

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

### Season 2 Episode 18: Where the Cold Wind Blows

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

Frank Tilley was not a nice man, nor one beloved by his community. What he *was* was a man who could be counted on to get you something to wet your whistle at a time when such things were both scarce and risky to come by. Frank wasn't a moonshiner himself—he had no patience for the care and attention to detail that making good shine required, but through his work in the local yard of Locke Rail, he had made a number of connections with the bootleggers up north who were only too happy to pay for properly-distilled spirits—those that were not likely to make you go blind, or even kill you, as the bathtub gin and other liquors made by amateurs, looking to cash in on the black market created by that unfortunate amendment passed in 1920, had been known to do. Quite a few of the men and women of Appalachia had learned the fine art of distilling at their granddaddy or mamaw's knee, just as they had learned from theirs, going generations back, all the way back to their ancestors in Ireland, Scotland, or other such far-flung places. Frank was the man who brought the fruits of their labor to a market only too eager to pay a premium for good spirits.

About half the folks in Baker's Gap tolerated Frank because he was useful, and the other half, because they was scared of him. Frank was a big man—had to be six foot four in his boots, at least, and meaner than a copperhead with its tail tied in a knot, particularly when he was in his cups. And given his secondary occupation and his taste for whiskey,

Frank was known to tie one on pretty much nightly, usually over at Bill and Arnie's place. See, the Ward family had run the local hardware store long as anybody could remember; and as the eldest son, Bill Ward had inherited the family business when their daddy passed. His younger brother Arnie had run the town's only saloon up until prohibition passed, at which point the brothers had done what any sensible businessman would do: they converted Arnie's bar into a fine, upstanding diner of the sort you wouldn't mind to take your mama to, and moved all the taps and all the liquor into the basement of the hardware store, where for a very small and reasonable fee, one could join Billy and Arnie's "chess club," and drink privately to their hearts' content.

Now, the Ward boys never got too much trouble from the law—possibly because the County Sheriff, Andy Hodge, was Bill's wife Bonnie's older brother. And it probably didn't hurt that Andy also enjoyed a complimentary membership to the chess club—in gratitude for his service to the community, of course. Andy often stopped by for a drink after his shift ended, which was lucky, because the only real trouble Bill and Arnie ever had was Frank Tilley.

Frank was ill-tempered at the best of times, prone to arguing over the slightest perceived insult or injustice. When he was drinking, he either got boastful and boisterous, on which evenings he was prone to get handsy with any lady in their establishment who happened to be within reach; or sullen and silent, and those were the nights that made Bill and Arnie nervous—the nights they were damned grateful to see

Andy walk through the door—because that’s when Frank could get violent, and nobody needed that.

But such was the case one cold evening in the fall of 1927, when the Sheriff came around the back of the hardware store and down the stairs to the basement, kicking mud off his boots on the rug outside the door, before he pushed his way inside. Andy Hodge stopped dead just inside the door, surveying a scene of chaos, frozen in tableau before him.

Carl Miner lay on the floor with a busted nose, apparently unconscious. Bill was crouched down, trying to bring him ‘round, while Arnie was coming around the corner of the bar with a baseball bat in hand. Frank Tilley had Eugene Doherty by the throat, shoved up against a pillar, and poor Gene’s face was turning purple, while Andy’s little sister Bonnie was coming up behind Frank with Bill’s 12-gauge aimed at the back of his head. Everybody froze at the sound when she racked the gun and rested it gently against the back of the tall man’s head.

“Whoa, now,” Andy called out, holding his palms up and out in a gesture of peace.

“Everybody, just calm down. What in the hell is going on here?”

It was Bonnie who spoke first, her blue eyes flashing with anger. “You know exactly what’s going on here, Andy Hodge. Same thing as happens too damn often. Frank, here, is treating my husband’s establishment like it’s his own personal boxing ring, and I, for

one, am getting mighty tired of it.” Bonnie Ward was a good church-going woman. Andy could count on one hand the times he’d heard her cuss, so he knew just how close to the end of her patience his sister was—the shotgun being another fine barometer. Andy took a deep breath.

“Mr. Tilley,” he called across the room, “why don’t you go ahead and put Mr. Doherty down? My sister knows her way around a firearm, and she don’t look too happy with you right now. Oh, and poor ol’ Eugene’s about blue.” Andy saw Frank’s eyebrows knit, thinking about it—weighing his chances, no doubt, the idiot. And for a second, he thought the man was going to keep on squeezing, but finally he let go, his hands falling to his sides in surrender. Eugene Doherty fell to the floor like a sack of potatoes, gasping for air and scuttling away from Tilley across the floor, back toward his friend Carl Miner, who seemed to be coming around. Now, Andy turned his attention to his sister.

