

Henry Berry Lowry Lives Forever

By Jefferson Currie

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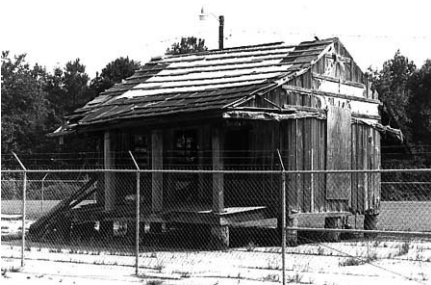
Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

On a hot June day in 1999, a young Lumbee Indian man, Randall Oxendine, stood on the banks of the old millpond at Bear Swamp and yelled, "I'm gonna get you, Henry Berry!" Gabriel Cummings looked at him and asked what Randall would do if Henry Berry came floating down that swamp in his flat-bottomed boat with his rifle across his knee. Randall, Gabriel, and I all laughed nervously, wondering if or when Henry Berry Lowry would come paddling down that swamp. We all looked to see if he was there. . . .

Henry Berry Lowry was the legend of Robeson County even before he vanished in February 1872. He disappeared after he stole the safes from Pope and McLeod's store and from the sheriff's office in Lumberton. He broke open the sheriff's safe and left it lying in the middle of a Lumberton street. In all, he stole \$28,000. Three days later he vanished. The *New York Herald* published reports that Henry Berry

Lowry had accidentally killed himself. An elderly Lumbee man, John Godwin, said that Henry Berry Lowry "had been trying to shoot the load off his gun for a long time. . . . The load went right up through here, my mother said, and blowed the top of his head off." This and other local legends were recorded by Lumbee historian and teacher Adolph Dial in the 1960s and 1970s. The many legends differ in their account of Lowry's disappearance. A ninety-six-year-old Lumbee man, Mabe Sampson, believed that Henry Berry Lowry escaped from the militia and the United States troops who were trying to track him down. Mr. Sampson said that "Henry Berry left here and was sent off by a white man, loaded right here at Moss Neck. He never was killed."

Henry Berry Lowry was one of twelve children in the family of Allen and Mary Lowry. The Lowrys struggled, as did other Indians in Robeson County, through the hard times that the Civil War brought them. During the war, the Confederacy forced Lumbees to work on building the earthen Fort Fisher near Wilmington. At home, the Home Guard accused Indians of harboring escaped Union prisoners and Confederate deserters, hiding guns, and stealing meat from smokehouses. The Home Guard supported the Confederacy and maintained law and order at home while the war was being fought. Indian men had to



Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

resort to “lying out”—or hiding—in the swamps to avoid being harassed and rounded up by the Home Guard.

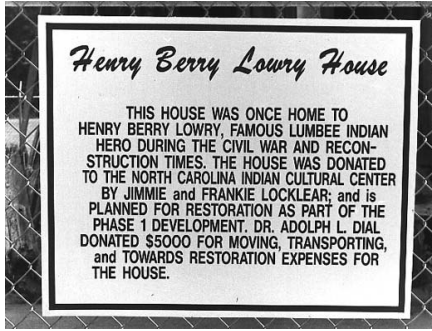
Henry Berry Lowry had had enough of being controlled and pushed around by the local Home Guard authority, so he struck back. He killed James P. Barnes on December 21, 1864, and James Brantley “Brant” Harris on January 15, 1865. The Lowry family had had ongoing disputes with both men. The Home Guard avenged the deaths of James Barnes and Brant Harris by accusing Henry Berry Lowry’s father, Allen, and brother William of various crimes.

The Home Guard called an illegal court. They tried, convicted, and executed Allen and William in one day, March 3, 1865. Eighteen-year-old Henry Berry Lowry reportedly watched the executions from behind some bushes. He swore to take revenge for their deaths.

Henry Berry Lowry was a wanted man. He lay out in the swamps but was arrested (with no warrant) for murder by the Home Guard on December 7, 1865, at his wedding to Rhoda Strong. Mary Norment, author of *The Lowrie History*, says that after his arrest “he filed his way out of the grated iron window bars, escaped to the woods with handcuffs on, and made his way back to his wife in Scuffletown [Pembroke].”

Henry Berry Lowry had gathered around him other Indian men who had tired of taking the mistreatment of whites. Along with this group, two African Americans and one white “buckskin” Scot joined what became known as the Lowry band. The band robbed rich white landowners, and Henry Berry Lowry became the “Robin Hood” of Robeson County. The governor outlawed Henry Berry Lowry and the band in 1869, offering large rewards for them, dead or alive. The band responded with violence. In one ten-month stretch, ten Police Guard and Lowry band members died.

In 1871 Francis Marion Wishart became colonel of the Police Guard manhunt and had the wives of the Lowry band held hostage in prison. Henry Berry Lowry and other band members sent Wishart a letter demanding the release of their wives, or “the bloodiest times will be here than ever was before—the life of every man will be in jeopardy.” The wives were released, and Colonel Wishart and the government began to work out an end to the conflict. The killing soon stopped, and in February 1872 Henry Berry Lowry vanished. Colonel Wishart called the reports of his death “ALL A HOAX.” No one ever collected the \$12,000 reward for his life.



Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives & History.

Many years after he vanished, Henry Berry Lowry reportedly was seen in a church at a funeral for someone he knew. No one talked to him, and he talked to no one, but Robeson County resident Charlie McBryde says that “They said had you looked at his eyes good, you would have known it was Henry Berry.” Today, reminders of Henry Berry Lowry are all around the area, with a road named after him and a play portraying his life. Henry Berry Lowry has lived on in the minds and hearts of the Lumbee. If you are ever in Robeson County, go down to the swamps and be still. You can feel him, and if you look real close, you might even see him.

Jefferson Currie is Lumbee. At the time of this article’s publication, he was an assistant curator at the North Carolina Museum of History who worked on the Henry Berry Lowry portion of the exhibit North Carolina Legends.