

OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA
Season 1 Episode 5: The Boy

Old Gods of Appalachia is a horror anthology podcast and thus may contain material not suitable for all audiences, so listener discretion is advised.

[The Land Unknown by Landon Blood]

I walk these hills, leave these dark valleys,

Where I can't stay in the land unknown

In these hills that I walk so often,

I can feel the wind now on your ghost...

Barlo, Kentucky 1917, Chapter 5: The Boy

Much has been said and written about the brave men of Barlo – men who dug deeper and earlier than a lot of the jobs that riddled the coalfields like a brittle decay. There's a whole memorial set up at the state capital, and a whole wall of pictures and news clippings back at B&L's offices up in PA. B&L of course being Barrow and Locke Mining and Railroad Combine – one of the earliest and richest collaborations to ever extract minerals from these here mountains, but we'll talk about them another time. Just not right now. We don't need to talk about them, or the men of Barlo – we need to talk about the Boys. Now, it's no secret how quickly boys are expected to become men here.

Mountain boys are tough, resourceful, and work hard. Mountain boys do what's best for their family, no matter how hard or how painful. This went double and sometimes triple in the mines.

Hordes of boys from 9 and 10 years and up working and greasers and tippers and other mind bogglingly dangerous jobs miles underground. Boys hauling buckets of hot engine grease by hand, working in the direct path of mine cars, boys sorting through coal with little to no breathing help, or even proper tools. The number of boys who never came home was astounding. We were literally feeding our children, our babies, to the bloody maw of old coal and teaching them that it was all there was.

It's no wonder the Boy came.

If you live anywhere near Goshun Creek or Barlo – Hell, maybe even as far north as Sandy Ridge, you've heard about the Boy. Some say he's a ghost, others say he's a harbinger, still others say he's something else entire.

Roy Absher out on Rooster Branch saw the Boy one time. Roy had lost all three of his boys in the mines. Roger and Kyle before they was 15 and little Thomas before them who made it all the way to the ripe old age of 11. Roy had been sittin' on his front porch talkin' to the Lord with the assistance of a self-distilled jar of the holy spirit, if you know what I'm saying. Right around sundown he said he saw a young boy out at the

edge of his property. He said he was a little feller – barely 10 years old, if that. Wearing work overalls that were a might too big for him and oddest thing was he was carrying a lantern.

“I hollered at him and told him he ought not have that out playin with it – he might burn himself. Get on home! But he just stared at me. Stared like I wasn’t even there. So I walked out and got a little closer to him and... God help me, I saw his eyes. They were black – not like somebody hit him, not shiny black or like they were inky black – they were the color of dust – flat and dead. He didn’t look *right*. Now, now it was gettin’ dark and I was – I was tired, but there was something about him that made me step back. You know, I asked him his name. He just looked at me. I asked him who his Daddy was. He just looked at me... then he said, ‘You are.’ And his voice... his voice, that was a man’s voice. I thought... I don’t know why I thought it, but for a minute I thought it might be – it might be Tommy come back... so I stepped off the porch and he held up that lantern and I saw past him.

[Voice grows increasingly upset, finally falling into weeping.] “And I saw – I saw all of them. All the boys. All the ones we lost. All the little ones that died screamin’ for their mummies that went down and never come back up... but mostly I seen my three. Coal dust smeared across where their eyes should be and then that Boy, he just tipped up over that lantern and it went out – and I couldn’t bear it. I was so dark, I couldn’t – I

could hear Tommy crying and I could hear Roger stop breathin' and I heard Missy's cryin' when I told her 'bout Kyle and it was too much. It was just too much and I..."

[The narrator's voice returns to its usual calm.] Roy stopped there. Stared off at something up and to the right in the distance and settled right back down. His mama takes care of him most days, sometimes his sisters come in to give her a reprieve, but he ain't left that house since. Says if he leaves the yard that Boy and his lantern are gonna be there waiting for him.

Myrtle Hooper said she saw the Boy once. The Hoopers – you've prob'ly heard of them – were known to be a drunk and violent lot that lived down in Sowerstown – a stretch of shacks and shanties about 5 miles south of Goshen Creek. Myrtle had always been a jealous thing. Never shared with her little brother, never gave him more than a good smack when she was mad enough. It was whispered when she was twelve or so she and her little brother had gone out playing in the flooded edges of the creek and little Brian Hooper didn't come home. Wouldn't come home 'til they found him floating facedown about a half mile away, the back of his head bloody and knotted like someone had smacked him with a rock. Myrtle, of course, didn't see nothin. She looked up and he was gone, done wandered off. He prob'ly fell and hit his head.

