961, fourth grade. Those years we moved from the county school down by Grammy's house, Momma's momma, I started the fourth grade there and moved into Forrest the city of the county seat. Forrest High school, I was there from my fourth grade to my ninth

grade [years]. So that's five to six years that I was there, and then we moved again. There was no telling of Musselwhite when I was a teenager, fourteen, fifteen, something like that, it was never used again. We would laugh about it because we thought we knew that it's not really true. But the story would be repeated to younger members of the family. They would get it and we would talk to them about "hey, don't believe that, that's not true". I wonder if my cousins and uncles and aunts would remember what happened. I know my brother Kenny is somewhere in Jones County lately. My first cousins Shirley and Wanda and Sheila Walters and my uncle Wilbur who was a preacher and a carpenter, and then his wife my aunt Vera, they never said anything that I recall about Musselwhite.

It all gets jammed together over the years—1961, it started with my grandparents in the twilight in late evening and lightning bugs out and things, we would play about as far around as you could from the house until somebody said something about Musselwhite, and we would all hurry to our place. I really don't remember past my childhood. Probably it would be around 1963-64, so those years, a few short years. They did leave their marks emotionally and whatever. And I remember those things and the value of a story to keep kids straight.

I don't remember that I did my children that way, I may have but I don't think so. I remembered both my girls, Rebecca and Angela; I think I told them the story. I didn't use it as a weapon to keep them close. I didn't really need to do that with Angela and Rebecca, they just stayed around close and had friends and that's what they would do.

Things lead into other things but moving to Forrest starting in fourth grade in the county school, and 1963 we were in Forrest the city, the county seat of Scott County. Those were probably what, four years that I heard it used that I heard it used in a

discipline mode. It's a vivid memory now looking back on it and thinking about it, and then it turns out there is a real story in a real newspaper that talks about the governor and what he's gonna do, Halloween day Musselwhite was to be executed, but then Musselwhite wouldn't eat; he was on a hunger strike. And for whatever reason people in the institutions said "that guy's sick, he hasn't eaten anything in a week and a half, you can't kill a man that's malnourished! He's too starved to kill." I guess he was, because the institutions, they took care of him and pleaded his case, but he got away. And in getting away, he was always everywhere. Wherever the suns going down and getting late, and the fireflies and crickets and things are coming out and chirping and doing what they do.

It just about stopped at the latest, January of 1966 we moved from Forrest to Yazoo City and then before the year was out, we went to Laurel. We went to high school in Laurel. So, I don't remember it being used or spoken of except as a little charming thing to talk about, being kids and remembering silly things like that now that we can look back on. Everything I knew about how that story was used beyond that was a disciplinary way and fear. The fear of, "Oh, if I don't behave, it's really going to be bad."

It looks like it was 1961 to 1965 with as it tails off into 1965 that its less and less convincing that we should pay attention to this and laugh about it. And now I find out, through Ella's scholarship, looking things up for me and finding the facts and newspapers and things, it's just brought it all back and it feels—I don't know, it feels like I'm touching a place in my life where I can remember what fear is for children. It has good and bad, I guess.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Thank you, I appreciate it. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

[Dr. Walters]: What I would like to find out is through the Scott County times if anything would be recorded. But it seems like surely it would be. He escaped, they looked for him, they never found him again. Surely if that happened in Mississippi, people would write, print things about him in newspapers and things. I wonder about the Scott County Times; in their archives and things I wonder if there's probably not just one article on Musselwhite. They probably say Musselwhite escaped, Musselwhite's to be executed, I wonder how they would share perspectives or tend to be saying the same things. Or that this one's unique in that—whatever. And also, I would be interested in finding out through scholarship, someone who has the tools to get to the resources and make them available, the Scott County times—it would be good. It would be good if you could find that. Maybe three or four articles that follow after in succession. How a man half starved to death managed to elude the public and the sheriffs and the law, and how did he pull it off, how did he get away? Did he have help or not? Where'd he go? Who are his brothers and sisters, mom, and daddy, if he has any. I'm sure those articles would make him more interesting to talk about. It's not necessary but it really would be good to find out that he was discovered here, talked about there. So those county newspapers and small-town newspapers. I wonder how they share information with this Columbia newspaper.

Okay. It's an interesting story, I'm glad you brought it up, Ella. I'm glad you did that scholarship and getting the story out, not as you told it but as it is told. We're not

tampering with the facts to take an obvious conclusion, we're letting the documents tell the story, letting the research be the research. It's really good. Thank you so much.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Thank you for speaking with me.

[Dr. Walters]: You're welcome.

APPENDIX C: ANGELA CORDER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

This appendix is a transcription of an audio recording from an interview with Angela Walters Corder on November 23, 2023. This was an informal interview in which Angela recounted oral history regarding her childhood in Mississippi. The conversation was guided loosely by the interviewer, Ella Lauderdale. The focus of the oral history was on memories related to the community and Luther Musselwhite. Informal language and grammar have been edited as little as possible so that the interview transcript is legible but still carries the same meaning as the original conversation.

[Ella Lauderdale]: This recording is on November 23, 2023, with Angela Corder. And again, just to reiterate, you understand I'm recording this, I'm going to be using it in my thesis work, and if at any point you decide you don't want me to use your oral history you can let me know.

[Angela Corder]: Yes, I consent.

[Ella Lauderdale]: So, where did you grow up in Mississippi?

