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A Note on the House of David

In the spring of 1903, a preacher named Benjamin Purnell and five followers arrived in Benton Harbor, Michigan. They were “following a star” and fleeing a scandal. Within a few years, their message had spread across the world, and a thousand more followers of King Ben had joined those first five at his colony, which he named the House of David.

Benjamin Purnell was born in 1861 in Greenup, Kentucky, where he claimed to have been divinely inspired to gather a flock to await the end of the world, when he and his colonists would become the last living people on earth. At the Second Coming, they would be granted an “eternal life of the body,” and would live together, in the flesh, forever.

For years the House of David itself must have been a kind of paradise. Its members, mostly young and healthy, built and lived in rambling mansions. It was said that the bricks from which the mansions were constructed had sand mixed into the mortar. They glittered in the sunlight. Proximity to Lake Michigan had tempered the climate for fruit-growing, and the colony was surrounded by orchards and vineyards. At that time, Benton Harbor shipped three million crates of fruit into the world annually. New colonists

arrived monthly—by boat, by horse and buggy, by train.

In order to prepare their bodies for the Second Coming, members were told not to cut their hair, not to eat meat, not to engage in sexual relations. But accounts of the colony do not evoke a grim, chaste lifestyle. Reports of Purnell speak to an enchantingly handsome and charismatic man. It was said that if you had a dollar in your pocket when you met King Ben, he would have charmed you out of it before you parted. He liked music, dancing, and a good joke. It was said that he wore a white suit, rode a white horse, and was often seen in the company of beautiful girls dressed in white. A ruby locket hung around his neck. Although he was married (to two different women at the same time, by some accounts), he displayed great affection for all of his young female followers. They, it seemed, returned his affections, and the fervent loyalty the men in the colony gave to King Ben seems to have offered him the company of their wives, sisters, and daughters.

In keeping with his vision of creating in Benton Harbor a “Paradise on Earth,” Benjamin Purnell began plans for an amusement park. In 1908 the Eden Springs Park opened. Eden Springs, over the decades, would become a major tourist attraction of the Midwest with its zoo, aviary, miniature train, beer garden, and musical and vaudeville acts performed in the amphitheater. The House of David baseball team became famous worldwide for the skill, the antics, and the beards of its players.

The contradictions between the preachings and the lifestyle of the colony did not go unnoticed. Here was a reputedly celibate Christian society, settled in the Midwest among farmers and businessmen, running one of the most

popular and lucrative centers for recreation and entertainment in the country. They may have laid claim to an austere philosophy, but a vein of bliss and satisfaction seemed to run beneath it. The colonists were said to be attractive, quick to laughter, full of life. The men were skilled craftsmen, strong, hardworking, handsome. The women were extraordinarily beautiful, and their leader, Benjamin Purnell, seemed to be delighting in them. The colonists of the House of David may have been preparing their bodies for the Second Coming, but they seemed to be enjoying them fully in the meantime, along with the wealth and fame that Eden Springs brought.

In the end, it's a story not that different from the original story of the Garden of Eden. For a while there was pleasure and perfection, joy on earth and in the flesh, freedom, and perhaps a kind of innocence brought on by isolation and blind faith.

And the downfall—that much more terrible because it came to Paradise—was so full of sex and scandal it seemed to have invented death itself.

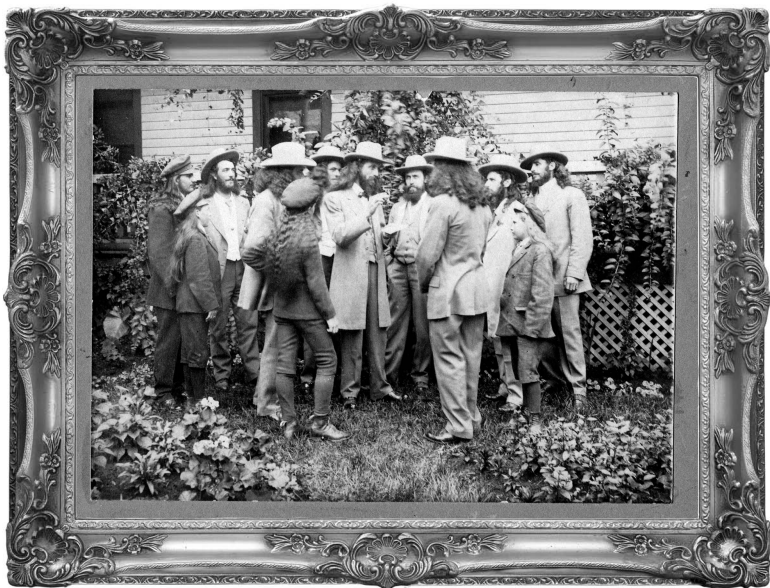
Today, a handful of elderly colonists continue to live in Benton Harbor. The mansions, most of them empty, still stand. The amusement park, closed down, remains where it was built—although it has been utterly claimed now by time and nature and decay. After his death in 1927, Benjamin Purnell's body was embalmed, and for decades it lay in state in a hermetically sealed glass coffin in the Diamond House, where he had lived for so many years with his “harem,” until the house was vandalized by teenagers, the

seal broken on the coffin, and the ruby locket stolen from around his neck. King Ben's followers, his girls, his persecutors, his defenders, and the tourists who once visited the amusement park, have scattered, have died.

