

“ROBIN HOOD OF THE BLUE RIDGE”: THE LIFE, LEGEND, AND SONGS OF OTTO
WOOD, THE BANDIT

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

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WOOD, THE BANDIT

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Otto Wood, a native of Wilkes County, North Carolina, became nationally known during the 1920s for his repetitive flights from the North Carolina State Prison. Wood began his rambling at an early age and spent his childhood years in the coalfields of southern West Virginia. After killing a Greensboro pawnbroker in the fall of 1923, he was sent to the North Carolina State Prison. Between 1924 and 1930, Wood made four escapes from the penitentiary and rose to the status of a criminal celebrity. He wrote his autobiography, *Life History of Otto Wood*, while incarcerated in 1926. In his *Life History*, Wood claimed that the poverty and neglect he experienced in childhood formed the roots of his criminal lifestyle. Governor O. Max Gardner attempted to use Wood as an “experiment in humanity,” but failed after Wood made his fourth escape in 1930. He died on December 31, 1930, following a gunfight with police on the streets of Salisbury, North Carolina. Wood’s legend was later spread in song by early country music artists. Drawing on primary sources, this thesis provides a biography of Otto Wood and places him within the economic and social context of the period in which he lived.

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Chapter 1: Outlaws and Mythmaking: An Introduction and Literature Review

To those of us blessed with life and a lively curiosity, there is afforded in North Carolina today the unique privilege of witnessing history in the making. Strange and new forces are being born in this State . . . not born of material prosperity and spiritual complacency, but of stern hardship, struggle, and a through-going appraisalment of our sense of social and individual values.

This statement, delivered as part of an address by Governor O. Max Gardner before the North Carolina Press Association in January 1931, offered a capstone to a hard year experienced by many North Carolinians. The advent of a second year of nationwide depression weighed heavily on the minds of the governor's public and any inspirational oratory came as welcome sentiment. Only three weeks earlier, Gardner and the journalists he addressed bore witness to history in the making as they reported the news that surrounded the violent end of the Old North State's most notorious renegade, Otto Wood—who died on New Year's Eve after a gunfight in Salisbury, North Carolina. Prior to his death, Wood's criminal escapades had provided adventure-filled stories to newspapers nationwide for nearly a decade. In turn, he possessed a celebrity clout that he never failed to use to his advantage. A native of western North Carolina, Wood had “played both ends towards the middle” as he pitted the sympathies of the public and reform-minded politicians—specifically Governor Gardner—against the lawmen who scrambled to keep him imprisoned.

Behind the desperado image cultivated by the press, there lurked within Wood a calculated criminal mind adept at political manipulation and expert at pandering to public sentiment. The controversial aspects of Wood's character placed the concept of a ruthless highwayman against that of a twentieth-century "Robin Hood" and outlaw philanthropist. The character of Otto Wood attracted much attention and afforded him a number of opportunities unavailable to his fellow prisoners. The relationship between Wood and Governor Gardner, intent on reforming the North Carolina prison system, displayed the experimental nature of reform politics in the progressive South. Gardner's ideas and the conflict with the realities of Wood's character provided a classic clash of politics and celebrity. "The Houdini of Cell Block A," as Wood became nicknamed following his repetitive flights from southern prisons, used his connections in the mountains of western North Carolina throughout central and southern Appalachia to dodge the law. He never hesitated to claim the hills of Carolina as his home and became popularly known as a bandit with a sense of place—an aspect of his character that later inspired writers and songsters to immortalize him in verse and song.

To examine the story of Otto Wood and his impact on early twentieth-century North Carolina, it is necessary to take into consideration the role that an outlaw filled within that society and what purpose Wood served by his existence as a folk hero. One of the seminal academic attempts to study larger-than-life characters came from the work of Orrin Klapp, a scholar of folklore during the late 1940s. Inspired by studies concerning Mexican bandits and guerilla chieftains in the 1910s, Klapp devoted a portion of his scholarship to the phenomenon that formulated "folk heroes" in order to identify a system of traits and qualities

ascribed to a “universal folk hero.”¹ Klapp divided his classifications of heroic champions into categories, mixing and matching their elements and plot devices to form the basis of mythical lives. Klapp categorized the aspects of a hero’s life into events such as “*The Feat*” that denoted a hero’s extraordinary powers, “*The Contest*” in which a hero publicly defeated his rivals, “*The Test*” that acted as the trial by fire, and “*The Quest*” which served as a “prolonged endeavor” to achieve an underlying goal.² While not all of these facets were essential to the story of a folk hero, Klapp theorized that at least a few derivations of them existed worldwide in any folktale concerned with an epic protagonist.³ The life of Otto Wood provided numerous examples of these events, most notably “*The Feat*,” as his escapes from state prisons left authorities baffled.⁴ Wood’s career included an element of “*The Contest*,” as he justified each jailbreak as a protest against the excessive cruelty of a corrupt prison system. The bandit found his “*Test*” in his existence as a fugitive, which prevented him from visits to his home without the fear of capture. From both a historical and folkloric standpoint, Wood ultimately reached his goal of a life of freedom through the hail of gunfire that resulted in his death. The bullets from a .32 police special removed the prospect of another return to a prison and, for once, secured a hiding place where he could never be followed by a posse of lawmen.

In his wealth of theories, Klapp separated his heroes into various groups or character types which could both stand alone and, more often than not, overlap to form the basis of a legendary personality.⁵ The folklorist established the characters of “*The Clever Hero*” who “vanquish[ed] or escap[ed] from a formidable opponent by ruse,” “*The Uncompromising*

¹ Orrin E. Klapp, “The Folk Hero,” *The Journal of American Folklore* V. 62 No. 243 (Jan.-Mar. 1949), 17-25.

² Klapp, 20.

³ *Ibid.*, 19

⁴ Jerry Lankford, “Otto Wood Recalled as Likeable Outlaw,” *The Record*, 8 December 2004, 1-2.

⁵ Klapp, 20-21.

Hero or Cinderella” or the “dark horse” from humble origins, “*The Defender or Deliverer*” that rescued humanity, “*The Benefactor*,” the charitable and “kind- hearted hero,” and “*The Martyr*,” cap-stoned by a heroic death that leads to legendary status.⁶ Born into a farming community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Wood became noted as a trickster and an outlaw. His death in the gunfight at Salisbury gave him the status of the most romantic of the group, “*The Martyr*.” In addition to his mystique and his association with the “*Cinderella-underdog*” caricature were Wood’s physical disabilities, a left club foot and an amputated left hand that no doubt made his ability to escape the law throughout his thirty-four year life span all the more unbelievable.⁷ Wood embodied the dual roles of the “*Benefactor*” and “*the Deliverer*” with many tales concerning his charitable actions towards many Wilkes County families.⁸ Through this systematic process of myth, he fit perfectly the “Robin Hood” character for early-twentieth-century North Carolina.

By the time of his death in 1930, Wood enjoyed a notoriety comparable to that of an Old West outlaw. The romanticized character created by the public and proliferated by Wood’s own writings placed him in a league of mythical criminals whose line descended from Robin Hood to Jesse James. In his history of America’s fascination with criminals, historian Frank Richard Prassel attempted, much in the same fashion as Klapp’s folk heroes, to solidify patterns in the construction of criminal characters. By Prassel’s standards, Wood’s actions as a car thief settled him within the previously constructed realm of “the

⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

⁷ Rose M. Haynes, “Wilkes’ Otto Wood Escaped to Fame During the 1920’s,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 10 October 1985.

