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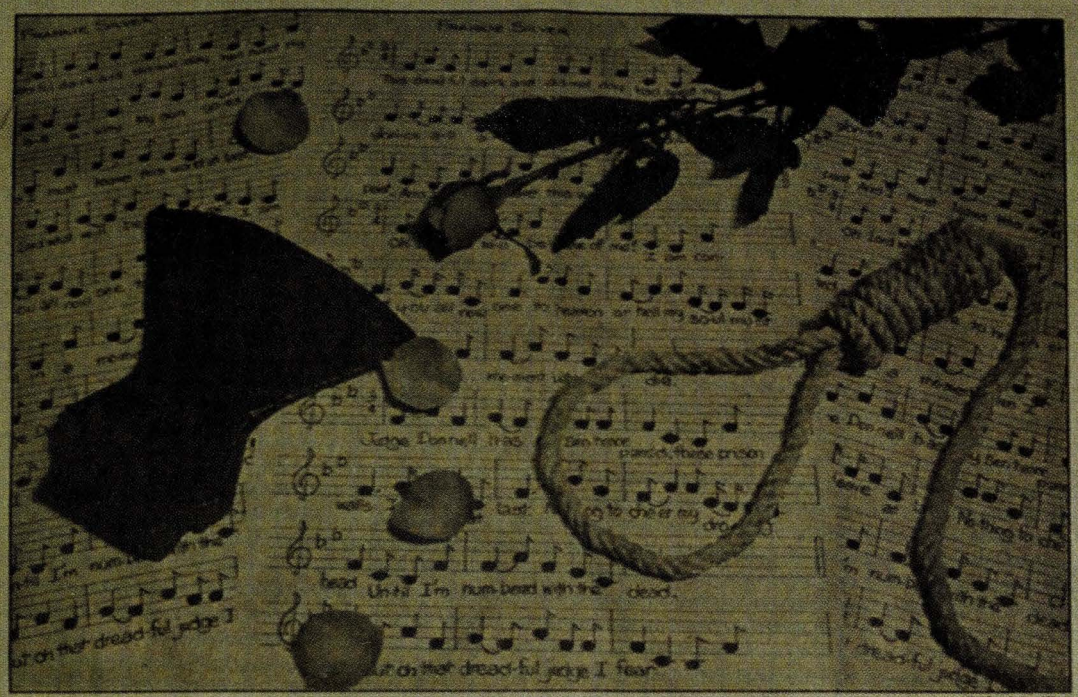

Frankie And Charlie

She had bright eyes, blonde hair
and a teen-ager's charms.
And the distinction of being the first white woman
hanged by the state of North Carolina.

By Jeff Herrin
Staff Writer

ASHEVILLE – On a tree-crowned hillside in the splendor of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Frankie Stewart Silver carved with a money clip: "Here lies Frankie."

Pretty, blonde and frail, she picked up an axe one winter night more than 150 years ago and drove it into the skull of her sleeping husband, Charlie Silver. The state hanged her, the first white woman to die on the gallows in North Carolina.

That much is known, borne by court records and a confession to her lawyer. But the Silver family, to this day, pole-vaults the unanswered questions of the case. And the discussions end on the word that begins: Why?

Why isn't Frankie's story finished? asks Wayne Silver, her great great nephew. "She'll never be finished, my friend. The answers you're looking for just aren't there."

Frankie's haunting past drifts from generation to generation of the Silver family. Wayne, 47, grew up listening to the tales on the porch of his cabin that Charlie Silver's father, Jacob, built in 1912 or 1913.

"You sit in the same spot, and you sweat in Black Mountain, and you rocked and you rocked, and you joined every minute of it," he said.

What follows is a glimpse of the story.

To some of the Silver descendants, the courtship of Charlie Silver and Frankie Stuart began on a river bank, 20 minutes from Hwy. 80 near Morganton.

Here, a courter's canoe glide near with the waters of the Yoe River's twin forks as an echoed of pools, eddies and rocks. Wayne, who is putting together a book about Frankie and Charlie, imagines the couple falling in love with the land, the river and each other.

They married in the late 1820s or 1830 and built a cabin upstream. The site, marked now only by the rocks that once served as a foundation, reflects practically and panorama.

The view from Frankie's kitchen window was far from spectacular, but the home's southern exposure ensured warmth in winter. Not far from the porch gurgled a spring and creek that joined the Yoe River.

Charlie Silver, whose mother died on his birth, was "strong and healthy, good looking and agreeable," said his half-brother, Alfred, in a 1906 interview with The Morganton Herald.

He was a favorite at all the parties, for he could make merry by talking, laughing and playing musical instruments," added Alfred, who died in 1909. "I think he was the best fiddler I ever heard."

Frankie, her young wife, had fair skin, bright eyes and could spot Yoe River trout a day on a spinning wheel, Alfred said.

"She had charms," he said. "I never saw a smarter little woman."

On Dec. 22, 1831, 19-year-old Charlie set out to cut a supply of hickory wood for the holiday season, a time when he probably would leave his wife and 1-year-old daughter, Nancy, to go hunting.

He returned home carrying his 6-foot axe and a supply of Christmas whiskey, just as a blizzard began to howl across western North Carolina. Charlie lay down to sleep on a pallet by the fire. Nancy crawled in his arms.

Frankie, according to a confession she later gave her lawyer, carefully picked up the child and put her to bed. She then reached for the axe Charlie had leaned in a corner of the cabin.

"Being moved and urged by the instigation of the devil," and with a strike of the heavy blade, Frankie delivered "one mortal wound of the length of 3 inches and of the depth of 1 inch," according to the bill of indictment filed by Solicitor William Alexander.

The [illegible] says that Charlie died [illegible] the fireplace. Alfred [illegible] interview with the Herald, [illegible] Charlie's father, [illegible] Frankie's mother, [illegible] Frankie's sister, [illegible] Charlie's brother, [illegible] where Charlie lived and drew a [illegible] the outlaw's remains. [illegible] Frankie's parents to move away [illegible] asked Wayne. [illegible] was done away with [illegible]

Other accounts suggest that drugs found the

(See FRANKIE On 10B)

The grimmest part of the story follows. By flickering firelight, Frankie used the axe to dismember Charlie's body. She tried burning some of it, hiding some of it under the floorboards of the cabin and stuffing the rest in a hollow tree stump, according to evidence produced during her trial.

She scrubbed the pallet and floor clean of blood, then set off the next morning to her in-laws' home to see if they had heard anything from Charlie.

Court records don't offer a clear picture of how the body was found, leaving plenty of room for conjecture in the mountains.

One version says Frankie went to a quilting bee a couple of days after the murder. The smell of bacon cooking over a fire reminded her of Charlie's burning bones, according to the account, and Frankie broke down in a tearful confession.

Alfred Silver says the family initially believed Charlie had left the hills and [illegible] journey. Frankie [illegible] meet a man who purported to be Charlie's accomplice while a "stranger [illegible]

[illegible] hung the [illegible] like a pendulum and [illegible] Alfred [illegible] interview with the Herald. [illegible] Charlie's father, [illegible] Frankie's mother, [illegible] Frankie's sister, [illegible] Charlie's brother, [illegible] where Charlie lived and drew a [illegible] the outlaw's remains. [illegible] Frankie's parents to move away [illegible] asked Wayne. [illegible] was done away with [illegible]

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(See FRANKIE On 10B)

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Rocks And Trees Are All That's Left Of The Cabin Where Frankie Killed Her Husband

Three Sets Of Stones Mark Grave Of Charlie Silver