

## OLD GODS OF APPALACHIA

Season 2 Episode 22: Paper, Ink & Sorrow

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

[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*

Combe County, North Carolina—1881.

Gerald Cornelius Brotherton, newest and youngest appointee to the State Prison Board, was not the smartest, the kindest, or the most honorable man on that Board; but in all

fairness, neither was he the dumbest, the ugliest, or the most dishonorable; but he was very important. Very important indeed, because Jerry, as his friends and family called him, was charged with overseeing the State Prison Board of North Carolina's participation in the joining of two worlds. He was the Board's representative and liaison with the railroad companies regarding the construction of the Swannanoa Tunnel. This passageway, carved through the very breastbone of the Blue Ridge, would link the mountains of western North Carolina to the rest of the civilized world. Why, Governor Vance himself was overseeing the process further up the food chain, and Jerry's daddy, a close associate and old army buddy of the Governor, had made a convincing case that his boy would be the best set of eyes that the Board, and thus the Governor himself, could have up in them mountains.

Now, mostly Jerry just sat in an office over in Asheville, signing papers and shaking hands to help provide the one resource that the North Carolina State Penal System could provide their new allies from the railroad in this grand endeavor: bodies. Men. Inmates. Free labor, locked up for violating the laws of the land. And these agents of chaos would now be bent to a new purpose, helping bridge the gap between the past and the future, as laborers on the railroad. The fact that this assembly of malefactors and malcontents might be made up more of misdemeanor and miscreants than cold-blooded murderers mattered little to the State Prison Board, and the fact that almost none of these men were white mattered even less.

“Any man can swing a hammer, and if he done broke the law in Combe County, you

better believe he's going to do it until his time is served, or until the Lord take him," Jerry had said to the reporter from the *Asheville Citizen*. "Black, white, it don't matter—the law is the law, and them that's out there earned their place busting rock for the County. Y'all want to stay off the chain gang? Don't get caught breaking the law. Simple as that." Jerry Brotherton knew quite a bit about the law, yes he did. See, his daddy was Judge Wayne Brotherton, formerly Major Wayne Brotherton of the Confederate States of America, and he'd sentenced more than his share of men to hard labor or hanging over the past 25 years, and it could be noted that "Hanging Wayne," as they called him, sent plenty of white men to the gallows for truly horrific crimes. He'd do so without blinking and with little comment, but when it came to sentencing men, particularly Black men, to hard labor, Wayne Brotherton gave the most long-winded tent revivalists a run for their money. He'd hold forth on how he wanted to help the convicted, help them rehabilitate their lives, and how he hoped they would open their hearts to accept the reform that the state was offering them. Why, when they got to the other side of their sentence, they'd be brand new men, all built up and strong from working hard and building roads and laying rail to make Combe County a place of riches and wonder. And then he would sentence the man from three to thirty years of hard labor, which was just as deadly as the noose—just a longer drop, family.

Jerry Brotherton learned well from that man—right from wrong, black from white, law from order, and so on. And day after day, he signed off on longer and longer lists of names to be taken from local jails and work farms and consigned to the more back-breaking labor of digging a hole through a whole-ass mountain.

On jobs like this one, men die. It was a foregone conclusion in most cases, be it from cold or sickness or cave-ins or accidents or just the men getting mouthy and needing to be taught a lesson, men died. Jerry knew that. His daddy told him as much, but the Swannanoa Tunnel—well, it was burning through men.

He reached out to his fellows on the Prison Board, and even to his daddy, but was told the same thing: sign the forms, send them all the men they need, don't ask no questions. Just get the job done, play your cards right, you can be a judge yourself one day—retire to some nice little town and not ever have to worry about money ever again. Sounded good to him, but Jerry almost wondered where so many men were coming from. He had stacks of pages that were nothing but names and serial numbers of men who'd gone to work out in that gap and never come back.