⁸ Jerry Lankford, “Otto Wood Recalled As Likeable Outlaw,” *The Record*, 8 December 2004.

Highwayman,” a form of outlawry that can trace its roots back to the British Isles.⁹ Prassel outlined the popular conception of the “highwayman” as follows:

As portrayed, the highwayman usually had a less-than-genteel background, yet he enjoyed the money and social graces of the privileged few. Furthermore, the highwayman seemed a romantic, daring, and crafty figure. He robbed, and perhaps raped but very seldom murdered. His victims represented power, wealth, and education. The highwayman was simply a man of the people bettering himself in a most expedient manner and doing no significant harm to ordinary people. At times, he was even thought to demonstrate some of the traits of Robin Hood.¹⁰

Prassel noted that this conception of the highwayman had much more to do with literary interpretations formulated in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries than with the gritty reality of criminal activity.¹¹ Yet, at least on the surface, Wood’s actions exemplified this archetypical criminal caricature. His humble roots in rural western North Carolina established the image of an impoverished farm boy devoid of wealth or formal education who took what he could from the world by any means possible. Incidents such as Wood’s playful capture and return of the State Prison physician’s car after his 1924 escape from the penitentiary in Raleigh made him appear as a daring and crafty outlaw who was neither overtly malicious nor violent. Aside from the 1923 murder of A. W. Kaplan in Greensboro, Wood claimed no other definitive murder charge on his slate, setting himself

⁹ Frank Richard Prassel, *The Great American Outlaw: A Legacy of Fact and Fiction* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

apart from the more blood-thirsty criminals of his era. For all intents and purposes, Otto Wood's motives seemed fixed on the advancement of his personal position and freedom. The idea of social freedom, in the analysis of Prassel, projected the allure of the outlaw to his peers and formulated a sociopolitical statement of rebellion around an otherwise self-concerned lawbreaker.¹²

Contemporary to Prassel, Paul Kooistra constructed his own theories about American outlawry in his work *Criminals as Heroes*. Kooistra focused a portion of his research on media perceptions of western bandits. Concerned with criminal antics under the eye of the media, he declared:

Undoubtedly the presentation of outlaws as admirable men was important in gaining for them widespread admiration. Through the performance of spectacular feats, outlaws did become media sensations. The *Santa Fe New Mexican* (May 4, 1881) described a daring jail escape made by Billy the Kid as "as bold a deed as those versed in the annals of crime can recall. It surpasses anything of which the Kid has been guilty of so far that his offenses lose much heinousness in comparison with it, and it effectively settles the question of whether the Kid is a cowardly cut-throat or a reckless and fearless man."¹³

Skeptical of earlier scholars, Kooistra specifically challenged Klapp's theories and focused his analysis on the popular southwestern folk hero and outlaw William H. Bonney, better

¹² Ibid., 3-20.

¹³ Paul Kooistra, *Criminals As Heroes* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), 23.

known as “Billy the Kid.”¹⁴ Kooistra panned the popular myth of “the Kid” as a “blonde, blue-eyed, well- built, and rather handsome” hero of the West and cited archival pictures of the notorious gunslinger.¹⁵ The author supported his challenge with a quotation from one of Klapp’s contemporaries, Dixon Wecter, who, upon the sight of “an authenticated picture of the young desperado,” remarked that Bonney appeared an “adenoidal farm-boy with a rifle.”¹⁶ In his analysis, Kooistra underlined the swift reinterpretation of bandits by media sources as they covered outlaws who proved their merit through unlawful yet spectacular crimes that engaged the attention of the public.

A similar newspaper article to the one cited by Kooistra about “Billy the Kid” lauded a daredevil escape made by Wood in 1924. This journalist painted the man once dubbed “the one-handed terror of the south”¹⁷ as an “old west” bandit nearly admirable in his nostalgic outlaw demeanor:

All of the “wild west” stuff isn’t done for the movies. What director could have staged anything more forceful than did Otto Wood in his daring escape from the penitentiary . . . it was a thriller through and through even to the story told by Wood after the Roanoke police had him in custody. Otto Wood is nobody’s fool; and what a pity the genius he displays in wrong doing could not have been better directed. He is not all bad . . . he has something of the gallantry of the old-time bandit.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 24.

¹⁷ “Thrilling Story of Otto Wood’s Life Subject of Story.” *Mount Airy News*, 22 May 1933.

¹⁸ “Page the Universal!” *Lexington Dispatch*, 12 May 1924.

Kooistra suggested the outlaws he described received a white-washing at the hands of the press, both within their lifetimes and after their deaths.¹⁹ To Kooistra, the conceptualized hero only shielded the villain temporarily as primary research beyond folktales oftentimes yielded startling tales of brutality.

Like Billy the Kid, Wood's image fluctuated from the extremes of a charming, handsome desperado, to a down-trodden cripple, and ultimately to that of a violent gunslinger unleashed on modernized 1930s North Carolina. The truth behind Wood's life lies somewhere in the middle of these extremes and his social relevance to the mountain South and North Carolina hinged on the implications of each image attached to him in the popular conscience. Prior to the publication of this manuscript, aside from Wood's *Life History* and an article series published in *The Record*, a North Wilkesboro newspaper, there has never been an extensive study done on Otto Wood. By the examination of newspaper accounts and archival sources contemporary to Wood's life and crimes, this singular character in the history of western North Carolina can now be better understood within the context of time in which he lived—a period of extreme social and economic change perfectly suited to the emergence of a dynamic and sensationalized criminal.

¹⁹ Kooistra, *Criminals*, 24.

Chapter 2: “One Road Away from Trouble”: Childhood and Early Crimes 1894-1921

I was born in the western part of North Carolina in a small mountain town during the year 1894. My father died when I was four years old leaving myself and four brothers [it is unclear whether Wood means to count himself as one of these “four brothers”] in the care of a widowed mother our ages ranging from 2 to 10 years. —Otto Wood, *Life History*, 1926.

Wood was born and raised in the Ronda section of Wilkes county, in country traversed by what is now the Boone trail. His people are said to have been good, law abiding people, but he turned out to be the black sheep of the family. —*Mt. Airy News*, 3 December 1925.

In the fall of 1985, the *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* decided to memorialize one of Wilkes County, North Carolina’s most infamous sons. The paper sought out local memories of Otto Wood, an outlaw from the hills of eastern Wilkes County. In an attempt to shed further light on Wood’s local roots, the report featured a small reminiscence from Fannie Buchanan, the midwife who delivered the child that grew up to become a bandit. The chief thought in Fannie’s memory regarded Wood’s feet, which she had placed splints on “to prevent them from turning inward.” Despite Fannie’s work, Otto’s left foot remained clubbed in adulthood,

a characteristic oftentimes used by authorities to single out Wood in his many flights from his prison cell. “Mrs. Buchanan said in later years,” stated one source, “that if she had known he was going to spend his life running from the law, she wouldn’t have fixed his feet.” Buchanan’s light-hearted regret sprang from the knowledge that the child she brought into the world possessed a legacy of exploits that extended across the nation during his lifetime. Wood held the dual status of a hometown hero and a statewide nuisance, a man who made his name as he subverted the law and lived a lifetime full of well publicized criminal adventures.

