

## The Burning of Cherry Hill School

Cherry Hill, similar to most rural sections of America, is rich in tradition. Old timers love to tell stories from the past; however, none caught my interest more than that of Minnie Keys. As the story goes, Minnie, the local school teacher, was unhappy with the dilapidated condition of the Cherry Hill school. Having led many unsuccessful attempts to persuade the politicians and the school board to build a new school, she became more and more frustrated with the county's refusal to replace the school and, thereby, decided to burn it. This version of the school's burning makes a good story and paints Minnie Keys as a local hero. However, as in many other cases, tradition doesn't correspond with fact.

In the early morning hours of April 14, 1917, the new Cherry Hill School was burned to the ground to the dismay of local residents who had worked so hard to have it built. The outrage was immediate, and everyone had his own list of suspects. All agreed that it must have been what they described as the undesirable elements that committed this cowardly act. The people of Cherry Hill and Dumfries began to donate money to fund a reward for the capture and conviction of those responsible. Among those giving money were G. E. Soutter, F. W. Walker, W. M. Sullivan, O. Carney, G. E. Shepherd, H. O. Russell, W. G. Bushey, J. F. Hicks, J. E. Morgan, J. G. Crane, R. A. Oertly, and John O'Neal. The \$75 raised in only a few days was a considerable reward since it had only cost \$1000 to build the school.

The burned school, built around 1915 or 1916, was a modern building within eye site of the decaying first school. It had taken years for the school board to respond to the needs of this small community. Some of the parents also wanted a different teacher and had started to make it known. Minnie had worked as hard as anyone for the school and certainly had no intention of leaving without a fight.

In a few weeks, the police and investigators from Aetna Insurance Company began to focus on Minnie and a man by the name of Lawrence Harrison. At the time of the arson, Lawrence worked for Minnie's father and boarded at their house. In early October, Minnie and Lawrence were arrested and charged with arson. Minnie's father was charged with complicity. All were released on bail.

The evidence or the case of the Commonwealth was that Minnie and Lawrence Harrison waited until about 2:30 a.m. before they left the house. Then, they walked through the woods and crossed a small stream before reaching the school. They built a huge fire in and around the stove, located in the center of the one room school. After they were sure the fire was big enough, they retreated into the woods, close to the Keys' house, to watch the school burn. The evidence was mainly circumstantial until Lawrence decided to testify for the Commonwealth, implicating himself and Minnie.

As is the case in many circumstances, justice is never fast. After being charged by the grand jury with "a true bill" in October 1917, the trial was set to begin in December. Many continuances, granted the defendant for medical and other reasons, delayed the case until April 1919. In the two years between the burning of the school and the trial, the mood of the community had calmed. The third Cherry Hill School was built and was even better than the one Minnie was accused of burning. Even though some believed Minnie to be guilty, most just wanted an end and certainly none wanted to see her sentenced

to what the state was asking. If she were found guilty, the minimum sentence was to be three to 10 years in the penitentiary, with up to a \$1000 fine.

The jury, after hearing the evidence presented by the state, deliberated only ten minutes before returning to the court with the verdict read by the foreman, T. S. Bradshaw. "We the Jury find the defendant Minnie Keys not guilty as indicted."

Ron Turner