“All right, Bonnie, I understand you’re frustrated, but I’m gonna need you to put that bean shooter down,” Andy said, gesturing slowly toward the ground with his outstretched right hand. “The law’s here now, and you just let me take care of this, all right?” Bonnie didn’t look too happy about it, but she did as he asked, stepping away from Frank and unracking the shotgun carefully, just as their daddy had taught her. Everybody in the room relaxed at that, the tension melting away like snow on an April morning.

“Now, Frank, looks like to me you’ve had enough for one night,” Andy said to the man at the center of all the fuss. “Seems it’s about time for you to head on home to your wi—” He caught Bonnie’s glare. Everybody knew Frank Tilley was nothing but a cross for his poor wife to bear, and quickly changed his course. “Or better yet, you go find someplace to park your truck and sleep it off. You ain’t no good to nobody, the state you’re in.”

Frank took a moment to collect himself, straightening his collar and re-tucking his shirt, while glaring around at everyone present, before snorting derisively. “Fine. I got better things to do, anyway.” He clapped his brown fedora onto his head, shoved his way past Andy, and was out the door and gone. A collective sigh of relief made its way around the room. It was the last time any of them would see Frank Tilley alive.

[The Land Unknown: Hollow Heart version by Landon Blood]

*Her cold wind calls  
And so I follow  
No time to rest these weary bones.  
I hear her song  
And my heart goes hollow  
Best not to walk these woods alone*

*Best stick to the roads  
Stay out of the shadow  
Best get on home  
Best to leave them ghosts alone...*

It was nearly two in the morning when Sheriff Andy Hodge was roused from his warm and cozy bed by a telephone call from the Deputy on duty, one James Mutter. A near-accident on the railroad tracks just off Dry Gap near the reservoir, a train that had left the station over in Tipton and should have long since made its way up to Paradise, was found stopped on the tracks out in the county by the next train coming. To everyone's relief, the engineer of the second train had spotted the first and managed to bring his locomotive to a stop in time to avoid a collision. Concerned that the crew of the first train might have had some engine trouble or other misadventure that required assistance, the conductor of the second had gone down to investigate. What he found had sent him running for the last farmhouse they'd passed to ring up the Sheriff's office. About halfway down the line of boxcars hauling coal, 'baccer, and other goods up north, a couple of flickering oil lanterns had been set on the ground, casting a dim glow onto cases full of glass bottles that had been upended and shattered. The air was filled with the distinctive, stinging aroma of moonshine.

On the tracks before them, one of the stopped box cars yawned open in a way that made the conductor unaccountably nervous. The darkness and cold inside that car seemed to seep out, finding its way through his coat and into his clothes. As he drew near and his own brighter, and more modern, flashlight illuminated the area, the conductor saw that a deep reddish-brown stain spread across the grass and soaked the sandy dirt around the tracks.

Blood.

When he shot his light up into the open boxcar, he could see that blood had seeped into the boards and dripped from the open lip of the door. Its source seemed to be the crumpled, broken bodies of the two brakemen within.

The conductor had stumbled back from the car, fumbling inside his coat for his pistol. Train robbery not being entirely unheard of, most conductors carried some sort of firearm, though he'd never felt the need for it before this night. As he pulled the gun from his coat, he felt something—some spindly, long-legged thing—skitter across his foot with a soft chittering sound, and he felt that cold sweep out of the box car, seeming to come for him, wrap itself around him, and the conductor had decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Whatever had happened to this train crew, it was obvious they had made an unscheduled stop for some illicit purpose, and he wanted no part of it, no, thank you. He'd run straight back to his own train, issued orders that his own crew were under no circumstances to leave their post, and hiked back along the tracks, about a half mile to the last house they passed, to telephone for help.

Upon receiving the conductor's frantic call, Deputy Mutter had phoned the Sheriff, then summoned the county coroner, and welcomed the two other deputies. Hodge and Mutter were the first on the scene, arriving within minutes of each other, each parking his vehicle on either side of a narrow trail used by rail workers for maintenance, using the cars to mark the location for the coroner and their fellow officers.

The two men carried heavy-duty, department-issued flashlights, which they carefully swept the ground with as they proceeded up the rutted dirt track through the brush toward the railroad track. There were fresh tire prints, suggesting some sort of car had come this way recently, but the path would be nearly impossible to see from the road. In point of fact, Andy and the Deputy would have had a hell of a time finding the trail, had the conductor not given such excellent directions.

About a quarter mile in, they found the vehicle in question—a dark Packard pickup truck, which Andy noted looked familiar, though he couldn't place it right away, and a little ways beyond that, the little clearing the conductor had directed them to. The lanterns had guttered now, but the officer's torches illuminated the scene the man described well enough: the crates of what was clearly moonshine smashed on the ground, both outside and within the boxcar; the ground soaked in blood; and the two brakemen, dead inside the car. Looked like another sale of bootleg whiskey gone wrong. Although Johnson County was a quiet place, it wouldn't be the first time that rampant crime that seemed to be a natural consequence of the 18th amendment touched their community.

