

The Ghosts of Graveyard Island

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Between Holly Creek Marina and Willow Grove is a tiny little island. Over the years, it has been known by a number of different names, but after the Corps of Engineers deemed it a designated camping spot, it became known as Graveyard Island and officially hit the maps. Despite its ominous name, campers and boaters flock to its southern point for its wonderful, panoramic view. Its long shallow point makes swimming a breeze there, and fishermen love the steep river channel alongside. It's an A-1 place to play.

But, why would such a beautiful place own such a frightening name? The answer is simple. It was once a graveyard. During the 1800s and early 1900s, this island was just a high ridge along the Obey River. The river had carved into this ridge, leaving a high bluff that overlooked the old town of Willow Grove and the communities of Johnson Bottom and Willis Bottom. The ancestors of the folks of these communities were buried where they had a beautiful view of their "Bottoms" (so to speak).

As with many cemeteries of its day, the ground around the graves was heavily planted with a dark green ground cover, called Myrtle. This plant helped choke out other pesky trees and saplings and briars. Even in winter, the deep green hues of Myrtle color the cemetery floor in a rich carpet of vines and leaves. And in spring, it throws thousands of tiny violet blooms. It's a gorgeous sight.



Of course, in 1942, the graves of this cemetery (known as the Smith Cemetery) were removed from the soil and reburied at other cemeteries above and beyond Corps property. Forty-four large holes donned the earth that year.

As with most graveyards, this one has its share of creepy stories. I don't claim to have seen ghosts here, but some have witnessed strange occurrences in this special little spot. For instance, one man claimed to hear the voice of a young boy in the Cedar thicket on the island. Yet upon investigation, the man found no one else on the island but himself. After some investigation, I learned that one four year old Porter Smith died and was buried in this plot. Could this voice have been his?

Another story involved strange lights in that same thicket. It is said that odd, pale lights glow in the trees there, but grow dim and disappear as one approaches. But the mind plays tricks on a person in the dark sometimes. Maybe these lights are figments.

Now here is a documented creepy tale. In 2004, four young men reserved the campsite on this point, joking with one another about the eerie name. One of the lads was quite a prankster. Before leaving on their trip, he searched online for a fake cadaver. I don't know where one searches for such a thing, but the fellow found just what he wanted. He found and purchased a rubber dead body that looked devastatingly real. With the help of one of the other young men, he concocted a plan and a story about a drowning on the island the week before, where the body had not been found.

Upon their arrival, the two quietly placed the fake body conveniently along the shore for the other two lads to stumble onto. Oddly, a couple of days passed and still the other two men had not yet stumbled onto this frightening rubber cadaver. Finally, after many beers and rounds of tequila, the original two pranksters elected to take their boat out fishing for a while, completely forgetting about their carefully laid plan and prank.

Meanwhile, one of the other two lads decided to walk off some of the tequila, leaving his buddy napping silently by the fire. One can easily guess what happened next. The wandering friend screams bloody murder, waking his friend into a panic. Chaos ensues. Cell phones sketchily dial out, further creating more panic...*dead body found on Dale Hollow.*

By the time the original two lads returned from their drunken fishing trip, the island was swarming with officers and paramedics and official people of every kind. Needless to say, our Clay County officials failed to find the humor in the prank, and carted all four men to Clay County Jail, where they spent the remainder of their camping vacation charged with public drunkenness, deceiving an officer, and the list goes on. And our little island gained a new story to tell.

Another type of ghost from days gone by is in view here, also. While gazing downstream toward First Island, one can catch a narrow glimpse of old Highway 53 etched into the rock bluff, left of First Island. The old road wound along the river and

traveled past First Island on its journey northward. It crested the steep bluff between First Island and Stillhouse Creek. Its heavily dynamited walls can be seen descending into the lake surface. When the water is low, one of the old culverts emerges from its watery home and again sees the light of day after sixty-five years of darkened confinement. This road's ghostly remains are always evident. If you get the chance, the old road is still easily walkable from the Jennings Hollow side, and there is a wonderful overlook at its highest point. It's a must-do for true lake lovers.

As always, I'll end my segment with what I see from these great sites I write about. As I sit quietly on this red clay point, I neither see nor feel ghosts. I see the same forty-four holes dug in 1942 and the rich green Myrtle still diligently fulfilling its purpose. No, I sense no ghosts here. But I do sense the history these ghosts have left behind. The old inhabitants of this age-old point share with us one spectacular view. And I suspect it is like nothing they ever imagined. They saw no lake surface. They saw no houseboats, no personal watercraft...no rumble of heavy horsepower. They saw nothing I see now. But I sense their views of long ago. I see people and horses scurrying along the old road in the distance. I see the Willow Grove Schoolhouse nestled on the edge of town. I see young Porter tossing rocks in the river. And I wonder if he sees me waving.~