He'd started having dreams about it. He'd been out to the work site when the Governor himself had come to town with a bunch of other fancy-dressed men and the rest of the Prison Board, most of whom got to stay back in Raleigh while he was stuck out here in God knows where, so he knew what the place looked like. The cleared and bald face of an ancient mountain dynamited and hacked at, carving a wound into the earth that was meant to be kept open and bleeding people in and out of these hills. Well, in his dreams, the tunnel was finished—a gaping maw of lightless space. He would be standing on the tracks, and the ground would start to shake with what felt like the might and force of an oncoming train. He'd look up, expecting to see the headlamp of an oncoming steam

engine, but there weren't no train coming—the noise and the source of the shaking came from the void of the tunnel, a tangible darkness that would begin to resolve itself into the shapes of countless dead men packed into the hole of the mountain. Hundreds, maybe thousands of Black bodies murdered and worked to death by the prison Board and the railroad, and slowly, they would writhe and twist until they began to lurch forward as one hulking mass—countless hands reaching for him, a sea of empty eyes all turned on him, and the shaking and thundering roar would intensify as all the men that Jerry Brotherton's daddy gave to the mountain began to rise and claim that second chance that they'd been promised.

Jerry would wake soaked in sweat every time. The dream had, of course, come just last night, robbing Jerry of several hours of sleep the night before he would need to come out here in the cold, spring grayness of early March. March is never a kind month in the mountains of North Carolina—no, family, it is not. It's a temptress—with its warm and near summer-like afternoons and sprouting green, it can lure a man into short sleeves without even trying, and in that same breath, the month of March will turn around, look you in the eye, and spit on your mama's grave with heavy gray skies that hung like a water-stained basement ceiling and rains so cold they could set rot into a healthy man's bones.

So, here Jerry Brotherton stood, looking out at the grounds and at the guards on horseback, shotguns at the ready, as a legion of men toiled away, waiting for the Man from the Railroad to come inspect the progress. He didn't know who the man would be

this time. it could be Rory Buchanan from Norfolk Pacific—an old, round bear from up around West Virginia way. That wouldn't be too bad—Rory liked to have a good time and was easily plied with whiskey and women. It might be Andy Serber with the Virginia Kentucky Rail from out Saltville. Well, that'd be all right—it's not as much fun as Rory, but Serber would take an envelope of cash to keep his mouth shut about anything he needed to not talk about. Ugh, or it could be one of the boys from B&L. They didn't often make the trip down from the Locke Rail home office in Pennsylvania, but when they did, it was not pleasant. He met Nicholas Locke once, and that was enough. There was something oily about the man. He didn't look at you as much as he looked *through* you, and well, he couldn't be bought. The Locke family had more money than God, and they only trusted their immediate family members to look at the important jobs, and he prayed to sweet baby Jesus that he didn't have to deal with that lot today, ugh—give him the shivers. The telegram had just said: MAN FROM RAILROAD WILL BE AT TUNNEL SITE BY NOON STOP. DON'T BE LATE STOP. WEAR TIE STOP. It was unsigned, but the bit about the tie at least made him suspect it was from his daddy. Turning up the collar of his coat and pulling his hat down just a little, Jerry made his way onto the worksite, nodding to the guards overseeing the men bustling and hauling rock and called out to one in particular.

“Hey Wayne, come here a minute—Wayne, yeah, come here.”

Wayne Carter slid off his horse and handed him off to another deputy and walked over to where his old school buddy waited. “Hey, Jerry, are you late? That guy from the

Railroad's been here about a half hour, and he was asking for you."

"Ah, shit—no, I'm not late, he's early, God damn it! Who is it, do you know him? Is it one of them creepers from B&L?"

Wayne paled and shook his head. "I've never seen him before, but he was asking about the graves, Jerry. He knew where two of them were."

"The—the what? What graves?"

"Don't give me that—where we buried that bunch that got sick and died in the boxcar we burned. Them other four that tried to run. He even asked where we put the ones who got caught when that section caved in last week—asked if we left the pieces in there, or if we took the time to dig him out. He knows things, Jerry."

Jerry Brotherton's head swam with the possibilities of where this could go. Would the man ask for a bribe? Could Jerry buy him off with booze and a girl? Otherwise if not, could—could he just disappear? If it was one of the Locke boys, that was out of the question, but if not, who knows? Jerry wasn't about to mess this up, and he'd do what he had to do to protect him and his daddy's position here. He was about to say something else when a voice he did not know called his name from about a dozen or so yards away.

"Mr. Brotherton!" Jerry looked up to see a man dressed in an immaculate, charcoal

suit—no mail-order or off-the-rack here, no sir—this was a man in his double-breasted, hand-tailored best. It fit him as if he'd been borned into it. Every line, every stitch looked as if it had been laid to the exact proportions of the tall, elegant man. This was somewhat incongruous, as he walked through the mud and busted ground to the construction site like a foreman in steel toes, though. His stride, confident and balanced, not at all put out by the mist and rain and the sounds of hammers on stone and steel.