Andy sent Deputy Mutter toward the back of the train to search for the rest of her crew, while he turned toward the forward cars and began making his way towards the engine. The woods on either side of the train were strangely quiet—even in winter, he'd expect to hear the call of owls, of the scurrying of small critters through the dry leaves—but the

air was silent and heavy, and the Sheriff's hard-soled boots seemed loud as they crunched in the sandy gravel on the side of the tracks.

He found no one in the other cars, not even a dozing train hopper. As he neared the engine, he felt the temperature drop sharply, his fingers and face growing numb.

"Jesus," Andy grumbled and transferred the heavy flashlight into the crook of his elbow for a moment. He raised his cupped hands to his face and blew into them and rubbed them together vigorously to warm them. The flashlight's beam bounced wildly around him, now illuminating the ground ahead, then the trees to his left.

Something darted past, barreling between his feet, and Andy nearly lost his footing. It was the size of a cat or a small dog, and it was moving fast. He fumbled for his light, trying to get a better look as it scuttled into the trees. He knew that wasn't a cat, not with a skinny, hairless tail and long, gangly legs. It looked more like a large possum, or a huge rat, but no, not quite that either. It was—it was *wrong*, somehow. He thought he could almost see its spine, but no, that couldn't be. No, nothing that hurt or deformed like that could live, and at least not move like that. No, it—it just had to be a trick of the light. Andy swept the trees with his flashlight, searching, but found no further sign of whatever it was.

Shaking his head, he returned to the task at hand, abandoning his search of the boxcars for now—all the other cars appeared secure, anyhow—and proceeding to the engine. He

did not find this train's conductor, nor her engineer, nor her fireman. What he found instead was Frank Tilley's head.

There was no sign of his torso, nor his limbs, but his head had been wedged in between the spokes at the top of one of the engine's driving wheels, a grim and clearly calculated display, the eyes wide open and staring in terror at whatever had been his last sight in this world.

Andy Hodge stumbled back into the trees and was promptly sick. He would not be the only one. Although the coroner was made of sterner stuff, the deputies of Johnson county were unused to violent crime on this scale. Frank Tilley was not a nice man, nor one beloved by his community. He may have even been a pain in Sheriff Andy Hodge's considerable buttocks, but no man deserved to die like that, he thought.

As additional resources converged on the scene, the Sheriff ordered a more thorough search of the train, which turned up no sign of the other members of her crew. Deputy Mutter, however, discovered the crime's only survivor and eyewitness, hiding in the caboose: one Jeremiah Silcox, a local man known to ride the rails from time to time. Mr. Silcox had agreed to ride along with Frank Tilley to meet the train and help him load the crates of shine onto the car so he could hop the train bound for Paradise, a small city situated on the Tennessee Virginia border, which was rumored to have a number of clandestine drinking establishments. It seemed Jeremiah was already sincerely

inebriated by the time he and Frank had arrived to meet the train, however, and his story didn't make a whole lot of sense to Andy or anyone else.

He kept babbling on about seeing a pale, dark-haired woman. "It was her," he insisted. "She must have killed him! And I've never seen such eyes on a woman—they glowed! Like fireflies, they glowed." Andy just nodded and half listened as he waved one of the other deputies over, and Silcox grabbed his arm, looking up at him with feverish eyes. "The Dark Earth comes! It comes for us all! The Good Mother sings the dawn!"

"I'm sure she does," Andy assured him, rolling his eyes as he handed the man over to the Deputy, who raised his eyebrows. He would tuck Jeremiah into a squad car and drive him over to the jail to sober up. Perhaps he'd make more sense after he'd had a few cups of coffee to unscramble his brains, or perhaps not. Jeremiah Silcox was well-known to the Johnson County Sheriff's Department, to their great misfortune.

In the meantime, there was the widow to consider. Frank Tilley had a wife, though no children, thank God. She would need to be notified, and of course, questioned, as she might know some of the... "business associates" who could be responsible for this crime. Andy asked James Mutter to come along for that dismal task, and the two men headed back up the maintenance track toward the squad cars.

The old farmhouse where Frank Tilley had lived with his wife Coralee stood in the shadow of the deep pine woods on the far side of the reservoir. Its once-white paint was

chipped and faded, the tin roof was rusty, and the front porch sagged, the steps canted precariously to the right. One of the windows on the front side of the house, the kitchen maybe, from the look of it, had been broken and haphazardly patched with a piece of cardboard that had clearly seen better days. As Andy Hodge steered his patrol car up the narrow, dirt lane that led into the Tilley's yard, the sky was just beginning to lighten, though the house nestled into the pines stood in deep shadow. It was dark and presumably cold. No smoke issued from the chimney to indicate a fire lit in the wood stove, an uncomfortable but often necessary bit of cost-savings around these parts. Mrs. Tilley must not be up yet.

