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Mary the Elephant. The town considered guns, electrocution and dismemberment before setting on hanging.

There's A Skeleton In A Trainyard In East Tennessee

BY JOAN VANNORSDALL SCHROEDER

It was 1916, and things were changing fast. World War I raged in Europe. Dadaism, ripe with comic derision and irrationality, took hold in artistic circles. Freeform jazz took hold of the American music scene. Margaret Sanger opened the first birth-control clinic. It was a good year for scapegoats. It was a good year to hang an elephant.

The Place

Erwin, Tennessee seems to be a polite and patriotic town, where campaign signs ask voters to "Please Elect..." then thank them in advance. It's a place where many of the Main Street businesses mark the Fourth of July by closing down for four days, and nobody seems to mind the inconvenience.

In 1916, Erwin was a railroad boom town, home to the Cincinnati, Clinchfield, and Ohio Railroad's repair facilities, "sprouting like a boy growing too fast for his own britches," according to longtime resident Hank S. Johnson. The population of Erwin (which was supposed to be called Ervin, in honor of the man who donated 15 acres of land for the town, but was misspelled by a postal worker) nearly tripled in the first 16 years of the century. Makeshift boardwalks stretched above the ankle-deep yellow mud in the streets.

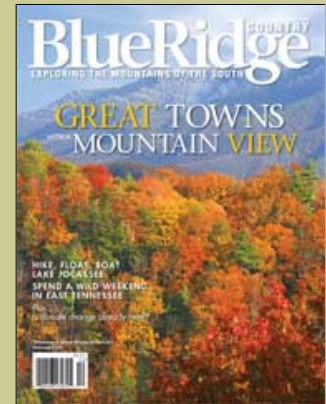
The Clinchfield line used to carry coal out of the Tennessee mountains; Clinchfield and Blue Ridge Pottery were the major employers in Erwin. For decades, the railroad yards were the busiest place in town.

Now, the yards are quiet: pigeons roost in the old passenger station, and most of the tracks are dull from disuse.

This is where Murderous Mary, a five-ton cow elephant with the Sparks Brothers Circus, was hung by the neck from Derrick Car 1400 on September 13, 1916. The story of why and how Mary died is, of course, obscured by time and countless retelling: an example of the best and worst of oral history. It is tragic, absurd, excessive: quintessential turn-of-the-century America.

The Players

Charlie Sparks, the owner of Sparks World Famous Shows, was a frustrated man. His circus was two-bit, compared to his southern rival, John Robinson's Four Ring Circus and Menagerie. A circus's net worth was measured in rolling stock and elephants: Sparks' dog-and-pony show traveled in a mere 10 railroad cars, compared to Robinson's 42; Sparks could boast of only five elephants compared to Robinson's dozen. Never mind Barnum and Bailey—84 railroad cars was beyond



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