Otto Wood was born in May 1894 in the shadow of the Brushy Mountains of eastern Wilkes County, North Carolina. The reality of farm life in the foothills and piedmont of North Carolina during that period presented an image “far removed from an agrarian paradise of yeomen.”¹ Unlike their neighbors to the east who suffered under the near feudal conditions of tenant farming caused by the cash crops of cotton and tobacco, those living in the predominantly agrarian region of western North Carolina owned their homes and land. The valleys of the Blue Ridge held small farms with hillocks as well as high fertile potential for crops such as those around the Brushy Mountains of Wilkes County, suited to the grazing of livestock and productive orchards.² Only six years after Wood’s birth, the 1900 Census noted a population of 26,872 people resided within Wilkes County, a majority of whom inhabited the some 2,565 farms within the region.³ Over two thirds of Wilkes County residents listed within the census held their land free of mortgages.⁴

¹Sydney Nathans, *The Quest for Progress: The Way We Lived in North Carolina, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 12-13. Johnson J. Hayes, *The Land of Wilkes* (Charlotte, NC: Heritage Printers for the Wilkes County Historical Society, 1962), 269-270.

²The North Carolina State Board of Agriculture, *North Carolina and its Resources* (Winston, NC: M. I. and J. C. Stewart, Public Printers and Binders, 1896), 410.

³“U. S. Census 1900,” *Historical Census Browser*, Available at www.lib.virginia.edu.

⁴Ibid.

Although the farming communities of western North Carolina enjoyed relative prosperity, for most, making any significant financial gain off the land proved elusive. Termed “hoe farmers” by their eastern counterparts, the rural residents of the foothills and mountain areas lived on the far periphery of the “cash crops” market of the lowlands.⁵ Even without substantial means for profit, these farmers historically suffered under a tax system that took into account the potential productivity of their land. According to historian Dwight Billings, an “antiquated tax structure placed an unequal burden on agrarians at a time when corporate taxes were minimized to encourage industrial development.”⁶ Though more prosperous farmers expressed the grievances of their neighbors throughout the rural South, government policy largely catered towards the support of industry and transportation, especially railroads.⁷ The foothills possessed fertility, yet North Carolina officials grappled with the issue of how to make the region economically viable without a reliable means to export its yield.

In Wilkes County, the courtship between a predominantly agrarian region and industrial development appeared to become a reality when the Norfolk and Southern Railway constructed a line from Winston to Wilkes in 1891.⁸ At the rail line’s terminus, only a short jaunt north across the Yadkin River from the county seat of Wilkesboro, the new town of North Wilkesboro gradually grew into the county’s center for industry and commerce. Built on land once held by two farms, the railroad hub initially serviced the timber industry, but by the 1910s held mills engaged in the production of corn, cotton, and lumber as well as several

⁵Iva W. Van Noppen and John J. Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina Since the Civil War* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1973) 283.

⁶Dwight B. Billings Jr., *Planters and the Making of a “New South”: Class, Politics, and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 149.

⁷Ibid, 149. These complaints often focused predominantly on the provision of services for the improvement of education and the need for farm relief programs.

⁸Johnson Hayes, *Land of Wilkes* (Wilkesboro, NC: Wilkes County Historical Society, 1962), 339.

tanneries and the beginnings of furniture factories.⁹ North Wilkesboro's steady development as a silent boomtown represented a substantial benchmark connecting the Old North State's northwestern counties with the centers of the lowlands and piedmont. As surveyors and scholars touted in North Carolina Department of Agriculture's 1896 report, the Winston and Wilkesboro railroad opened up "a section heretofore accessible only with difficulty."¹⁰

Otto Wood spent his earliest years in the vicinity of North Wilkesboro, though he probably saw only the beginnings of industrial progress during his time there. In 1900, the town reported a population of only 918 people, many of whom still claimed their occupation as either "farm worker" or "day laborer."¹¹ A sickly child with a club foot, Wood escaped punishment for many of his earliest crimes through pity and the protection of his mother who, according to one source, "petted" her son.¹² Listed as both "Emelia" and "Ellen Wood" in the 1900 Census, Wood's mother gave her first recorded occupation as "dressmaker."¹³ At thirty-five years old, Amelia Ellen Staley Wood was a widow who claimed to have borne seven children, four of whom survived: James, age sixteen, Luther, twelve, Otto (at that time spelled "Auto"), six, and Robert, four.¹⁴

By 1910, the family reported their home at Antioch, a small farming community located in the west-central portion of Wilkes County.¹⁵ There, Ellen Wood, under the name Amelia, provided her occupation as "farmer" with sons Otto H., now fifteen, and Robert L.,

⁹Ibid, 339.

¹⁰ The North Carolina State Board of Agriculture, *North Carolina and its Resources*, 411.

¹¹ Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line] (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004).

¹²"Otto Wood: The Bandit's Final Days," *The Record*, December 22, 2004, accessed September 19, 2011. http://www.therecordofwilkes.com/news.asp?edition_number=267&pg=F

¹³ Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵ Ancestry.com, *1910 United States Federal Census* [database on-line]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2006.

thirteen, listed as “farm laborers.”¹⁶ In a situation akin to that of other small farming families, the Wood household may have not been wealthy, but the family did possess ownership of their farm free of mortgages.¹⁷ Two more children, Irene, age eight, and Ellen M. Wood, six, are also listed as part of the Wood family as “daughters.”¹⁸ No account existed on the census ledger or any other contemporary documents to explain where these two additions to the Wood family came from and Otto failed to make any mention of sisters in his 1926 autobiography.¹⁹

Ellen sent Otto to school at age seven, but Wood later acknowledged his lack of affinity for education.²⁰ To his credit, there was little to recommend the formal instruction he chose not to receive. Like many other rural areas of the South, the school system in Wilkes County suffered due to its ineffectual structure that entailed “too many school districts, poor housing facilities . . . poorly prepared teachers . . . [and] poorly compensated teachers.”²¹ By the late 1890s, just prior to the time Wood became a student, only 58 percent of the 3,748 children enrolled in Wilkes County public schools attended classes regularly.²² Severely underfunded, the “typical school” required students or parents to “furnish their own books” at a time when “there was little money in most families for books or anything else.”²³ Drawing on a work by former Wilkes school master Lawrence D. Washington, Ina and John Van

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹See Otto Wood, *Life History of Otto Wood* (Raleigh: Commercial Printing Company, 1926). Wood reported in a 1928 study done on capital punishment that his mother had a relationship with a married man which produced two children. The interviewer explained that Wood considered the time of this relationship as the most intense period of neglect in his life. See North Carolina State Board of Trusties and Public Welfare, “Case E,” *Capital Punishment in North Carolina* (1928).

²⁰Wood, *Life History*, 4.

²¹Hayes, *The Land of Wilkes*, 191.

²²Ibid., 203.

²³Ibid., 203.

