

# THE GHOSTS OF WILLOW VALLEY

The town of Decipere sits precisely in the middle of a verdant valley some ten miles west of the Bounty River. Oddly, at the base of the hills surrounding the valley grows a rim of willow trees. I say oddly, because, except for the narrow entrance at the east end, the trees completely enclose the valley. Standing precisely ten feet on center (a fact that seems quite improbable in nature), the willows give the appearance of a prison with the trunks forming the bars and the thick branches completing the barrier.

*Sir Jonathan Barrymore, Fort Contra Expedition, 1867*

But for the journal entry above, I could find no other historical record explaining the strange formation surrounding Willow Valley and the town of Decipere. Furthermore, I could find no official record of the town of Decipere at all. Myths and

fantastic expanding stories abound, but they don't satisfy the probing mind of an investigative reporter such as I am.

What follows is an account of my experience in Willow Valley. Having heard stories about the area as far away as Boston, I felt compelled to expose the myths surrounding Decipere and the valley. As the only town in Willow Valley, Decipere supposedly laid claim to far deeper oddities than the willow prison. It stood as a desolate monument to a fallen civilization. Flesh and blood residents no longer called it home.

I made my first stop Mansfield, the closest town with residents who might have had some direct history with the valley. To my disappointment, I found no one who would admit to any such association. I did receive numerous words of warning: Watch; take heed and watch; keep an eye on your back; beware of the winds; do not fall asleep, and so forth. It did not surprise me that I could not find a soul willing to make the journey into the valley, so I traveled alone.

Entering through the narrow gap at the east end of the valley, I immediately felt the surreal

impression given by the willow prison. Countering that impression, the lush summer green of the meadow grass provided little evidence of the dark, desolate past of Decipere and the valley. Training my eyeglass farther down the valley, I spotted the distant outline of my destination some two miles or so away.

Walking my horse through the clover filled me with the delight of pleasant childhood memories, so much so I felt like all the stories of gloom and doom had led me astray. And then I found a path—a well-worn path. The obvious question arose in my mind: Why would there be a well-worn path to a town without people? Perhaps it was merely one used by animals of one sort or another. Still, the words of warning that I had received in Mansfield made their first mark on my nerves.

To be certain, I took the path, but with all of my senses on alert. Periodically, I looked at the path behind me. Finally, I reached the edge of the town. Standing in front of a weathered sign welcoming those who dared to visit, I felt a modicum of uneasiness. Looking to the left and then to the right, I saw a perfectly straight line where the lush meadow grass abruptly ended and the barren dirt of

the town began. Within the confines of the town limits that I could see, there existed not the first blade of grass or leaf of green. It had all the appearance of a bleak, snowless winter day. I noted the lifeless scene in my journal before venturing any farther. I added the words, "Something drastic must have happened on Decipere's final day." I did not know that for sure, but it did not strike me as a gradual death.

The first street that I came to appeared to be a primary avenue for commerce. Judging from the boardwalk in front of each wooden skeleton, I would say it consisted mostly of shops and small businesses. I took a step up onto one of the boardwalks and immediately felt a jolt go up my leg. My foot went through the rotten wood as it turned to dust. It took every ounce of strength I had to pull my foot out of the hole that seemed to exert a powerful holding force. Breathing heavily, I rubbed my ankle and then stood back erect to see a mini-whirlwind moving down the dirty path once laden with busy human traffic. As the whirlwind disappeared around a corner, I heard an odd sound coming from one of the buildings opposite to where I stood. Moving closer to the building, I found the sound to

be more haunting and yet more clear. The words besieged my ears with pleadings, “Follow me”, “No, come follow me”, “Look, it is me”, “I am the one”.

It wasn't until I had cleared the last building of the main street that the words stopped their assault on my mind. I can't honestly say whether the words came from every building or whether the words simply followed me down the street. Savoring the silence, I proceeded down yet another dirty street. To my right stood a row of what must have once been great and wonderful stone buildings. The mighty stone could not escape destruction either, as someone appeared to have cast them down from their lofty positions. Then, another whirlwind sucked up the lifeless soil of the path in front of me. And the words returned, but this time they were in French. Processing the words as best I could with my meager foreign language study, I concluded they were the same pleadings as before. Silence did not return until the whirlwind lost its breath. At the time, I didn't even contemplate the strangeness of another language.

Leaving the avenue of broken stones, I felt an irresistible urge to cast one more look down the

street. Vestiges of dirt clouds from the whirlwind remained atop the remnants of the man-made stone monuments. Then a sudden burst of wind forced the nebulous remains to flee into the surrounding hills. I felt a similar urgency to flee, but there was one more street between my position and the exit path.

The pace of my walk increased on a parallel with my heart rate. The last building on the street had all the appearance of a public or governmental meeting place, maybe even a school. As my hand touched the cold stone pillar out front, I felt a sharp pain in my back. Momentarily, it eased, only to return to my legs. A cycle of sharp and dull lingering pain continued to alternate between my back and my chest. I finally realized that the sensations stopped every time I took my hand off the stone. A sane man would have resisted the urge to step up and peer into the open chamber of the building, but I did not. I could not resist. Stepping across the threshold, I heard muffled cries or moans. The cleansing of an afternoon sun shining through a large gap in the wall only revealed barren floors and barren walls. Yet, the sounds came as if from someone under duress, and the only thing keeping

them from screaming hideously was the conviction of their soul.

I could take no more. I ran the last hundred yards to the path I thought would provide my escape. I untied my horse and mounted up. Hope propelled me to the waiting meadow of clover. By the time I reached the halfway point to the valley entrance, only a few lingering rays of light remained to the day. How quickly they departed, leaving me with a moonless night to navigate the last of the path. Casting a parting look at Willow Valley, all I saw was darkness. The town of Decipere rested deep within the bowels of a tormented valley, or maybe the valley only surrounded a tormented town. The inky desolation of the darkness kept me from seeing any of its form in my final look. And I was glad.

My numbed mind fought any rational thought on the trip back to Mansfield. My normally steady hand struggled with unlocking the door to my room. After washing the dust off my face, I sat down on the bed. I felt my heel bump up against something under the edge of the bed. Retrieving the object, I found a well-worn leather-bound Bible. Curiosity led me to open the book to the spot where

a letter of some sort appeared to be serving as a bookmark. My eyes were drawn to a passage underlined in red: “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.”

After the experience of the day, I was willing to accept any explanation, even from an underlined passage in a Bible that just happened to be under my bed in a hotel room. I opened the letter in the Bible hoping to find more clues. The single sheet of writing paper began with the words, “Dearest Matilda”. The rest of the paper was blank.

I shuddered at what I read. Questions abounded in my mind. Did my hands hold evidence of a survivor from Decipere? Might they have been sitting down at their desk to write a letter to a loved one and suddenly had to leave? Were the people of Willow Valley watching? Or did their blind complacency doom them to ghostly lives without substance? Why the people in that one specific town? Was Mansfield any different? Was Boston any different? Were the dozens of towns I passed on the way to Willow Valley soon to become future



ghostly Deciperes? I had the incredible urge to go home and hug my wife and two children. At times, the line between Willow Valley and the rest of the world seemed almost indistinguishable. And that was scary. That night I made a vow to never take any day that the Creator of it all gave to me. I looked out the window of my hotel room that overlooked the main street of Mansfield. In the gaslight, I saw a mini whirlwind suck up loose dirt from the street and disappear beyond the rows of street-lights.