Prob'ly. Now, years later the night before Myrtle's wedding day, back in 1912 Myrtle had the jitters something fierce and so went for a walk down by the creek coincidentally

ended up not far from where her little Brian had been found. I wished I could tell you she was missing her little brother and dying with shame inside for her part in his death, but she wasn't. Myrtle remained a jealous and bitter woman right into adulthood. So when she rounded the bend and saw a light glaring in her eyes in the distance, she cursed it. Held up her hand and asked who was on her daddy's land and what they thought they were doing. Whoever was holding up the light up had better put it down! And whoever was holding it up did lower it so she could approach. As she got closer she could see it was a little boy. He looked to be about Brian's age and he was dripping wet. He was wearing a cap and overalls and for a moment, Myrtle was 12 years old again, her little brother had taken her sucker and run off with it and she was so mad she picked up a rock and she, and she and she... well, he knew better. She stepped gingerly toward the boy, trying to soften her voice.

"Hey little man - whatchoo doin' out here? Are you lost? Are you lookin' for your mama?" The Boy's expression never changed.

"You're not my mama," he said. "You're not anyone's mama, and you ain't gonna be. Never."

The Boy stared at her with dead eyes the color of shovel dust as he lifted his lantern and lit the water around them as dozens and dozens of pale child-sized arms rose from the creek, the water swelling and chilling as they groped their way towards Myrtle -

tangling in her dress, catching her ankles, climbing up her thighs, clutching at her waist as the creek began to rise higher and higher, the hands pulling her down. And the last thing she saw as the water swallowed her screams was that little boy tipping that lantern over, extinguishing the last light she thought she'd ever see. They found her the next morning, washed up on the bank. Still breathing. There never was no wedding, though, not after that. Myrtle's eyes had gone permanently wide and wild and she could not bear the dark for one minute. Last I heard they found a private hospital out near Lexington that took her in.

Earl Hamner had been with B&L Coal and Rail for 40 years. He'd come south with the operation from up in Pennsylvania, right by Barrow, the home office. Earl wasn't liked by many, and he didn't have no family nor kin down here so it made sense that he didn't much like nobody neither. Didn't have to. Earl had been a day boss when he started in Barlo. He oversaw the early shift that ran in #7 and he was a cruel taskmaster to the men and boys who abandoned daylight to sink nearly a full mile beneath the earth to provide for their families. He had no sympathy for sickness or injury.

Back in PA, he'd been the man who had ordered a 10 year old boy back to work after his mama tried to take him home with a busted foot. The boy died of blood poisoning a week later. After the boy's daddy and about 12 other miners followed Earl home the night of the boy's funeral and dared him to come back to work, Earl had been moved to another jobsite over in Eli near the West Virginia line.

Earl ended all over B&L's territories from across the northern coalfields for years before what happened in Avalon. In Avalon, the main ventilating furnace set fire to the woodwork in the main shaft. That's a catastrophe, in case you don't know. On the morning of what would end up being one of the deadliest mine fires in company and state history, Avalon's stable boss had gone down to take feed to his mules and discovered the fire. Within minutes of giving the alarm, the mouth of Hell itself devoured the Avalon mine, suffocating and cooking all the men inside. Thousands of relief workers poured in from surrounding counties but found themselves helpless in the face of a god set on burning up timber, coal, and all the air a man could breathe. The stable boss had made it to safety, stood frozen and helpless as he watched countless men and boys burn alive as he walked out unhurt and unbothered. His eyes stony and set, never shedding a tear. It was said that he went home that night and had a steak dinner and drank himself to sleep. That stable boss's name was Earl Hamner.

Now a boss in his own right, Earl Hamner oversaw the day to day operations of old #7 and was responsible for its safety and compliance with company policy. As far as the ledgers knowed, they'd lost the expected number of workers, mostly boys, to accidents and gas – that Mullins boy lost his foot but he'd live – he was well under quota and he felt all right about that. In the early morning hours, well before dawn, Earl woke up with a sour and bitter stomach, a common occurrence for men his age and one that was getting worse. He stumbled out of bed and out to his outhouse to see if his body would

rectify the situation when he spied a light by the edge of his yard. Now, the gate into Earl's front yard was right off of Main Street in the square and to see someone out in this part of town at this hour was peculiar.

Earl's body called louder than his curiosity, though, so to the outhouse he went and from in there he saw that light moving all around the edge of his yard. No footsteps carried it, but there it went back and forth. When Earl emerged and came round the side of his house to investigate, he found the light was back at his main gate, a ratty picket thing with a single metal latch. When he squinted through the light he could make out the form of a small boy. No older than 10 or 11, a lantern dangling from his hand as he stood there dressed in sooty overalls and a cap. His face smudged with coal dust and grime.