[Angel Corder]: So, several places. I was born at Forrest General Hospital. We lived in Petal from the time I was born until I was about three, and then we moved to the Mississippi delta in Morgan City, Mississippi, which is outside of Greenwood, for my

school-age years up until the third grade. Then we moved to the coast to Pascagoula from the third grade until my sixth-grade year, then to Natchez until my sophomore year of high school, and then I finished high school in Carthage, Mississippi. So, all over the state in every kind of region I guess you would say, I spent some time of my childhood.

[Ella Lauderdale]: What are your memories of Luther Musselwhite as a story, as a person?

[Angela Corder]: I never knew that his name was actually Luther Musselwhite, we actually thought he was someone named Muscle White, Muscle as a first name, White as a last name. He was the boogeyman of the woods pretty much. Not a monster or fictional, but we knew he was real and was dangerous. I don't know that we knew anything about him actually harming someone in a specific way, we just knew he was dangerous especially to children. So, we knew Muscle White as someone who was going to sort of get us if we went too far into the woods.

[Ella Lauderdale]: What was the story exactly that you were told?

[Angela Corder]: It's pretty much cautionary. We would always kind of push the limits of where we would go in the neighborhood, especially when we lived in the delta where it was very rural and there were open woods for us to go into. It was cautionary. It was always my dad who told us, never my mom. So, my dad would say, "You don't want to go too far into the woods because Muscle White's out there and he's gonna come out and

get you." Now what "get you" meant, we didn't know, we didn't have to ask what that meant, we just imagined that it meant something terrible. I guess that Muscle White never, I never knew about the name Luther. Just a cautionary tale, that would be what it would be. I think it kind of maybe took on different forms, because I can definitely remember the story being told not just when we lived in Morgan City in that rural area but even when I was smaller and could kind of barely understand. My sister, Rebecca, might remember because she was school age at the time, being four years older than me. Even then I think the story was pretty much dark areas, anywhere you weren't supposed to go, Musselwhite could be there. He could be hiding out.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Your dad, Bubby, he grew up in Mississippi, but your mom didn't, right?

[Angela Corder]: She lived as a small child in Mississippi around some family land up in Seminary just for a few years from my understanding. She was born in South Carolina, moved here to be with family maybe in like first and second grade, and then shortly after that moved to south Florida where she spent most of her childhood up until like I think her junior year of high school they moved to Pennsylvania. But yeah, she wasn't in Mississippi, didn't consider herself a Mississippian, I wouldn't think, till maybe later she moved back here to go to junior college.

[Ella Lauderdale]: So, she really didn't know anything about the story at all?

[Angela Corder]: Yeah, no, and I never—if she ever said anything about Musselwhite it was just to kind of tame my dad, so he didn't scare us too bad. It was never to add to the story or anything like that.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Alright. Well, thank you. If you have anything else to add, you can.

[Angela Corder]: That's about it.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Thank you.

[Note: Afterwards, Angela mentioned that they occasionally would use Musselwhite to spook her daughter Nadia when she didn't want to come inside at night because she was so spooked by Bubby's story that it stuck with her and would coerce her to come in. They currently live in Pascagoula.]

APPENDIX D: NADIA CORDER INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

This appendix is a transcription of an audio recording from an interview with Nadia Corder on November 23, 2023. This was an informal interview in which Nadia recounted oral history regarding her childhood in Mississippi. The conversation was guided loosely by the interviewer, Ella Lauderdale. The focus of the oral history was on memories related to the community and Luther Musselwhite. Informal language and grammar have been edited as little as possible so that the interview transcript is legible but still carries the same meaning as the original conversation.

[Ella Lauderdale]: This recording is on November 23, 2023, with Nadia Corder. Again, just to reiterate, the purpose of this interview is to discuss memories and oral history related to Luther Musselwhite, and you know that this is being recorded; you're alright with me using this for my thesis; nobody will use this other than me and my thesis advisor; and if at any point you decide that you don't want me to use this you can let me know?

[Nadia Corder]: Yes.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Alright, so to reiterate where did you grow up in Mississippi?

[Nadia Corder]: I mostly grew up in Pascagoula, Mississippi, but spent a good I'd say about six-ish years of my life around Hattiesburg, Petal, and Oak Grove.

[Ella Lauderdale]: And what are your memories related to Luther Musselwhite?

[Nadia Corder]: Well, I remember being with, of course, you, us, and our family, at your old house and us sitting around the fire and fire pit and Bubby, our grandpa, telling us about Musselwhite. I remember him saying that he was dressed in all white, and I have a vivid picture of him just like being completely white. His hair white, his eyes, his skin being really really [sic] white. And then him telling us that Musselwhite lived in the woods, and he would roam the woods, and to scare us he would tell us that he was after little kids, and he would tell us that he got out. He was an escaped convict, and he was roaming through the woods and if you weren't careful, he would get you in the woods. And always to be careful and to listen for him at night because sometimes you could hear him and see him like a flash of white going through the woods. I remember feeling scared of that because I thought that I was gonna get taken by Musselwhite.

I think that's pretty much it, that one specific instance of being told about Musselwhite.

[Ella Lauderdale]: And you never knew that it was real?

[Nadia Corder]: No, I had no idea. I thought it was real because he had told me, but besides that…

[Ella Lauderdale]: Like a child's way?

[Nadia Corder]: Yeah, a child's memory.

[Ella Lauderdale]: Well, thank you!

[Nadia Corder]: Of course.

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