Noppen's *History of Western North Carolina Since the Civil War* gave a description of one such underfunded public school of the early 1900s:

Books in use had been in the families for perhaps two generations so that there was no uniformity of texts. . . . Children were dressed in homespun and their shoes were made of home-made cowhide. A roaring fire was of little help because the door had to be left open to provide light. The room was windowless. . . . A plank hung to the wall with leather hinges was used as a writing desk by fire [sic] or six pupils at a time. No classes were held in arithmetic or reading.²⁴

Wood later remembered that he suffered due to the expense of the impoverished education system and, when admonished by his mother for “playing hookey,” he responded that “other boys had nice clothes and they laughed at me . . . [it was then] she made me not go to school anymore.”²⁵ Perhaps the one small victory in Otto's formal education, listed in the 1910 census, was his ability at age fifteen to both read and write,²⁶ two skills he would use to great effect during his lifelong crime spree.

Little information survives about Wood's childhood, aside from stories gathered from his family after his death and anecdotes offered by his own pen. Yet, when collected, these short narratives form a portrait of a child who, unsatisfied with the poverty in his home region, fell victim to a rabid case of wanderlust. “I appeared to crave adventure,” Wood recalled, “and the sound of a locomotive whistle seemed to put new life into me as I considered it a call to go somewhere.”²⁷ A 1916 article in the *Charlotte Observer* remarked

²⁴Van Noppen and Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina*, 131.

²⁵Wood, *Life History*, 4.

²⁶Ancestry.com, *1900 United States Federal Census*.

²⁷Wood, *Life History*, 4.

that Wood, by that time noted throughout western North Carolina as a car thief, already possessed a renowned reputation for his childhood travels.²⁸ As young boy, he had apparently once hoboed to Winston-Salem stowed away in coal tender of a passenger train and, soon afterward, traveled to the St. Louis Exposition from which he came back with a (presumably stolen) profit of twenty cents.²⁹ He claimed to have started his career as a hobo at the age of seven, though only slim evidence substantiates this claim other than his *Life History*.

One of the earliest crime stories involved Wood's robbery of a hardware store in North Wilkesboro. In 1931, W. P. Byrd, later deemed a "father-in-law by adoption" after Wood had eloped with his daughter, described his memories of the outlaw:

I've been knowing Otto since he was little boy just so high. . . . The first thing I remember him doing was stealing guns from a hardware store in Wilkes County and selling them. And I guess he has been stealing ever since.³⁰

The article that held Byrd's interview described how "Ellen Wood used to go around . . . gathering up all these guns . . . [and] taking them back to the stores and begging off for her boy."³¹ In one of his childhood firearm stealing forays, Wood supposedly sold three stolen guns to a mountain wagoner who, upon paying the boy, turned his back while "Otto stole them again." Wood then "took them out in the country and sold them to an old woman" from whom he promptly stole them a third time.³²

²⁸"Bob Wood Captured by North Wilkesboro Posse: Brought to Town Under Guard But His Brother Otto, Noted Auto Thief, Is Still at Large," *Charlotte Observer*, 29 September 1916.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰"Mrs. Celia Wood Wires Her Mother," *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931. As a point of later interest, Celia Byrd was also the widow of Otto's brother, Robert Wood.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²"Bob Wood Captured by North Wilkesboro Posse," *Charlotte Observer*, 29 September 1916.

Another story, told by Wood himself, recounted a stolen bicycle that he could not ride, a fact which quickly made the local police suspicious and caused them to take the young lad into custody.³³ For the bicycle crime, Wood recalled being sent to the Iredell chain gang for a term of six months, a fact substantiated by a 1907 article in the *Statesville Landmark* that took interest in the barely teenaged prisoner.³⁴ The chain gang foreman took pity on Wood and sent him home to Wilkes County where, instead of acting the part of a reformed trustee, Wood once again raided guns from a local hardware store.³⁵ After his subsequent capture in Taylorsville, North Carolina, Wood went to trial and met “Judge Allen, from Goldsboro” who offered a sympathetic reprimand.³⁶ The errant Wood later recalled the trial:

[Judge Allen] seemed to be the only friend I had. . . . Asked if any of my people were in the courtroom . . . no one answered. . . . I told him of an older brother doing business in North Wilkesboro . . . he told the sheriff to have [Wood’s brother] in the court room at noon on Friday . . . said he withhold judgment until then. . . . The solicitor jumped up and told the judge I would be in another State by Friday. The judge asked me about it, and I promised I would be right where he said come the very time he wanted me there.³⁷

Allen apparently believed that Wood “was not a bad boy” and asked an older brother, presumably James A. Wood, to “take [Otto] and see that [he] did not get into any more trouble.”³⁸ James Wood responded that he “had tried and failed” and that “he could not do

³³Wood, *Life History*, 5.

³⁴“Chain Gang,” *Statesville Landmark*, 27 August 1907.

³⁵Otto Wood, *Life History*, 5.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

anything.”³⁹ Newspaper accounts and Otto Wood’s *Life History* showed an estrangement the two brothers, reportedly because the elder Wood was a “good citizen” who made his young sibling’s life “miserable.”⁴⁰ W. P. Byrd later stated that, “outside of stealing,” he viewed Wood’s childhood days as relatively “free from crime.” Byrd’s statement accompanied a reported consensus among locals that, though a criminal, Wood’s demeanor appeared especially “generous.”⁴¹

From the beginning, Wood’s childhood, centered in the hills of Wilkes County, yielded a “pan-Appalachian” experience. The rail lines along the base of North Carolina’s Blue Ridge ran through the mountains of Virginia and from there west to the coalfields of West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. For Wood and other young men in the counties of western North Carolina, the new railroads provided a “means of escape, their ticket to adventure, a new life of opportunity, and excitement.”⁴² Wood remembered that from his earliest years, he had heard stories of an uncle “engaged in the saloon business on [the] Tug River, Mingo County,” located in the heart of the coalfields along the Kentucky border.⁴³ The Wood family’s connection to the coalfields was so established that, upon Otto Wood’s death in 1931, his family requested his body be shipped for burial to the town of Coaldale in Mercer County, West Virginia.⁴⁴

During Wood’s childhood, the saloons in the coal towns along the Tug River possessed a reputation that rivaled the fictionalized portrayals of the “Wild West.” According to one recent examination, the proliferation of inexpensive firearms coupled with “the appeal

³⁹Ibid.,5.

⁴⁰Ibid., 5. “Bob Wood Captured by North Wilkesboro Posse.” *Charlotte Observer*, 29 September 1916.

⁴¹“Mrs. Celia Wood Wires Her Mother,” *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931.

⁴² Van Noppen and Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina*, 253.

⁴³Wood, *Life History*, 5.

⁴⁴“Mother of Bandit Asks for His Body,” *San Antonio Express*, 2 January 1931

of liquor made taverns in the smokeless coalfields the principal sites of gunplay.”⁴⁵ Intoxicated miners “shot one another” in altercations over anything from “card games” to “trivial disagreements [such] as ownership of a pair of shoes.”⁴⁶ A young Otto Wood found visits to his family in the coalfields exciting, later recalling:

I spent most of my time around the saloon and witnessed several bloody battles between the Hatfields and McCoys. I would not run as other boys did when trouble started but tried to get up close so I could see every movement. The Hatfields noticed that I did not become excited and became attached to me. . . . They made and drank whiskey, gambled, and had a big time generally. I engaged in all of this. They would give me money and play cards with me, always letting me win the game. By the time I was ten years old, I knew the gambling game pretty well. I did not stay with these people all the time, but made an occasional trip to see my mother back in North Carolina.⁴⁷

Though not above the suspicion of embellishment—the Hatfield-McCoy conflict “officially” ended in 1889, five years prior to Wood’s birth—the influence of the violent coalfields acknowledged by Wood was validated by his frequent use of the region as a haven during his adulthood.⁴⁸

Similar to the description that Wood gave in his autobiography, the Hatfields still received attention for committing violent activities within the coalfields throughout the early

⁴⁵Paul H. Rakes, “‘A Hard Bitten Lot’: Non-Strike Violence in the Early Southern West Virginia Smokeless Coalfields, 1880-1910” in *Blood in the Hills: A History of Violence in Appalachia*, ed. Bruce Stewart (Lexington, KY: University of Press Kentucky, 2011), 314-339.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 437.

