

# 'Voodoo' doctor's spells play a

DATE &amp; LOCAL

THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

## part in bizarre 1898 murder trial

Ben Goore, a black man, was murdered on the night of June 13, 1898, by two of his neighbors, Amzi Dunovant and Frank Castles. All lived in the vicinity of Sharon, in western York County.

The body was found in the bottom of an abandoned well under rocks and debris. Goore's body was carried from his cabin tied to a pole with rope around his wrists and ankles.

It was not difficult to build a case against Dunovant and Castles. What is interesting is the testimony offered by Goore's neighbors.

One of the witnesses was Nellie Bratton, alias Nellie Wagoner. Nellie was an elderly black woman who was a "voodoo" doctor, or conjurer. According to testimony,



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people came from as far as 100 miles away for Nellie to cast spells or provide them with "charms." She had a large following who had great confidence in her abilities.

On the stand Nellie stated that she learned how to doctor people from her late husband, Grandison Wagoner, who was a "state doctor." She said the main medicines used were silk weed, Sampson's snakeroot and another herb she could not remember. Also there

was some concoction put up in a bottle.

Nellie said that Amzi Dunovant had come to see her about his sick baby and she gave him medicine. Amzi wanted her to go home with him, but she had refused.

Maj. James F. Hart, the prosecuting attorney, asked, "How do you know what is the matter with people without seeing them? How do you know what medicine to give them?" Nellie could not answer the questions.

Major Hart handed Nellie various herbs and shells and asked her to identify them. She could not except for one liquid that she said was her concoction. She denied consulting her "tricks" for Amzi.

Amzi Dunovant had testified that Nellie had shown him Ben Goore's picture after rubbing together copper and brass plates. Nellie denied it.

Amzi's story was that when his child became sick he was told by some of Ben Goore's children that old Ben had "tricked" his child. He further said that Ben's trick had been meant for Amzi, but it went to his child instead. Amzi had gone to Nellie to get her to undo the trick. She had refused to go with him, and the child had died.

Amzi said that some time after the death of his child, Frank Castles came to his house about renting some land, and they began talking about Uncle Ben and then set out for Goore's house to take the herbs away from him.

Frank Castles believed that Ben had caused his cow to go dry, but said he didn't set out to kill him. The two men admitted tying Goore and that they "choked Ben too much."

Goore's widow, Elizabeth, alias "Ibby," was also charged as an accomplice of Dunovant and Castles. When Ibby was asked why she did not report the disappearance of her husband, she replied that she was worried but was accustomed to his disappearing and remaining away about three weeks.

Pleading not guilty, she said she was happy with Ben and certainly had no desire to get rid of him.

On Nov. 8, it took the jury only 20 minutes to return the verdict of guilty for Amzi Dunovant and

Frank Castles. They were to be hanged on Friday, Dec. 2, 1898, between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. Ibby was sentenced to spend the remainder of her life at hard labor in the state penitentiary.

The two men were not hanged on Dec. 2. The governor signed a reprieve until Jan. 6, 1899, after the ministers of Yorkville, a number of Yorkville citizens and Judge Gage of Chester sent him a petition asking for enough time for the convicted men to prepare their souls before execution.

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