Still, hundreds of weathered postcards survive, addressed by those long-gone tourists to friends and families. Those postcards bear excited messages of having glimpsed Benjamin Purnell strolling through the Eden Springs Park on a sunny day, like a god.

It was said that the occasional lady would faint when he passed.

He was known to have stopped now and then to kiss a particularly pretty visitor's hand.



Prologue

SAYS HE BURIED GIRL IN CULT'S SAND PLOT

An inquiry by Sheriff Bridgeman of Benton Harbor, Michigan, revealed a gravedigger who told of receiving a frail, undecorated casket to bury with the information that it contained a 68-year-old follower of "King Benjamin" Purnell, and that her death was due to apoplexy. As he pushed the box into the grave the top broke off, revealing the body of a girl about 16, wrapped in old paper.

(*The New York Times*, April 29, 1923)

*Y*ou dig a hole in the sandy dirt, and you lower the casket into it. You shovel the dirt and the sand back over the box.

And all the time you're thinking about the sun on your back, or the rain. The sweat making stains on your shirt, the sound of a few crows screaming in the breeze, or you're thinking about a girl—your girl, someone else's girl—naked, posing, like in a postcard. Or you whistle the last song you heard, whatever song it was.

But there's a smell.

A silence, and a weight.

That silence is a weight, and you can't pretend you don't feel that.

So he looked away, angry at those crazies from the House of David for burying this old lady like a dog in a box as thin as paper, and nobody but him there to say a few words.

Nobody but him and the dead woman and the earth as far as the eye could see, the ear could hear. When he pushed it into the grave, the body tumbled out . . .

. . . brown paper, but then the paper tore away, and he

couldn't help looking right at her because she was looking at him.

He'd been told that she was sixty-eight. That all her people were over in England, or in Germany. Apoplexy, which he understood to be a blood-burst in the brain.

But this was no old lady staring back at him. This was a girl, no older than sixteen. Strawberry-colored hair in two loose braids; her lips were parted, and he could see her teeth, that they were dry and white. Except for the darkening grip of whatever it was that had killed her creeping down her neck, she could have been alive.

Blue-gray eyes.

He grabbed the shovel and started throwing sand on the open box—the girl with the strawberry-blonde braids, the torn brown wrapping paper—and all the time he could hear himself making choking sounds in his throat.

He was afraid someone would come by.

He was a gravedigger.

No one expects to see the gravedigger choking over a grave.

He left in a hurry, and when he passed a boy cutting weeds near the gate, neither of them said a word.

Part One

THEY ARE COMING FROM AUSTRALIA, ENGLAND,
IRELAND AND SCOTLAND BY FAMILIES

Are you satisfied to be a spirit—an angel—when you die, or do you want a material body? If you have a choice, the members of the “House of David,” who have a colony at Benton Harbor, Mich., on a fine fruit farm of 800 acres, and are traveling over the world gathering converts, will instruct you.

Carriage No. 5, with Lulu, Grace, Frank, Myrtle and John, passed this way on an evangelizing tour of Ohio and Pennsylvania. Their faith, epitomized, is: “The end of the world is not far distant.” Also, they say, if you let your body go down to the grave, then the best you can hope for in eternity is to be a flimsy, floating spirit, but those who have not died by the time of the second coming “shall return to the days of their youth, and their flesh shall become fresher than that of a child’s.”

(*Cleveland Press*, May 21, 1922)



*I*t was always a problem, what to do with a body. Cora Moon did the paperwork, but it was hard on her eyes. The pen shook in her hand and splattered ink all over the paper. There was something wrong with Cora, something recent, and related, most likely, to aging (anyone could see that she wasn't what she'd been even the summer before: she could hear the young girls giggle that morning when, pouring tea, she splashed it on the table), and it shouldn't have come as such a surprise. You couldn't even drink a cup of milk you'd left on the table overnight. Or eat an egg. Things spoiled. They decayed.

But Benjamin didn't want anything to do with that, and they all listened to Benjamin, so the body was still out in the orchard, and Benjamin forbade anyone to go near it.

“Let the dead bury the dead,” he always said, taking it as a personal affront, death among the converts.

But he never told anyone how the dead could bury the dead.

They were supposed to live forever.

This was, after all, his paradise. He’d made promises concerning eternal life and committed those promises to writing.

When a boy came back to the house and said he’d been watching “a sky so full of vultures over the orchard that it was like night,” Cora said something had to be done or they were going to get in trouble with the state, and Benjamin said, “Okay, okay, old lady,” and finally sent Paul Baushke out there with a wagon and some pine boards and a handful of nails.

Baushke built the coffin right around the body and then drove it over to the cemetery for the gravedigger to take.

But that, Cora knew, would not simply be the end of that. There would be questions and paperwork and who knew what else, and Cora was the one who was going to have to worry about that.

Lena McFarlane watched out of the corner of her eye as Cora’s hand shook over the paper and splattered ink at the edge of it, and even on the table.

“What are you going to write down there, how she died?” Lena asked, trying to make it sound like she didn’t, herself, care one way or the other.

Cora didn’t say anything, so Lena stood up and looked over the old woman’s shoulder.

“Struck by lightning!” Lena clapped a hand over her mouth and laughed out loud.

Cora put the pen down and made her hand into a fist—partly out of anger but also because the hand was so tired. There was a dull ache in the center of her palm. She turned around to frown at Lena, but the girl was already gone, just the swish-swish of her long skirts as she hurried out of the office and into the hall.