⁴⁷Otto Wood, *Life History*, 5.

⁴⁸John Ed Pearce, *Days of Darkness: The Feuds of Eastern Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 74.

years of the twentieth century. The battles involved not the McCoys but a series of sporadic attacks between members of the extended family of “Cap” Hatfield, who operated a “blind tiger”—a bar for illicit spirits—in the community of Wharncliffe, Mingo County.⁴⁹ In one prominent example from September 1906, “Cap” and his younger brother, Dr. Elias R. Hatfield, settled a personal dispute in a shootout on a stretch of railroad track below Wharncliffe.⁵⁰ Elias wounded his older brother with two pistol shots to the chest as they closed on one another from a distance of forty yards.⁵¹ The young Dr. Hatfield, far from an uneducated mountaineer feudist, held a degree from Louisville Medical College.⁵² Though Wood may not have given an entirely truthful account of his exposure to the Hatfields, his casting of them as rough yet intelligent people held much more weight and accuracy than other contemporary and often sensationalized descriptions of the infamous family of feudists.

Wood claimed that he worked as a trapper boy in the southern coalfields from the age of thirteen, sometime around the year 1908.⁵³ Two years later, Wood still described himself as a farm laborer on the 1910 census, a fact not necessarily contradictory to his account in which he stated that he moved back and forth from West Virginia to Wilkes frequently.⁵⁴ At seventeen, Wood stated that he had become a “locomotive foreman” on a line for the Norfolk and Western Railway that ran from Bluefield through the coalfields to Williamson, West

⁴⁹See, “HATFIELD FEUD RENEWED: Four Men Killed in Desperate Fight in Kentucky Attempt to Arrest.” *New York Times*, 30 March 1902. “FOUR ARE SLAIN IN FEUDAL FIGHT: Pike County, Kentucky, Is Again Spilling Blood.” *Atlanta Constitution*, 30 March 1902. “KILLED ONE OF THE HATFIELDS: Mountaineers Try To Drive Negroes’ from the Coal Mines.” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 25 1901. “HATFIELDS ‘GET RELIGION’: Eleven Sons at Brothers’ Biers Promise to Lead Better Lives,” *Washington Post*, 24 October 1911.

⁵⁰“‘CAPT’ HATFIELD, SHOT BY BROTHER, IS DYING: Noted West Virginia-Kentucky Border Outlaw Nears End,” *Washington Post*, 20 September 1906.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Wood, *Life History*, 5-6.

⁵⁴Ancestry.com, 1910 U. S. Federal Census, Otto Wood, *Life History*, 5-6.

Virginia.⁵⁵ Except for a few stories told through oral history, Wood's teenage years remain a mystery. The small amount of information on this period of his life produced contradictions that Wood himself never saw fit to address. Most notably among these accounts was the loss of his hand, which occurred sometime around the age of eighteen. The handicap proved notable because it impeded his ability to avoid the suspicion of lawmen. Though newspapers popularly blamed a "railroad accident," family members, including a cousin, Luther P. Staley, later revealed that Wood had lost his hand while on a trip home to Wilkes County.⁵⁶ According to the family's version, sometime in the fall of 1912, the eighteen-year-old Wood:

Went hunting . . . a quarter mile east of [his mother's] front door he saw that the lid was down on Harrison Park's rabbit gum. Leaning his shotgun against a bush, he bent down to take the rabbit out of the gum. . . . [H]is shotgun was slipping. . . . He reached for it, too late. . . . [T]he barrel roared . . . he caught the full barrel load close range in his left hand.⁵⁷

The family quickly sent for Dr. Pegram who examined the young man's maimed hand in the home of Reverend Jim Majors.⁵⁸ Staley, an eyewitness, remembered "Dr. Pegram said that Otto's hand had to come off. . . . Dr. Turner [called for by Pegram] . . . [took] his hand off at the wrist."⁵⁹ After only a month, Wood recuperated and once again traveled to West Virginia, but his career as a railroad man had effectively ended.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Wood, *Life History*, 6.

⁵⁶Wood, *Life History*, 6, "Otto Wood of Wilkes," *The Record*, 28 July 1964.

⁵⁷"Otto Wood of Wilkes," *The Record*, 28 July 1964.

⁵⁸Ibid. See Ancestry.com, *1910 U. S. Federal Census*, Dr. Pegram was listed as Wood's nearest neighbor in Antioch Township, occupation, "Physician." Reverend Majors was also listed as residing in Antioch.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Shortly thereafter, Wood became entangled with the law in Virginia. As he wrote in his *Life History*:

I was engaged to a girl in in Point Pleasant, West Virginia and occasionally called on a girl living at Graham, Virginia. Soon after [the accident] . . . the Point Pleasant Girl and I were married. Three months later, the girl at Graham, Virginia, had me arrested on the plea that I had promised to marry her and I was the father of her child. I was tried, convicted, and sentenced to serve two years and two months in the [Virginia] State Prison.⁶¹

Although no account survives to verify these charges, a newspaper article later verified that the State of Virginia incarcerated Wood in the State Penitentiary on May 7, 1913.⁶² Instead of a breach of promise, the crime involved car theft in the vicinity of Tazewell, Virginia.⁶³

Wood described his first escape from the Virginia State Prison as a “wild dash for the mountains” in which he fled for West Virginia where his wife—the wife from Point Pleasant—waited.⁶⁴ From this point forward, the narrative offered in his *Life History* swirled into a whirlpool of stories concerned with travels in the southwestern United States, his capture in Ohio, a second escape from the Virginia State Penitentiary, and a barroom gun battle in Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁶⁵

By 1916, Wood’s name reappeared in North Carolina newspapers as he made sporadic visits to his home near the Antioch and Dellaplane communities in Wilkes County. Crime had become a family affair with many of the reports prominently featuring Wood’s

⁶¹Otto Wood, *Life History*, 6.

⁶²“Otto Wood of Wilkes,” *The Record*, 28 July 1964.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴Otto Wood, *Life History*, 6.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 6.

youngest brother, Robert “Bob” Wood. When the pair left a trail of stolen cars in their community-wide crime spree, one of Otto’s older brothers, “not in sympathy” with his outlaw kin, followed the example of his neighbors by removing the tires of his automobile rather than risk its theft.⁶⁶

The roads around Wilkes offered a wealth of unmarked routes where Wood could hide. On the afternoon of September 26, a posse of citizens from North Wilkesboro cornered the Wood Brothers six miles east of North Wilkesboro near Dellaplane.⁶⁷ When Otto sighted the posse approaching from “an obscure side road,” he and Bob leapt from the cab of the car, leaving the lawmen to rescue a woman and a child in the uncontrolled vehicle as the duo “dashed into the woods.”⁶⁸ The *Charlotte Observer* gave the fugitive’s description as relayed from the authorities in North Wilkesboro: “Otto Wood is about 26 years old, left hand gone, deformed foot, and has a record for cunning thievery, unequalled here.”⁶⁹ The report then explained that three of the cars recovered in the chase were “an Overland stolen in Virginia . . . a Buick six from Mr. Leak in Winston . . . and the one he was using [when cornered in Dellaplane] . . . stolen in High Point last night.”⁷⁰ On September 28, the North Wilkesboro posse captured Bob Wood and took him back to the town under guard.⁷¹ With his brother jailed, Wood then stole a local man’s Buick and drove towards the mountains of Tennessee.⁷²

⁶⁶“Bob Wood Captured By No. Wilkesboro Posse,” *Charlotte Observer*, 29 September 1916.