“Yes sir, yes sir—that’s me,” Jerry called back, moving to close the distance between them, holding out his hand. “Jerry Brotherton, State Prison Board—and you are?”

The man smiled wide, his teeth even and perfect. Up close Jerry could see he wore a thin salt and pepper beard, much like his daddy did, and he relaxed for a moment, and then realized the man had already shaken his hand and kept on moving and talking at the same time.

“I’m from the Railroad, Mr. Brotherton. Ever onward and ever forward, yes? I was speaking to one of the deputies over there about your disposal of the deceased.” The man’s accent was not of these hills, and wasn’t of anywhere Jerry could place, but that voice slid into his ears like a kiss and left him unsettled and shaken. The sheer weight and confidence of it—this was a man who was not used to being questioned or defied—or simply wasn’t questioned or defied, ever. Nonetheless, Jerry scrambled to catch up.

“Now, now—wait just one second, sir. I don’t know what you’re insinuating, but, uh—”

“Oh, Mr. Brotherton, I’m not *insinuating* a thing,” the man said, turning to look back at Jerry and pointing to the tree line as he spoke. “I *know* there are 188 men and boys buried in the woods, and along the river, that came from this work site. I know there are 92 more buried in similar graves on the other side of the mountain, where the other crew is woefully lagging behind you. I know you grind these men into ash with remarkable efficiency. I know that this tunnel is wringing the blood from them like your granny might a... ‘warshrag.’” He smirked as he said this last bit, putting on the local accent without any effort.

“Now, hang on, I—I’m not doing anything here, I just sign the permits and approve the, the, the—”

“Oh, come now, Mr. Brotherton! You must take pride in your work! The Railroad takes pride in its hard work, and so should you.” The man spun around and continued walking. Jerry followed at a trot for a moment and realized they were heading directly into the mouth of the unfinished tunnel. His stomach roiled. The dream loomed in his mind, but he shook it off and pressed on.

“Please, sir, I don’t know who told you all that, but I assure you that our loss of life with this crew has been—”

“Quite extraordinary, yes,” the man finished appreciatively. He knelt and examined the entrance’s floor, wiping his finger through the dust and licking it clean. “When this corridor is finished, the blood of over 300 men will mark its making—a doorway through the bones of this old mountain, connecting the old world with the new. It’s an exciting time, Mr. Brotherton. We at the Railroad have invested a lot of time and energy into this particular portal, and once it’s open... [chuckles] it’s ‘ever forward, ever onward,’ yes?”

“I’m not—I’m not sure I understand what you mean, sir—what, what line did you say you were with, again?”

Without a word, the man stood and strode deeper into the blossoming tunnel, his eyes roaming about the ceiling as he smiled and murmured to himself. Jerry swore under his breath and struck up his courage to walk into the literal mouth of his nightmare. Breathing out hard, he pushed past a pair of older men carrying a huge tray of busted rock between them, Jerry stepped into the tunnel to catch up with the man. He looked up and froze. The mountain was all around him—he was inside the mountain, oh God, he was *under* the mountain. The ceiling swerved, his legs began to buckle, his vision blurred, and somewhere in the distance, there was a sound like thunder, and the ground shook. Jerry expected to see the air resolve itself into the piles of waking dead that haunted his dreams, but suddenly, he was being pulled bodily through the air and onto the ground. Dust filled the air and cries of men calling to one another asking if anybody was hurt, or who was all right. Jerry looked to see who’d grabbed him, and the Man from

the Railroad was standing there, offering him a hand up. Jerry looked back to where he had been standing, back to where the two older men had been carrying their tray and almost passed out. A rock the size of a bank safe had fallen from somewhere up above them, and the two men were crushed to pulp beneath it. If Jerry had been standing there, he'd have been crushed too.

The Railroad Man pulled him to his feet and looked over at the broken and bloodied husks pinned under the rock. "Ooh, looky there—numbers 189 and 190. Ever onward, eh, Mr. Brotherton?"

Jerry was in shock. "You—you saved my life."

"Think nothing of it, my friend! I didn't think you'd do us much good as number 191. Never good to be an odd number."