"Who is 'at?" Earl growled in his boss's voice. "Boy, what are you doin' with that light away from the job? You gonna set the whole weeds on fire sneakin around here with that - where's your mamma at? Who let you out?"

The Boy started mutely at him, his face empty... his eyes *not*.

"Boy. What are you doing out at this hour?"

"Been lookin' for you, Mister Earl."

“What you lookin’ for me for—”

“Been lookin’ for you for a long time now...”

“Boy, you better make yourself plain before I—”

“They called you Bobby in Avalon. You done changed your name.” The Boy tilted his head a little. “Maybe that helped you hide.”

Earl Hamner, whose first name was indeed Robert, called Bobby by his mama, froze and paled as he heard the name of the place.

“You been back to Avalon lately, Bobby?” Earl realized then that the voice coming from the child was that of a grown man, rich and deep. “Place is hainted they say. Since the fire everybody there is a sleepwalker. Walkin’ around like every day’s a dream – but it ain’t a dream is it, Bobby? Cat got your tongue? Oh, you think you’re dreaming now, Bobby?”

The little man lifted his lantern and the streets of Barlo came into sharp relief and Earl could see the boys. Rows on rows on rows of boys – some ghostly pale, some mutilated with burns and misshapen skulls. Others were missing hands or legs. Earl’s mind reeled

and detached and the present horror seemed to fade, because Earl Hamner was back in Avalon now.

And Avalon was burning. He was holding a pitchfork, of all the ridiculous things to be holding underground, he was holding a pitchfork. He'd been expecting to find his mules and little Jacob Erskin waiting for their breakfast and instead, he found them suffocated and dead. Found his own chest tightening as he threw down his fork full of hay and made to sound the alarm. And out of the corner of his eye he saw – he saw little Jacob stir... Jake was alive, maybe he could – and then a wave of heat and fire erupted and Earl ran. Somehow he outran the angel of death that visited almost every house in Avalon that day and managed to stand bloodspattered and smoke stained but alive, just like a high priest in the bible.

He discovered the fire so most assumed it had been his fault, but they couldn't prove it. His daddy had gone to school with old man Barrow's brother's boy, so again, they looked after him and got him reassigned. Sending him south this time to the middle of godblessed nowhere: Barlo, Kentucky. Avalon was supposed to be a memory, a ghost, but he could see the edge of that town burning just as clearly as he could see this legion of dead boys who were beginning to slowly trudge toward him, a slow wave of vengeance in the predawn darkness as his heart hammered the inside of his ribcage and a slow scream began to build in his throat.

And Earl screamed and sat bolt upright in bed as the first light of morning streamed in his window, his sheets soaked through with piss and fear. It had been a dream.

He crossed the room and looked out his window to the street and saw the day beginning – the carts bringing in men from the hollers and town men starting out on the walk to work, some of them moving like old trees in a stiff breeze.

“Place is haunted they say. Since the fire everybody there is a sleepwalker. Walkin’ around like every day’s a dream. But it ain’t a dream, is it Bobby?”

Earl shook himself, got up, and cleaned, got himself smellin’ good enough to go to work and arrived on the jobsite where he was greeted as he had been for weeks, by miners on strike. Not anxious to argue with Billy Watts or any of the other union boys, Earl pulled his hat down over his eyes and managed to make his way through the gate and into the site proper. Being management did have its advantages, like knowing where all the real holes in fences are. Honestly he just couldn’t let go of that dream. He’d been under a lot of pressure, what with old #7 on strike and bringing them colored men in from Ohio, maybe it just stirred up too many memories, too many ghosts.

“You think you’re dreamin now, Bobby?”

As if on cue, a fire bell sounded, men shouted and called and for the second time that day, Earl Hamner pissed his pants.

Old #7 was on fire.

A half hour later, Earl and a small crew of volunteers stood around the remnants of a small structural fire on level three of old #7, panting and coughing but breathing sighs of relief. It had been a small thing, and fairly easily managed – a couple boys got burned when a patch of bad gas went – but all in all it was small and contained. The all-clear had already been given and the scabs had all headed back down into the belly of the mountain to get back to work.

Earl wasn't surprised when he looked at who he was down here with. Ed and Pinky Avery, Wayne Conners, Noah Garvin, David Elkins, all union boys from the picket lines, good men who weren't gonna let other men die doing their jobs. Union or not, the dark can make brothers of anyone, Earl thought.