⁶⁷“Noted Auto Thief Is Cornered by Posse, But Escapes by Dash to Woods.” *Charlotte Observer*, 27 September 1916.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 13.

⁷¹“Bob Wood Captured By No. Wilkesboro Posse,” *Charlotte Observer*, 29 September 1916.

⁷²“Alleged Auto Thief Captured In Wilkes,” *Charlotte Observer*, 3 June 1917.

Wood remained in hiding until June 1917, when he once more visited Wilkes County, this time as a fugitive from the State Prison of Tennessee.⁷³ Unaccompanied by his sidekick brother Bob, now employed as a brakeman on the Norfolk and Southern Railway, Wood's presence quickly became noticed by locals who sent word to the authorities.⁷⁴ County Sheriff W. D. Woodruff, accompanied by three deputies, found a stolen car hidden in the woods outside Dellaplane and decided to lay in wait for the bandit.⁷⁵ The four men concealed themselves beside the car all night and surprised Wood as he attempted to flee the next morning.⁷⁶ Two days later, an imprisoned Otto Wood filled out a draft card, which was required due to the First World War.⁷⁷ On the form, he wrote his "present trade" as "in jail awaiting release to Tennessee Penitentiary."⁷⁸

Although Wood's visits back home to Wilkes County possessed some motivation through family connections, the illicit trade of moonshine liquor no doubt offered some attraction for the young outlaw. During the 1920s, Wilkes County and other locales in western North Carolina boomed with liquor and frequently hosted violence caused by the production, distribution, and consumption of illicit spirits.⁷⁹ The car thievery practiced by Otto Wood more than likely seemed just another diversion alongside newspaper stories of local liquor raids and moonshine-fueled atrocities. "The mountains were the safest place for me to live," Wood acknowledged, touting that he had once run liquor from Wilkes to

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴United States, Selective Service System. *World War I Selective Service System Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918*. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration. M1509, 4,582 rolls.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷"Otto Harrison Wood," *Registration Card, Draft, 1917*. Ancestry.com.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹See examples of moonshine violence in Wilkes County and surrounding area in *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 14 Feb. 1924, 27 March 1924, 26 June 1924, 7 August 1924, 1 Jan. 1925, 22 Jan. 1925, 26 Feb. 1925.

Winston-Salem on a regular basis, selling his loads at \$20 a gallon.⁸⁰ From a practical perspective, blockader made the perfect job for a character like Wood due to its already illegal nature. Wood's skill at car theft allowed him never to be identified with any one vehicle; he made his run then ditched whatever stolen car he had made it in.

On one occasion in the spring of 1921, Wood broke down on a nighttime haul to Winston-Salem and hired a ride from Jack Cowan, a boy from Statesville driving his father's Buick.⁸¹ Eventually breaking his ruse as a common traveler, Wood, at pistol point, told Cowan that "he was transporting whiskey" and then ordered him to drive to an area outside of Mocksville. They stopped in a wooded area, where Cowan reported that "the stranger" appeared "surprised not to find [his] car and walked into the woods . . . [he] returned saying that the liquor was there but he supposed the negro [presumably an accomplice] had taken the car to a friend's home."⁸² Wood stole the Buick from Cowan who then proceeded to walk to the Winston-Salem police station where he identified a photograph of Wood as matching the identity of "the stranger."⁸³ D. O. Cowan, Jack's father, recovered the car two months later after authorities found it "damaged from wear and rough treatment" in an Illinois garage.⁸⁴

As a near bookend to Wood's early crimes, the Spanish Influenza Epidemic of 1918-1919 swept through the hills of Wilkes County. Despite being an escaped prisoner, Wood reportedly helped his neighbors as a nurse and in *Life History* recalled that throughout the epidemic "people were glad to have me around"⁸⁵ Among the lives claimed was that of

⁸⁰ Wood, *Life History*, 8.

⁸¹"Stranger Lifted Buick Car," *Statesville Landmark*, March 14, 1921.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴"Mr. Cowan Recovers Buick," *Statesville Landmark*, May 5, 1921.

⁸⁵Wood, *Life History*, 8.

Robert Lee Wood, Otto's younger brother and partner in crime, who died of pneumonia after contracting the Spanish Flu.⁸⁶ Otto signed his brother's death certificate using the vaguest possible answers. In an obvious attempt to dodge the law he listed his address as simply "W. Va." When asked for the birthplace of his parents "(city, town), (state or country)," he responded only, "country."⁸⁷

In 1926, while in the North Carolina Penitentiary writing his autobiography, Otto Wood offered a few lines of sentiment concerning his early years as a child and young man in the hills of Wilkes County. Wood opined, "I never found any place so dear to me as the little home town in the mountains of Wilkes County. . . . I love the people of Wilkes and am glad to hear of any improvements in the little town of North Wilkesboro."⁸⁸ The penitent prisoner further stated that "I expected to stay in North Carolina the rest of my life. . . . [I]f I could not stay in Wilkes County, I would stay just as near there as possible."⁸⁹ The truth behind this sentiment would eventually lead to Wood's downfall in the winter of 1930.

No matter what weakness Wood felt for the attraction of his home, he suffered no feelings of nostalgia for the hills of Wilkes County or the coalfields of West Virginia. In his mind, these places spawned the criminal activities that he committed as an adult. By his own words, he pleaded the case that he, a victim of regional poverty and neglect, would have benefited from better conditions at home.

Looking back to the days of my childhood, I can picture in my mind's eye the
conduct of those who were responsible for the life I led. I realize I was restless and

⁸⁶ North Carolina State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics. *North Carolina Death Certificates*. Microfilm S.123. Rolls 19-242, 280, 313-682, 1040-1297. North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina. Retrieved from Ancestry.com.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Otto Wood, *Life History*, 5-6.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

irresponsible, but I am loyal and forgiving and pray to God that all will be well with them in the end. I believe that the lives of 75 percent of the criminals had their settings in early environments of the home circle. Many young people start out in the battle of life with handicaps from which there appears no escape. A child will generally respond to kindness. He will also resent cruelty and neglect. Poverty with love and affection appeals to a child more than luxury without either. Few children I believe have the inclination to leave the right sort of home. They may crave adventure, but love and kindness overcome this desire. Even a hardened criminal responds to kindly treatment.⁹⁰

In one paragraph, Wood summarized his criminal career and constructed the argument on which he would hinge his appeal for public sympathy. Although his early crimes were recounted as relatively bloodless, the next chapter in Wood's life elevated his criminal status to that of a murderer—an image that he struggled to dispel for the rest of his life.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 16.