Jerry looked back at the rock and the two dead men pinned beneath it. He was still stunned, and words were hard. "I owe you my—"

"No, no, no—do not finish that sentence, my friend—not while you are without your wits, heavens no! You owe me—let's leave it at that."

Jerry didn't remember much of the day after that. Wayne had driven him back to Asheville and gotten him good and drunk. The day had been too much—what was he

thinking, going into the tunnel? And who was that old creeper—"from the Railroad"? he never even got his name or who he worked for. Hell, he could have been a cop, for all Jerry knew. Like, a real one.

He woke the next day in his apartment in a state of agitation and worry. What would happen now? The man had known about all the workers killed on the job. He could have walked them to every body buried in them woods, if he wanted to. Who would he tell? Would anybody care? Would they blame him? Would he end up busting rocks for the county? Hell, that many dead, that's a trip to the rope, for sure. And there was a knock at the door, and Jerry began to sweat. Would it be the police? Somebody from the Board? Hell, his daddy?

With the same trepidation he'd carried into the dark of the mountain the day before, he approached his door and opened it, and a smiling young man from WNC Telegram handed him an envelope and offered him a clipboard and pen, which he used to scrawl his initials on the receipt. He looked back and forth in the hallway and then retreated into his rooms, locking the door behind him. Without a second thought, he tore the envelope open—no sense of putting it off. The message was short, as they often were when they came from up the food chain. MAN FROM RAILROAD SAYS PROGRESS IS EXEMPLARY STOP. SAYS TO STAND BY STOP. HE'LL BE IN TOUCH SOON STOP.

[I Cannot Escape the Darkness by Those Poor Bastards]

*There is a curse upon my every waking breath,*

*And I cannot escape the darkness...*

Hey there, family. Welcome, y'all, to Act Three—the final third, the home stretch of season two of Old Gods of Appalachia, In the Pines. Notice we have jumped back in time this time around—this serves more as sort of a prologue in its own right to our next story arc, which, of course, will explore what happened with the Local Magistrate and the Railroad Man and the effect it had on everybody from the Walkers to the rest of Baker's Gap. But we had to start the story where it started. And I know we're big proponents of jumping through time, but sometimes you just gotta start at the beginning. And I hope you all are ready for a bloody, bloody ride.

Family, it is that time where I remind you to complete your social media ritual and follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, or the Facebook group—they're called the Fellowship Hall. You can find links to all those things, including our Discord server, over at [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com). And what else you can find a link to is our Teepublic store. We are a Teepublic affiliate. Teepublic is the only place to get our merchandise. There's still some stuff left circling around Threadless, but we're an affiliate with Teepublic, and that's where we would ask you to get your merchandise from now. There's a lot of stuff on sale, and I wouldn't be surprised to see some new merch designs show up there in the very near future. Uh, that's linked off of our website, [oldgodsofappalachia.com](http://oldgodsofappalachia.com), along with every other form of social media, including our

Patreon. And our Patreon is what keeps the home fires burning and keeps the lights on, and family, if you are looking for 17 episodes of the epic story of Build Mama A Coffin, it's there. If you're looking for the two-parter of The Door Under the Floor, a horrifying, death-implying peanut butter smoothie written by Cam Collins, it's waiting for you right there. If you are looking for interviews with cast members, exclusive digital extras like wallpapers and stuff for your phone and for your desktop, all of it's right there, including an announcement coming soon about an exciting new series of summer programming, including our first piece of non-fiction programming—family, you are not ready for it, but the Red Thread Society is jumping off of Discord and into your ear holes via the Patreon feed. The Red Thread Society will be a panel discussion show featuring six of the brightest minds, hand-picked by us from the Discord server, to share their thoughts and opinions and to connect those dots and look at some conspiracy theories within the show and to share things that they think are equally as horrifying. More details about that soon, along with the premiere date—it's going to be a good time, I promise you. [patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia](https://patreon.com/oldgodsofappalachia), if you would like to cast your tithe with us, we would greatly appreciate it, and we will do our best to reward you and make it worth your while.

Old Gods of Appalachia is a production of DeepNerd Media. Today's story was written and narrated by Steve Shell. Our intro music is by our brother Landon Blood, and our outro music is by Those Poor Bastards. The voice of Jerry Brotherton was none other than Corey Ryan Forrester, and the voice of The Railroad Man was Yuri Lowenthal. See you soon, family. See you real soon.