Andy parked the car to the side of the house, and Deputy Mutter pulled in behind him. As Andy stepped out into the cold November morning, the Deputy opened the door of his own cruiser and made as if to join him. Andy waved him off, motioning that he should hang back, and Jim stayed put, leaning against the open car door. He watched as Andy made his way across the yard, his feet making soft crunching sounds in the hard frosted grass and walked gingerly up the leaning stairs onto the porch. He hesitated for a moment before knocking. The house was silent.

The Sheriff always dreaded this part of the job. It was never easy sharing the news that a loved one had passed, and he hated to disturb the poor woman's rest as well. Better he'd come later once Miss Tilley was up and dressed and had a cup of coffee in her, but there was nothing for it. Duty called, and as always, Andy Hodge answered. He raised a hand and knocked on the door, waited a moment, listening for some sound of her shuffling

around inside, and when he heard no response, he knocked again, a bit louder this time. Waited. Third time, Andy knocked even louder and called out, “Mrs. Tilley? Coralee! It’s the Sheriff, Andy Hodge. Uh, I’m sorry to wake you, but we need to have a word.” The silence remained unbroken, and the house still.

“Huh,” Andy said thoughtfully, stepping back from the door. It appeared Mrs. Tilley was not at home, a fact that could mean any number of things, but Andy sure hoped it did not mean that she had met the same fate as her husband. He leaned forward and peered through the upper pane of the window by the door above the cardboard, cupping his hands around his face to see better into the darkened farmhouse. The Sheriff was searching for any signs of trouble, and sure enough, he found them.

The kitchen was a mess. A small, square table, suitable for two, was turned on its side, along with the matching chairs. A casserole dish lay shattered on the floor, and whatever it had contained, splattered across the linoleum. The door to the icebox swung open, hanging crooked on its hinges. Anything stored inside—and there was precious little, from the look of it—no doubt spoiled by now. It looked like domestic trouble, and it was rumored that the Tilley marriage was... not a happy one. But it was troubling that the mess hadn’t been cleared up.

Nodding to himself, he decided he had probable cause, backed away from the door, and was preparing to give it a solid kick, when Deputy Mutter called out, just loud enough for his voice to carry.

“Sheriff.”

When Andy paused to look over at him, Mutter furrowed his brow and nodded his head toward the side of the house. Andy leaned back to look around the side of the porch, and there, stumbling on bare feet from the dark woods, was Coralee Tilley.

She wore no coat, and her dress was wrinkled and dirty. Her long, black hair appeared to have come loose from whatever configuration she'd pinned it up in the day before. It hung half-down, loose and wild and tangled with twigs and pine needles. Her pale face appeared bruised, and her feet were smudged with dirt. But what Andy noticed most were her hands. They were slender, long-fingered, delicate, and streaked to the elbow with blood. Andy hopped down from the porch and met her halfway across the yard, just in time to catch her before she fell. Deputy Mutter was right behind him, already pulling off his coat and holding it out for the Sheriff to wrap around the shivering woman. Coralee seemed grateful, snuggling into the warmth of the coat without hesitation, clasping the lapels with her bloody fingers and pulling it tightly around herself.

“Miss Tilley—Coralee, what happened?” Andy asked her.

She replied through chattering teeth, “He—he’s d-d-d-dead. Frank.”

The Sheriff took a breath before he answered her carefully. “Your husband? Yes ma’am, he is. Do you know anything about what happened to him?”

Coralee nodded, closing her eyes as a single tear slipped down her cheek. “He was a b-b-b-bad man, and it—it came for him. It—it finally c-came for him.”

“What exactly do you mean? What came for him?”

“The, the, the D-D-Dark Earth. It came and it swallowed him up.”

[In the Pines by Keena Graham]

*Hey girl, hey girl,*

*Don't lie to me*

*Tell me where did you sleep last night?*

*In the pines, in the pines...*

Well oh, my, my. Hello there, family. Welcome to Act Two of Season Two of Old Gods of Appalachia, In the Pines. It is good to be back with y'all. I want to thank everybody for holding space with us, uh, last time around, as we offered you that little bridge into Act Two. And now here we are, my good and dear family. A crime has been committed, the authorities have been called, and there are dark things in the woods. Whoo. Y'all

aren't ready for this. Miss Cam Collins is, uh, the one driving this train, and you can't get off now—it's far, far too late.

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Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written and directed by Cam Collins and performed by Steve Shell. Our intro music was by Landon Blood, and our outro music is performed by Keena Graham of Blood on the Harp. See you soon, family. See you real soon.