Chapter 3: “Killing A Rattlesnake”: The Greensboro Incident and the 1924 Prison Escape

Killing a rattlesnake does not stop other and alive snakes from biting people; but get this straight: it does everlastingly [sic] make it impossible for the snake that has been killed to bite any more people! In killing the snake you have not removed the menace of snakes, as there are a lot of snakes left; but you have forever removed any menace from that particular snake. Think it over. —Billy Dock, Richmond, Virginia, May 17, 1924, on “Otto Wood and Capital Punishment.”

The readers of the *Statesville Landmark* could imagine the scene as H. K. DeVere stared into the dim light of a jail cell. “Pick him out,” ordered the voice of Greensboro Sheriff D. B. Stafford. DeVere shifted his gaze through the swarm of faces that peered back from the cell until he settled on one. “That is the man,” DeVere pointed, then looked straight into the eyes of the prisoner who, even after DeVere’s affirmation, showed no sign of recognition or nervousness. Despite the collected appearance of the man behind the bars, DeVere knew that this was the face of the gunman who jumped into his car and forced him to speed out of Greensboro on the morning of November 3, 1923. Determined to call the detached con’s bluff, the witness repeated his accusation in the form of a statement, “We are meeting under different circumstances.” As DeVere spoke these words, the prisoner dropped

his eyes. The motion did not escape the notice of Sheriff Stafford who watched as the convict slowly turned pale. His suspicions revealed, Stafford reported to the press that the City of Greensboro had its man, the outlaw Otto Wood.¹ The printed story captured only one small anecdote that received public attention.

The period between the years 1923 and 1924 yielded a series of events that further shaped the lore surrounding Otto Wood. Within the span of several months, his persona underwent a dramatic cycle of highs and lows that produced a wide range of public opinion. Wood gained notoriety as a murderer but, by his actions and demeanor in the face of a well-publicized trial, inspired reporters and citizens alike to question his guilt. His first break from the North Carolina State Prison in Raleigh, recounted in detail by newspapers, fascinated the public and established Wood's reputation as a tactful escape artist. In written statements to the press, he also made an entrance into politics and challenged Carolinians to investigate prison conditions that he claimed to have prompted his escape. The paradoxical nature of Wood's personality was rooted in these early years in the public eye. The events that took place within these months would introduce a debate focused on determining the motivations behind his continued defiance of the law.

In the fall of 1923, the Wilkes County "bad man" once again brought trouble home to North Carolina when a deadly exchange of blows with pawnbroker Abraham Wolf Kaplan of Greensboro marked him as a murderer. Kaplan, a Jewish-Russian immigrant, had made his home in the southern city and ran a pawnshop in the downtown district.² Wood entered Kaplan's shop on the morning of November 3, supposedly to reclaim a pawned pocket

¹ "Otto Wood Is Cool and Sure" *Statesville Landmark*, 19 November 1923.

² Ancestry.com, 1920 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2010.

watch.³ As Wood later recounted, an argument ensued that escalated until Kaplan raised a stick to strike him. In an attempt to defend himself, Wood pistol-whipped Kaplan over the head, a blow that discharged a round into the pawnbroker's shoulder. Wood later downplayed the wounds that he gave Kaplan in a 1925 interview. "I didn't kill that man," he demurred, "the doctors operated and he never came out from under the ether. He didn't have anything but a little scalp wound and I know that didn't kill him."⁴ This "scalp wound" was in actuality a fractured skull, which served as the cause of Kaplan's death.⁵ In his *Life History*, Wood underlined the fact that he possessed no knowledge of Kaplan's death until his capture and confinement in Princeton, West Virginia, in mid-November 1924. He recollected, "I had not before heard of his death and was very surprised for I had no idea of killing him."⁶ Though newspapers offered only vague mention of the specific details that surrounded Kaplan's last hours, some accounts, such as one relayed to the *Washington Post*, disclosed the ultimate cause of death as from "injuries received when [Kaplan] was attacked in his shop."⁷ The *Statesville Landmark* later divulged that Kaplan "on his death bed" claimed "he was beaten and shot by a man with only one arm."⁸

Wood's escape from Greensboro involved an almost theatrical sense of timing and attracted the attention of Piedmont and western North Carolina newspapers for nearly a month. After he wounded Kaplan, Wood rushed from the pawnshop into the middle of South Elm Street where he leaped onto a passing Gardner touring car and ordered driver H. K. DeVere to drive northwest and exit the city.⁹ In the countryside on the periphery of

³ "Pawnbroker's Slayer Is Convicted by Jury," *Washington Post*, 24 December 1923

⁴ "Annual Vacation of Otto Wood, Crafty Convict, Ends," *Mount Airy News*, 10 December 1925.

⁵ *Statesville Landmark*, 8 November 1923.

⁶ Wood, *Life History*, 13.

⁷ *Washington Post*, 24 December 1923.

⁸ "Otto Wood is Identified," *Statesville Landmark*, 15 November 1923.

⁹ *Statesville Landmark*, 19 November 1923.

Greensboro, Wood forced DeVere out of the automobile, removed the driver's coat and hat, and then demanded that DeVere "shell out" \$150 from his pockets.¹⁰ Inexplicably, the car stolen by Wood reappeared in Greensboro "in the dead of night," a trick that caused headlines to marvel at Wood's surreptitiousness in his ability to return the automobile "as quietly as if he had been a ghost."¹¹

As the Greensboro police investigated Kaplan's murder, the search for Wood's whereabouts escalated into a manhunt. Chief of Police George Crutchfield left the city to search for Wood in the hills of Wilkes County only to find that Wood's mother had left the Antioch community, presumably for West Virginia, almost two years prior to his arrival.¹² After Wood was officially declared an outlaw by Guilford County, the City of Greensboro and county commissioners levied twin rewards of \$100 for his apprehension.¹³ An additional reward of \$500 provided by Kaplan's widow quickly raised even more attention for the fugitive.¹⁴ The spectacular Greensboro escape prompted one newspaper to print a retrospective on the outlaw's actions in Iredell County, located on the southwestern border of Wood's home in Wilkes. Wood was no stranger to the Iredell chain gang, but the article specifically pinpointed a car theft in November 1915 by C. H. Staley, a popular alias used by the renegade, as one of many local stories connected to the hunted criminal.¹⁵

Wood's ghost-like abilities allowed him to evade capture until November 10, when lawmen cornered him in the vicinity of Bramwell in Mercer County, West Virginia.¹⁶ The posse discovered a hidden North Carolina license tag as well as a Ford coupe missing from

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Statesville Landmark*, 8 November 1923.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Statesville Landmark*, 12 November 1923.

¹⁶ Ibid.

the Davidson Motor Company of Lexington, North Carolina, parked near the homes of Wood's relatives in the community of Freeman, West Virginia.¹⁷ After he was detained by officers, Wood delved into trivialities and issued a statement to reporters that police located the car in Pocahontas, in neighboring Tazewell County, Virginia, and not in Mercer County, West Virginia.¹⁸ No matter how much the snared fugitive argued his case, the coupling of the stolen car with the description given by Kaplan doomed any chance of his acquittal.

