

During this month when our thoughts turn to ghost stories and the like, it is fun to examine what is probably the best-known ghost story in Webster Parish, the Legend of Sallie Baker's grave. One unifying factor for teenagers from the Bienville Parish line all the way to the Arkansas border is the tales of the odd happenings at Sallie Baker's grave near Cotton Valley. The stories of midnight visits to the site have been passed among the youth of our parish for several decades. Many different versions of who Sallie was are commonly told. Most involve her killing multiple husbands, attacking unsuspecting trespassers and in general terrorizing all who came near. However, on at least two occasions, by Diane Sentell in 1975, and by Karla Sumrall in 2000, the real story of Sallie has been examined in the pages of the Minden Press-Herald. In the spirit of Halloween and to help clear up Sallie's memory, here is a brief summary of her life, as recounted by those two journalists.

Sally Caruthers was born in 1869, the daughter of George Caruthers, a respected farmer of Northern Webster Parish. In 1896, Sallie, at age 27 had married John Baker; a relief to her parents who feared was destined to become an "old maid." John was in his early 30s and the couple moved to their own home, near the "bottoms" around Bayou Bodcau. Although the couple had no children, they had a happy life and eventually built a two-story cypress home. This peaceful life came to an end on July 26, 1925, when John fell dead on the front porch from a heart attack. The roots of the Sallie legend began with the circumstances of his death. The couple was alone at home when John was stricken. He had the attack while standing on the porch and collapsed against the porch rail. The rail gave way and John fell to the ground. Sallie ran to the nearest neighbors, two miles away to try and get help. When the body was found, its location gave rise to the rumor that Sallie had pushed her husband from the porch. That rumor was fueled by some owners of adjoining property who had been engaged in a land dispute with the Bakers. Soon the usual small town rumor mill began cranking out the stories that would eventually give rise to the legend.

Sallie was now alone as a widow in her mid 50s, living in an isolated area, with no family nearby to help her get by. Her reaction to that situation created some of the behaviors that eventually added to and enhanced the legends arising about Sallie. Always capable with a gun, Sallie now took up her husband's weapons to hunt for squirrels in the area around her home. Since few people came to her home, the few times she was seen were while roaming on these hunting expeditions. Thus the story arose that you "always see her with a gun", increasing the image of a mean lady. The gun usage took on another dimension, which was also related to the isolation of the Baker home. There were several people living the area of the Baker home that wanted Sallie's property in addition to the usual prowlers who might attempt to sneak in and steal from a widow living alone. Sallie came to learn that anyone nearing her property could likely have sinister motivations, so she kept a gun handy. Visitors were always greeted by a gun-toting woman, and many who did not have the best intentions, along with teenagers and older children bound for mischief, found that Sallie was more than willing to fire her weapon. But, despite the rumors, there is no record of anyone ever being shot while trespassing on the Baker land and no proof that Sallie did anything more than fire warning shots in defense of her home.

Sallie's physical appearance added impetus to the wild tales of her escapades. In 1934, she purchased a Ford Coupe and began making weekly trips into Cotton Valley to buy her groceries and supplies. She always came in "full dress", wearing an ankle-length dress of 1890s style, buttoned boots, gloves and a dress hat. The small sprightly-stepped lady drew attention from all passers-by, and in small town Webster Parish of the 1930s, she was always the topic of conversation on Saturdays when all the country folk were in town. As it could be expected, when someone is the focus of conversation, the wild stories multiply. Sallie was becoming the focus of legend while she was still living.

As many different people and groups attempted to gain title to Sallie's land, by both legal and illegal means, she became more and more wary of strangers and thus sparked even more anger and rumors among her neighbors. After fighting valiantly to keep her home for over a quarter of a century, Sallie finally found a foe she could not hold off. In 1951, as part of the Bodcau Flood Control Project, the Federal Government took her house and land along with that of many of her neighbors. Always the fighter, Sallie took the government to court and won a larger payment for her property than the amount received by other property owners.

With her beloved home gone, Sallie moved into Cotton Valley and lived out her life. She died on July 13, 1952, and was buried on a hill near her old home, and soon after her death the legends began to grow. It was in this period that the tales of poisoned husbands and pouring hot lead into the victim's ears emerged. Other facts added to the mystique of the tale. It was true that Bonnie and Clyde had been guests at the Baker farm, and Sallie even claimed that they spent the night before their death at her place. It was also a well-known fact that Sallie had kept money in sacks and hid them in the walls of her home and also buried them on her property. The claim that she had been buried with some of those sacks probably drew the first attention to the gravesite. Soon the stories of the strange little lady who had so steadfastly defended her land led to the tale that even though she was dead, she was still at the property keeping away the uninvited. Over the years the site became a favorite spot for teenage boys trying to "spook" their dates and the legend grew. By the 1970s and 1980s local media picked up the tale. They took the rumors and spiced them up a little bit and used a bit of selective journalism, on occasion taking stories told in jest as serious accounts. These factors helped contribute to the image of Sallie Baker we still have today. As a lifelong resident of Webster Parish I am sorry to confess that I have never been to Sallie Baker's grave, but after learning the truth, I don't think I'm afraid to go. Well, on second thought, maybe better safe than sorry is a good motto. Now that you know a little more about Sallie Baker, the real person, you can decide if you want to risk the wrath of Sallie Baker's ghost this Halloween season.