

## *Grotesome Tales from the Natchez Trace and King's Tavern*

Here at King's Tavern, travelers told tales of ambush and horror on their journeys of the Trace. With drink in hand, new arrivals to the Tavern spoke of outrage and savagery, like stories of The Harpe Brothers, Mason and Murrell.

At the head of the tales were Little Wiley Harpe and his brother Big Macijah Harpe, notorious murderers and thieves, who had little regard for human life and frequently killed for pleasure. Their deeds were so outrageous that even other outlaws detested them. Originally, from North Carolina, the Harpe Brothers were sons of a Tory. Their father was rumored to have sided with the British during the Revolution and was a frequent victim of barn burning and retaliation.

The Harpe name was known all along the Trace from the Tennessee Valley to the Natchez Bluffs. In the 1790's, the Harpe Brothers reputation reached as far north as Kentucky and they were rumored to have used the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky as a hide out. The brothers traveled with their wives in tow and were said to have shared them. They joined with bands of Native American outlaws from time to time to burn farms, loot, murder, and steal horses. The Harpe's were known to brutally kill their victims by gutting them, and loading the abdomens with rocks in order to sink them in rivers and bogs. They moved from one state to the other, killing and robbing as they went. They took great delight in torture and mutilation of their victims by cutting off fingers, poking out eyes with sticks, and gutting their victims. Once they tied a naked man to a horse and sent him reeling off a cliff to his death, for the fun of it.

Perhaps the most famous tale is that Big M. Harpe, exasperated at the crying of his own child, grabbed the child by the ankles and proceeded to bash the child's head into a tree until it shattered. Big Harpe, on his own deathbed, claimed it was the only murder that he regretted. The tale of the Harpe's killing a crying child here at King's Tavern may have been derived from this tale- it has not been substantiated.

On another occasion, the Harpe's were staying with friends and offered to watch a woman's child so that she could get their breakfast made quicker. They quieted the child by slitting its throat in its crib. When breakfast was served, the poor woman met her fate the same way with a butcher knife. After breakfast, the Harpe's burned the house down. Authorities offered a large reward for the pair and a vigilante group overtook Big Harpe, while Little Harpe managed to escape. The husband of the woman and child they had savagely murdered confronted, wounded, and paralyzed Big Harpe. In retaliation, the husband slowly and methodically, cut and hacked at Big Harpe's neck until he was decapitated with a butcher knife. Big Harpe's head was stuck in the fork of a tree as a warning to other outlaws. It is said that the white skull of Big Harpe remained in the tree for many years.