It was the goddamned Avery boys who had the bright idea to check the auxiliary tunnels for any stragglers or anyone taken down by the smoke. Earl wanted nothing more than to get out of the mine and back to sunlight when the dream whispered and nagged at him again – Avalon, little Jacob, all them mules – but that didn't happen here. He'd

caught it this time. Let the boys go lookin', he'd go... secure the entrance – that's what he'd do.

As he crested the rise that was the final approach to the surface, a shadowy little alcove that you could only really see into as you passed through it due to the slope of the path and the increasing dark, his boss's instinct started to tingle. Something was off. He was almost to daylight, and thus what should be cleaner air, but something... he came around the corner and as his brain registered the sight of torn ventilation partitions – heavy curtains meant to direct gas *out* of the mine, well they'd been tangled up, knocked down, looped back in – one whole side was just lying flat on the ground... the mine wasn't venting right, gas was building up, it wouldn't take much to...

Earl saw two grown men pass him by, followed by a little boy who was struggling to light a lantern with a flint as he walked, trying to keep up with his daddy. Earl shouted and leapt toward toward the boy who jumped back, nearly dropping the lantern – causin' Earl to land on his stomach at his feet, knocking the wind out of his exhausted body.

Earl was shaking with rage and fear and he readied his hateful-est boss voice and looked up at the boy – and withered where he lay. The Boy's dirty face and coal dust eyes stared back down at Earl with a cold smirk. The world seemed to fade – the sounds of work and recovery coming from miles away, it seemed. The air felt tense and tasted bitter.

Earl's breath stopped as he looked up and around for help and he realized – he was surrounded by boys – no men, no mules, no sunlight – just blank faced, dead eyed boys.

All ages: 5, 6, 10, 11...

“Still feel like a dream, Bobby?”

The boys all around started to murmur the names of towns – all places Earl knew, all places boys bled and died beneath miles of rock and flame. All places that had listed Robert Earl Hamner as a boss of some sort at some point in time – only to see him shuffled on to a new town, sometimes with a new name.

[Different boys speaking:] “Bradshaw, Eli, Morganton, Cottonflower, Sampson Patch, Avalon.”

[The Boy:] “You managed to do six before we found you – but we think seven is enough. *Seven* is always enough.”

[Different boys speaking:] “Bradshaw, Eli, Morganton, Cottonflower, Sampson Patch, Avalon.”

The swish of a flint, a spark.

“Barlo.”

Then light.

[I Cannot Escape The Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

There is a curse upon my every waking breath,

And I cannot escape the darkness...

Good evening, family. So good to see y'all gathered together again. Did you enjoy this trip to Barlo? I love pulling back the veil and showing y'all where we came from and how we got here. I feel it is important to examine our situation from multiple points of view and multiple places in time. I mean, if I've got that ability I may as well use it for your benefit, yeah? I think so. There's still more for us to find in Barlo, but I ain't gonna lie to you, family, my time is growing short. But don't worry. Plenty more content to come. I believe I owe y'all a holiday surprise, and I believe I owe you twelve things of Christmas which I believe is actually gonna be known as Twelve Things of Winter. So I hope you're excited about that because I know I am.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Our intro music is written and performed by our friend Landon Blood. And our outro music is performed by Those Poor Bastards, who happen to have a brand new album out on the tribulation reporting

company called Evil Seeds. Find it on Spotify or wherever you can, or at ThosePoorBastards.com Please support the artists that are helping us make this show possible.

Family, I see you out there. I've seen you at the edge of the yard and wanting to come in, well come on in. The Fellowship Hall is open on Facebook, our fan and support group for those of us who can't sleep the nights the voices are too loud. Find us on Facebook, Old Gods of Appalachia Fellowship Hall group. There's tons of great discussion, fan art, fan songs, music... You folks have gone, as I said the other day in an unboxing video (go look that up), you guys go below and beyond in making me realize we have created something truly special in just a couple of short months, holy wow – or unholy wow, your choice really.

And speaking of choices, if you'd like to truly choose the shadow and cast your thirty pieces of silver into our collection plate, head on over to Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia For a few dollars a month, you too could unlock forces that you never knew existed. You can gain yourself access to a top-secret storyline only available to patrons should you decide to go \$10 or more a month. That's gonna start in the month of February; we have a huge announcement about that coming and it's going to involve our friends in another fantastic band called Blood on the Harp. I'm super tingly about that one, family, I'm not even gonna kid you. So if you want to

help us out a few dollars a month, goes a long way into the shadow,

www.Patreon.com/OldGodsOfAppalachia

For more information about this show including cast and creator bios, source information, and the occasional exclusive surprise, visit us online at

www.OldGodsOfAppalachia.com

Today's story was written and performed by Steve Shell.