

- **Claiborne County (TN) Progress**

Nell Quesenbery Report

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THE MERMAID

By Nell Quesenbery

Long ago, a family by the name of West lived in the Ball Creek section of Straight Creek Road. In the nearby Bluetop community, there was a large hole filled with blue water. Upon finding no bottom to this strange hole, early settlers believed it led through giant underground caverns hundreds of miles to the sea.

After returning from the Blue Hole one day, the West man swore to his neighbors that he saw a mermaid in the Blue Hole combing her hair with her fingers. He said she was singing, "From the bottom to the top, from the bottom to the top, I'll never see dry land again." Then he said, "She went to the bottom and never came back anymore."

A BALL CREEK LEGEND

Summer, 1941

I was barely five. A slender little black-eyed child whose heavy chestnut hair, when not plaited by Granny Dora into French braids, hung waved almost to my waist.

It was summer, just before World War II. Mamie Cordie and I were sitting on our concrete porch. Mamie Cordie was telling me about the Blue Hole and women that, amazingly, were half fish.

"Have you ever been to the Blue Hole? Have you ever seen a mermaid?" I asked, leaning back against the wooden post of our porch.

"No," said Mamie Cordie, but, truly believing in mermaids, she added, "They are real."

Remembering that morning, mermaids, glossy green leaves and the scent of soft, large, white gardenia blossoms became mixed in my mind.

I was lonesome. My parents and grandparents, who were often away on jobs, had just this morning returned to Kingsport, Tennessee. This visit, Dad had brought my grannies an exotic burlapped blooming gardenia bush.

My present was a story book. Inside the book were pictures of a beautiful mermaid with long golden brown tresses and jewel green eyes.

Still talking with my great-grandmother about mermaids, I rubbed my nose against my bare arm. Delightfully, I could smell the odor of store-bought soap that Granny Dora had used to bathe me. Until only recently, we'd used lye soap and white cotton grass sacking for towels.

(Dora and Cordie had both been Jennings'; they both were my great-grandmothers. Also, both were the great-granddaughters of David and Margaret "Peggy" Moore.)

Reaching from where I sat on the edge of the concrete porch, I gently touched one of the large gardenia petals.

"Oh, look, Mamie Cordie, at the dark marks. My fingers bruised the flower."

Mamie Cordie got up and went around the porch and through the door of the bedroom, furnished with two iron bedsteads that the grannies and I shared. Still sitting on the porch, I could smell bubbling sugared apples that Granny was cooking in our dish pans for canning.

After Mamie Cordie left, I went over to my swing with the smooth bored seat. Dad had fastened the swing to the high outswung branch of our tall straight pear tree in the front yard.

Swinging, I could see my shadow in the grass. I appeared quite small. I looked at the shadow of my loosely hanging hair, then, turning my head, I allowed my hair to fall freely over my face. I squinted through the long strands, but could not see the gold color of the mermaid's long tresses in my deeply chestnut hair.

Tiring of the swing, I went to my favorite tree, the terribly bent pear tree near our chicken nest and coal house. The tree had suffered a terrible wound years before when Mr. Hill, Cordie's dead husband, had planted it.

Lying back upon the wide cradling trunk, I thought of a blue hole without a bottom and a beautiful woman with the tail of a fish.

I felt my eyes close. I heard a light snore in my secured position within the curving trunk of the tree.

Then, twinkling like a blue gem, I saw the round hole of blue water. The bank was softly covered by mosses and dry leaves. Inside the dell where the blue hole lay was a barrier of mighty trees of pine, cedar, oak, chestnut and poplar. Under these tall silent guards was a thatch of pine needles and old leaves.

There was not a path to the water, but I found myself stealing through the trees onto its mossy banks. Expectantly, thrillingly, I saw her. She was just lying there on the water, her finely made fish tail, with its broad double-curved fin, upswept.

Except for a large shell comb, she was unclothed from her waist upward to her long golden brown tresses. Yet her golden tawny body did not appear naked, as her long luxuriant hair afforded her an ample covering for her exquisitely formed tiny bosom.

“Oh, my! You must be a mermaid!”

“Yes,” she answered, “I’m Mystra, one of Nereus and Doris’s daughters. We are called Nereids. There are over one hundred of us. We attend Neptune, god of the sea. What is your name, little girl?”

“Nell Lee,” I replied politely. Smilingly, she swam closer, cunningly flapping her brilliant green tail. Her face was so beautiful and her voice softly charmed me.

She asked, “Nell Lee, would you like to enter Neptune’s sea from this little blue hole?”

“Oh, yes! Yes! What would I see?” I cried excitedly.

“You would see tides, harbors and crescent beaches. You would hear the sea winds of the moors and mountains. There will be cities, remote seas of the mighty deep, stone crags, blue bays, the bluer Mediterranean, snows of the gleaming suns of the Bedouin desert, green lush forests and mighty ships which pass old palaces and towers.”

“What about Granny and Mamie Cordie, will I see them again soon?”

“No, little human, you must leave all the land people.”

Holding her arms out to me, she smiled so beautifully that my heart hurt me frightfully.

“Will you come?”

“Oh, Mystra, part of me wants so badly to go with you. The part of me that likes fairy tales and wonderful things. But part of me wants to go home and eat dinner with my grannies.”

“Then, child, you must choose. If you return home, you choose love, which is the most powerful force in the world for humans. But, dear, if you come with me, you choose immortality.”

“I must go home. It’s noon. I hear Granny calling. She’s calling me to dinner. Goodby, goodby, Mystra.”

In my dreams I never returned to the Blue Hole. Many years ago, however, my young husband, Jack, who was raised on Ball Creek, took me to this wonder place.

I did not see a mermaid, nor the little fish that are said to be there. Yet, I still felt the magic all around the little pool of blue water without a bottom.