

The Death Ballad of Abner Vance

As reported in The Logan Banner, Nov 23, 1979



“One of the most legendary characters in Logan County history was Abner Vance. [A distant relative of my niece’s husband.] He was also a Revolutionary War veteran from North Carolina, an Indian scout, and a surveyor. As a Baptist minister, Abner spent many years traveling the countryside spreading the Baptist faith. He loved to write and sing the early mountain ballads and hymns.

According to the legend, Abner Vance had a daughter named Betty. Betty eloped with one Daniel Horton. Horton was a Virginia doctor and he took Betty off to Baltimore, had his way with her for two weeks, then brought her back to her father’s house and dumped her unceremoniously in the front yard, saying something to the effect of “Here’s your heifer back.”

In a fit of rage, Abner Vance pulled down his shotgun and killed Lewis Horton, Daniel’s brother, though he may have been aiming at Daniel, as he tried to cross the Clinch River.

Abner stayed in this area [Logan Co., VA] until friends convinced him that if he went back to Russell County, he would get a fair trial. But the trial ended in a hung jury, and was moved to Washington County. In the second trial, Abner was

found guilty and sentenced to hang. Tradition says that while in jail awaiting his execution, Abner wrote the famous Death Ballad of Abner Vance, which he sung standing on the scaffold minutes before he was hung. A newspaper account of the hanging says that Abner addressed the spectators, about 4,000, for an hour and a half, with considerable ability.

Ironically, he did receive a pardon from the Governor of Virginia, but the pardon arrived after the hanging.”

Click below to hear the song:

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