the strange Tale of
Hatchet the Clown

Fullerton Press
New York, New York
1939
In the early 1930’s, during the heart of the Great Depression, residents of several small towns up and down the east coast of the United States reported unusual and unsettling sightings of disturbing clowns: clowns standing silently near laundromats, clowns lurking near roadsides staring at passing cars, and clowns trying to lure children into the woods.

The clown sightings were first reported by the press in Greenville, South Carolina, in the Greenville Journal on October 12, 1932. Written by reporter David Lancaster, the Journal article reported a local sighting by a ten-year-old boy of a clown loitering beneath a stone bridge near the town, a report by a seventy-year-old woman of a clown standing motionless in her backyard at dusk, and an accounting by Baptist Minister Rev. Donald Denton of a clown wandering the grounds of the Lakeview Cemetery at dawn.

The Greenville Journal article evidently liberated reports of clown sightings from timid residents in many towns in other east coast states who may have been too embarrassed or uncomfortable to share what they had witnessed. Within weeks, newspapers in Virginia, Georgia and Alabama also printed articles reporting strange clown sightings.
By early 1933, clown hysteria had risen to such a fever pitch that Greenville Sheriff Thomas Cole decided it was time to get to the bottom of it. Cole began by interviewing the residents of Greenville who reported seeing the clown. He then traveled to eleven other towns and, with the cooperation of local sheriffs, interviewed those witnesses too.

Cole’s investigation found that there was very little similarity between the various clown reports. Some witnesses saw a fat clown, others a skinny one. Some saw a tall clown, others a short one. In some accounts, he wore a red wig. In others, it was blue. Or green. Or he wore no wig, but his head was shaved. Red nose, no red nose. Big red shoes, small blue shoes.

Sheriff Cole’s conclusion was that either some form of mass hysteria had gripped the small towns of the east coast, or there were literally dozens of clowns roaming the countryside. Cole decided that the clown sighting epidemic was most likely the result of panic and mental suggestion coupled with fabricated reports and publicity seekers.

The Greenville Journal reported on Sheriff Cole’s
investigation and conclusions. The article was widely circulated in other newspapers in the region.

For a time, the panic subsided and the number of new clown sightings began to drop off.

Until the murders began.
Greg Anderson had been a carnival clown since age seventeen. He grew up in John’s Creek, Georgia, in a poor family with nine brothers and sisters; his father, Joshua, was a subsistence farmer and contracted himself out as manual labor when the fields were fallow. Anderson’s mother, Rosalyn, was perpetually pregnant and supplemented the family income by selling jams and jellies at the local market.

When Joshua Anderson was drafted into the Army during World War I, responsibility fell to Greg to run the farm. With his father gone, Greg seized the opportunity to prove himself. During the first year, Greg was able to increase the total harvest from their rented fields by nearly twenty-five-per-cent. He used some of the profits to purchase a draft horse; the remainder of the balance due would be made in monthly horse payments to the seller.

Then in July of 1918, a telegram was delivered to the Anderson homestead. Joshua had been killed on June 20 in the Battle of Belleau Wood. Rosalyn was to receive a small death benefit from the U.S. government, but Joshua Anderson would never be coming home.

Fifteen-year-old Greg Anderson’s universe collapsed in that terrible moment when his mother read the four line
telegram aloud to the family. For three days, he refused to leave the bedroom he shared with his four brothers.

On the fourth day, Greg packed a small bag and left the Anderson homestead. He would never return to John’s Creek.

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Clower’s Carnival and Traveling Show was one of the few carnivals and circuses to survive the early years of the Great Depression. By keeping overhead low, charging a reasonable admission, and setting up in small towns around the southeastern U.S., Irvin Clower kept his carnival solvent.

Small towns, he discovered, desperately needed a diversion from the harsh economic realities of daily life, and the southern poor were willing to shell out a few nickels for an evening of carnival entertainment.

Greg Anderson bought a ticket to Clower’s Carnival in Traveler’s Rest, South Carolina, where he was working as a field hand on a farm. The carnival opened Greg’s eyes to a whole new world of possibility. The next day, he talked his way into a job with the carnival on the road crew,
dismantling, transporting, and reassembling the carnival as it moved from town to town.

Greg was a gregarious young man, and soon became friends with just about everyone in Clower’s traveling show. He was most enamored by the clowns, and when Greg was not working, he spent most of his available free time in the company of Clower’s clown troupe.

Within a year, Greg had learned enough to perform as well as any of the veteran clowns. With the support of the old-timers in the show, Greg convinced Mr. Clower to give him a shot as a clown performer.

Greg’s first two shows were great successes; the crowds, and the children in particular, loved him. Clower soon made Greg a permanent member of the carnival’s clown troupe. He was only seventeen years old. As was the custom, Greg was free to choose his own stage name.

The name he chose was Hatchet the Clown.
Ingrid Brock was a newlywed; she had been married for
only six days when she was found naked in a muddy field
with an axe in the back of her head.

