

A Glass of Water and a Cursed Town



Hendry County Courthouse (Image: Author)

It all began with a misunderstanding over a request for a glass of water. On June 3, 1926, Henry Patterson, a black laborer, knocked on the backdoor of a home in LaBelle seeking a glass of water to help combat the hot, sticky Florida summer. The housewife, seeing a strange black man at the backdoor and fearing the worse, fled screaming in a panic through the front door.

Rumor and hysteria spread like wildfire. Several men of the town worked themselves into a fever pitch. Before he even knew what was happening, Henry Patterson was dead, the victim of multiple gunshot wounds.

The sheriff rounded up about a dozen men believed responsible for Patterson's death. Not surprisingly for a small town in the 1920s south, evidence during the trial proved contradictory and confusing. As a result, the judge ruled it was impossible to fix blame and dismissed the case. No one was ever convicted for the senseless murder of Henry Patterson.

Following the trial, the rain dried up. With little rain already, farmers looked forlornly towards the sky. It rained in the counties near LaBelle, but not in or around the town itself, save for a few teasing drops – barely enough to even wet the dust.

Thunder boomed and rolled ominously on the horizon, but this wasn't unusual for a Florida summer. Suddenly, the town was jarred by a sharp crack and the sound of a massive explosion. Residents felt the ground itself rumble. The smell of ozone filled the air. Rushing outside, townsfolk discovered a stray lightning bolt had struck the courthouse clock tower, smashing and setting fire to the clock works. The lightning strike caused the clock bell to sound and its vibrations lingered as the storm clouds quickly dissipated.

The town fathers said it was simply a freak of nature and quickly ordered the clock repaired. But then the same thing happened again – and again. The tower and the clock works were inspected and a lightning rod system installed. Nothing seemed to help. The clock was repaired only to be struck by lightning again.

Quiet whisperings began to circulate that Henry Patterson was having his revenge on LaBelle. Cooler heads dismissed such suggestions as utter nonsense. Events soon caused even the skeptics to question their off-hand dismissal of an otherworldly explanation.

As the town prepared to celebrate Independence Day on July 4, 1929, storm clouds again formed over LaBelle. A massive bolt flashed from the clouds with a deafening roar. It smashed into the clock tower with enough force to break off a large stone which smashed through the courthouse roof. Venturing inside, residents discovered the stone had crashed into the courtroom where Patterson's trial was held, nearly crushing the judge's bench.

Coincidence or not, the town fathers decided to take no more chances. The clock was dismantled, its works and massive hands stored in the courthouse basement.

Years passed; old residents left or died off, new people arrived. Over time, people became so used to seeing the clock face without hands, many believed it'd never had any to begin with. Some outsiders seeing the handless clock even assumed LaBelle was so laid back, the town didn't bother to keep time. The old clock bell was removed and given to a local Baptist church. For years, the clock tower sat as a mute reminder of LaBelle's shame.

As the years passed, the few remaining old-timers noticed the lightning strikes had stopped. Hesitatingly, talk began of getting the old clock running once again. New works were installed and the hands placed back on the clock face.