

Submitted by Glen Haney - bud at ncweb.com

“The Murder of Lottie Yates”

The following account written by Virgil L. Sturgill of Washington, D. C., originally appeared in the Kentucky Folklore Record, V (1959), 61-64, and North Carolina Folklore, VI (1958), 26-28. Another, longer text of “Lottie Yates,” running to thirty stanzas, was printed in the same issue of Kentucky Folklore Record, pp. 65-69. This variant was collected by Cratis D. Williams from Mrs. M. E. Ekers, who took it down from the singing of her brother, Lindsey Adams, on Daniels Creek, Lawrence County, Kentucky. Williams included it in his University of Kentucky M.A. thesis of 1937 on “Ballads and Songs.”

The incidents related in this tragedy are entered in the court records of Carter County in eastern Kentucky, where I was born and where I spent the first fifteen years of my life. For the text and music, we are indebted to Mrs. Julia B. Kiser of Gregoryville in Carter County, who permitted me to record her singing of this ballad on tape, May 29, 1957. Mrs. Kiser was a girl in her teens when the tragedy occurred. She remembered clearly all pertinent detail of the tragedy and sang it with vigor that belies her eighty years.

“The Murder of Lottie Yates” is one of two surviving ballads that come from the pen of Elija (“Lige”) Adams, a gifted folk-poet and singer of that period. Of the background and training of this itinerant minstrel, poet, and folk-historian, little is known, but he was a real person and very much alive and active near the turn of this century. This is attested to not only by Mrs. Kiser, but by my eighty-four-year-old father and relatives on my mother’s side of the family. The skill with which he treats his material, the style and phraseology which he employs reveal innate talent and an understanding of forms employed in older English and early American ballads. This song, like his better-known “Ashland Tragedy,” was probably issued originally as a broadside, but so far as known, no copy of it survives today.

1. Come listen, friends, while I relate
 Of a crime committed in Kentucky state.
 It was the murder of poor Lottie Yates,
 I hope she’s passed through Heaven’s gates.

2. It was one night in the month of May
 While she in bed with her baby lay,
 The dirk was hurled with a wicked dart
 That caused poor Lottie and her babe to part.

3. He raised the window with full intent,
 To talk to her he was deeply bent,
 And as he talked his heart grew cold.
 O such a crime, it would damn one’s soul!

4. “He’s killed me now,” she faintly cried.
 Her father soon was by her side.
 Do all he could, it was in vain.
 He could not bring her back again.

5. Her life blood rushed from its fountain head
 While she lay gasping on her bed.
 Her mother shrieked with grief so wild,
 And the father sank by his dying child.

6. With throbbing heart he dashed away.
The broken knife at the gateway lay.
It done its work when Lottie fell.
Of such a crime it is hard to tell.
7. Go look on the grave where Lottie sleeps.
Though tears may flow and hearts may weep,
Her loss to you might be her gain.
Though Lottie's dead, she will live again.
8. He's done the crime and fled away.
God's vengeance followed him day by day.
He was taken at last and placed in jail,
No mercy lent nor gave him bail.
9. "I did the crime," he did confess,
"The cause of it was jealousy.
May God forgive us both I pray,
And save us both on Judgment Day."
10. The night before the trial came
A crowd did take the Willard train
And made a rush for the prison cell.
Who were these men? I cannot tell.
11. They marched through town with a steady pace
To the jailor's house they went in haste.
They made him give those iron keys
That unlocked the prisoner's cell with ease.
12. The key was turned; the door did creak;
The prisoner screamed and loud did shriek.
He knew his time was short to be,
From iron bars he would be set free.
13. They placed the culprit on the verge,
No funeral song nor lonesome dirge,
With none to sing but the nightingale
To mourn his loss or sad bewail.

14. The time has come; he must make the leap
While frantic shadows o'er him creep.
He's gone; he's swung beneath the sky.
For a cruel murder he had to die.

15. This ends these lines of which we read
Of a crime so black with its bloody deed.
May all mankind who marry a wife
Live true and faithful all their life.

This ballad contains the incidents of Lottie's murder at the hands of her estranged husband, Oscar (or "Os") Porter. At the time of the incident, she was living with their infant son at her father's home in the Willard community in Carter County. As told in the song and stated by Mrs. Kiser, "Porter came to the Yates home one night, raised the window, and stabbed her to death while she lay in bed. This was in the year 1895. He dropped the murderous knife near the yard gate as he fled. Later he was arrested, confessed the crime, and was confined in the county jail at Grayson. Emotions ran high in the community, and a mob took the law into its own hands. They stormed the jail and took the prisoner to nearby E. K. Junction (now Hitchins) in the same county and hanged him from the nearby railroad trestle." My father also confirms these facts as follows: ". . . the murder of Lottie Yates was in 1895, and Porter was hanged on the E. K. [Eastern Kentucky] Railroad bridge crossing the Little Sandy River between Grayson and E. K. Junction. A piece of rope left tied to the bridge remained there for some time after the hanging, and I saw it while walking over the bridge."

by Richard Mercer Dorson