The town where the gruesome murder occurred was
Greenville, South Carolina. A dairy farmer had seen a
clown in a dirty, white costume standing by the side of the
road earlier in the day before Ingrid was killed, but was
reluctant to report the sighting for fear of being labelled an
agitator.

The residents of Greenville blamed Sheriff Thomas
Cole. If Sheriff Cole had just taken the previous clown
sightings seriously, the argument went, then Ingrid Brock
would still be alive. Reverend Denton preached a sermon at
the Baptist Church the following Sunday morning about
the sin of pride with pointed analogies directed toward
Sheriff Cole. Ingrid’s young husband, Richard, was seated
in the first pew, listening intently as the congregation
affirmed the Reverend’s message with a chorus of “amens.”

That evening, with amens still ringing in his head,
Richard avenged his murdered bride by shooting Sheriff
Cole at point blank range with a twelve-gauge shotgun as
Cole left the Lamp Post Diner after supper.
By the time the Greenville Journal reported the details of the murder of Ingrid Brock in the next day’s paper, the whole town already knew the gruesome details. In addition to nearly splitting her skull in two with a blow from a rusty axe, the killer removed seven of her toes. When Ingrid was found in that fallow field, her eyes were wide open and her face was fixed in an expression of such sheer terror that the farmer who found the corpse instantly dropped to his knees and began reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

Ingrid was buried that afternoon in a fresh grave next to her grandparents in the Lakeview Cemetery. Reverend Denton presided over the funeral service. Richard, locked away in a jail cell, was unable to attend.

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Five months after the murder of Ingrid Brock, her husband Richard was executed by hanging following his conviction for first degree murder by a jury of his peers. Richard is now buried next to his wife Ingrid in the Lakeview Cemetery, three rows away from Sheriff Thomas Cole’s grave.
Over the next six months, Ingrid Brock’s killer unleashed a frenzy of murder across several states.

In Middleberg, Virginia, a shop keeper found the corpse of a prostitute in an alley behind his dry goods store. Her skull was cleaved by an axe. All ten of her toes were missing. Her blonde hair had turned red with her blood. A young boy reported seeing a clown in a corn field outside of town the day before.

In Mooresville, Alabama, an elderly couple was found murdered in their bed. Each had been killed by an axe blow to the head. Four toes were cut from the husband’s feet, and six toes were severed from the wife’s. A trail of muddy footprints led to the backdoor of the house. A smear of white makeup and blood was found on the door handle.

In Milton, Georgia, after three days of reported clown sightings around town, a female teacher was found dead in her classroom by a janitor. She had been struck several times with an axe in the face and was unrecognizable. She was identified by her clothing and jewelry. Her shoes had been removed and three of her toes had been snipped off with a sharp instrument.
In Bath, North Carolina, the town’s citizens were vigilant. Every landowner was required to provide one night of service in the "town watch" that patrolled the streets. Residents locked their doors and windows at night. Bath police officers rousted any transients or hobos that happened to wander too close to the town. None of their efforts bore fruit. A young woman was found in a ditch outside the local mill with an gaping axe wound in the side of her head where her right ear had been. She was stripped of her clothing and eight of her toes had been crudely removed.

In Lake City, Florida, Mayor Witt's daughter was found dead in the train station owned by the Atlantic Coast Line railroad. The nineteen-year-old beauty queen had been dispatched with an axe strike to the crown of the skull. She still wore her blue party dress, but her matching shoes were found on the tracks outside. Four of her toes were missing. The hobo sign for “danger” was found written in blood on a bridge abutment near the train station.

In Forrest City, Bedlam Asylum resident and patient Rachel Lancaster was shocked to discover the bloody corpse of another patient in her bed. He had been struck
in the head and face with an axe. The killer had cut off all ten of his toes. The walls and floor were smeared with blood. Several other patients of the asylum reported seeing a clown wandering the halls.

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Nearly a year after the first murder, an enterprising young reporter with the Atlanta Beacon named William Cross stumbled across a connection. Three of the murders had occurred in towns where the Clower Carnival and Traveling Show had performed at some time during the preceding year. Two of the other murders had occurred when the Clower Carnival was located within sixty miles of the murder site at the time when the killing took place.

The Beacon published an article outlining the reporter’s findings. On the day that the Cross article was published, the Clower Carnival was performing in Townsend, Tennessee.

Word of the article quickly spread. That evening, before the final show of the day, the Townsend Sheriff’s Department raided the Clower Carnival and Traveling Show.
Hatchet the Clown was nowhere to be found.

Deputies conducted a search of the entire carnival site. One unfortunate deputy named Dwight Savage searched Greg Anderson’s tent and made a horrifying discovery. Inside a footlocker next to his cot, Deputy Savage found a row of carefully wrapped jars containing over three hundred human toes.

Hatchet the Clown was never apprehended.