Bound and gagged after his capture, Wood created a stir among Greensboro's citizens upon his return, which followed an overnight train ride from southern West Virginia.¹⁹ "It looked like a funeral party," recalled one reporter, who noticed the shackled bandit slowly walk to the jail surrounded by a "flock of policemen."²⁰ To ensure Wood would not make a break, the officers rigged a rope on his neck and then fastened it into a knot around his arms so that any swift movement caused him to choke.²¹ A journalist from the *Greensboro Daily News*, among the first to encounter the infamous character, offered a biography as well as an up-close description of the bandit's features gleaned from a brief interview:

His name is Otto H. Wood, though he is sometimes called C. H. Wood. He is 27 years old and was born and lived his early life in Wilkes County. About 15 years ago he moved to West Virginia and has been living there since. He is a mechanic, he said, but has been working in mines in West Virginia. As to his past criminal record he would not talk except to deny that he had ever been a prisoner in the Tennessee penitentiary.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

He spoke freely and answered all other questions. In appearance he is neat and clean looking, a decided blonde with big blue eyes that slightly protrude from his head. He has high and prominent cheek bones and they and his eyes are the most striking features of his face. He wore a blue suit, tap shoes, low white collar and soft hat.

The left arm and hand which have been the subject of much discussion he kept partly hidden. The arm was in his trousers pocket and he held it there all the time he was talking. Unless looking for it, you would probably not have noticed that he has no left hand.²²

The description of a dapper, well-dressed, free-speaking man struck much contrast with Wood's outlaw persona. Instead of a roughneck, back-country miscreant, the personality who greeted reporters and witnesses in his cell emanated a cool, sophisticated quality. His striking features and dress, coupled with his hardscrabble roots and laid-back demeanor, appeared more in line with the guise of a popular politician than that of a criminal. The disparity in image even caused one witness to deny his certainty that the person behind the bars resembled the individual who sported "old clothes and a growth of beard" outside Kaplan's pawnshop on November 3.²³

The "Jekyll and Hyde" aspect of Wood's character became further accentuated as witnesses shuffled through the Greensboro cell block. A night watchman at a local garage identified Wood as the robber who accosted him on the night of July 12, 1923, and then

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

coerced him to drive to Winston-Salem.²⁴ The stolen car later reemerged in Radford, Virginia, abandoned on a “blind street.”²⁵ Another incident of an “assaulted” woman reported on the same night became vaguely pinned on Wood, principally due to the fact that the attacker robbed the woman’s escort.²⁶ The suspected murderer may not have actually committed the additional crimes discovered while he waited for trial, but their revelation only further complicated his image in the public conscience. Despite descriptions of crimes that placed him in the guise of a hoodlum and highwayman, Wood’s charm from behind prison bars convinced officials that they dealt not with a desperate murderer, but a thief whose botched robbery unknowingly caused the death of a local businessman. From inside his cell, Wood continued to deny his involvement in the murder of Kaplan and insisted that he could produce ten to fifteen “good people . . . not members of [his] family” with “no connection” who could verify his presence in West Virginia on November 3.²⁷ With a show of confidence, Wood confided to reporters that he “was not afraid to face a jury.”²⁸

Whether an accident or a conscious act of murder, the death of Kaplan resulted in a charge far more serious than any Wood had previously faced in North Carolina. In a narrative of the trial held in the Guilford County courthouse on December 24, the *Mt. Airy News* remarked on Wood’s “serene” demeanor as he received the verdict of second degree murder with a thirty-year sentence of hard labor in the North Carolina State Prison.²⁹ The article mentioned his wife and child—without offering any names or further description—as seated next to him when the judge announced the sentence. A *Mt. Airy* newspaper placed the story

²⁴ “Otto Wood Held for Another Crime,” *Statesville Landmark*, 19 November 1923.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “Cool and Sure,” *Statesville Landmark*, 19 November 1923.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ “Thirty Years for Otto Wood,” *Statesville Landmark*, 24 December 1923. “Otto Wood, Slayer of Kaplan, Is Found Guilty of Second Degree Murder,” *Mount Airy News*, 27 December 1923.

underneath the bold subhead, “Cool Killer Thinks Verdict About Right.”³⁰ Wood expressed his personal feelings about the trial to reporters shortly after his sentencing:

Maybe if my record had not been against me I might have got manslaughter. But the verdict is just about what I expected. . . . I’m going to try and show the people of North Carolina that I can be a decent man and if they think so they can give me another chance. But if they don’t think so I’ll serve the whole time.³¹

The Mount Airy News also identified Wood as an already notable character and “the most hard-boiled proposition that has come into the criminal limelight this year. . . . Like a slippery eel he usually got away with his rascality.”³² In the midst of its report, the *News* spoke for local sentiment around the community of Jonesville, some twenty miles east of North Wilkesboro, where residents readily acknowledged their neighbor Wood as regionally noted for his thievery, particularly of cars.³³

The trial and the details of the crime prominently occupied the front page in news for those in the vicinity of Wood’s home in Wilkes County. The *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* remarked that the young man received the verdict “with the coolness that has been the marvel of the oldest courtroom habitu  ” and appeared “relieved” by the fact he did not receive a more severe sentence.³⁴ The *Wilkes* article devoted the bulk of its column to the extensive speech given by Judge Thomas J. Shaw who spoke with “deep feeling” towards Wood:

³⁰ “Otto Wood Slayer of Kaplan Found Guilty of Murder in the Second Degree,” *The Mount Airy News*, 27 December 1923.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Otto Wood Sentenced to Pen for Term of 30 Years,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 3 January 1924.

Mr. Wood, the jury returned a verdict of murder in the second degree. As I stated yesterday, I approve of that verdict. The truth is that on Saturday before the solicitor addressed the jury I told him that it was a case of murder in the second degree and that if the jury returned a verdict of murder in the first degree I would set it aside.

I think it is much better to have a verdict in the second degree, though, than for it to have been ordered by the court, but even if it is only the crime of murder in the second degree it is a very very serious crime.

It is not necessary for me to talk to you. A man of as much good common sense as you have that will quit work to go out and steal and kill, there is really very little excuse for him. Now if a man has an unbalanced mind, if his mentality is deficient and he goes out and commits a crime there is not any excuse for it. But there is more excuse than for a person who has good common sense as you have.

It is written in the Bible, 'Be sure your sins will find you out.' The mills of justice grind slowly sometimes, but they grind; and if people would only think about that, when they commit a crime and escape the probabilities are that they will be caught and punished for it, I do not think there would be nearly so many crimes committed.³⁵

The sermon-like quality of Shaw's verdict hinted that the State of North Carolina, as early as 1923, had decided to make an example of Wood to the public. His suave appearance, apparent practicality, and display of "common sense" made him a character, though on the whole disreputable, both sympathetic and altogether vivid in the public conscience of the Tar

³⁵ Ibid.

Heel State. Wood donned the guise of a symbolic “man of the people” whose situation in life led him blindly off the path of an increasingly progressive South. The attention of the public eye certainly was not lost in his mind and, from 1923 onward, he continually courted the press in an effort to pander to the public. A Raleigh, North Carolina, columnist remarked in 1931 article reprinted in the *Greensburg (Pennsylvania) Tribune*: “He [Wood] always liked publicity and staged his crimes in public places to attract attention.”³⁶ The events in the months that followed only added to Wood’s celebrity and began to gradually build his clout as a calculated, resourceful, and oftentimes vocal fugitive.

On the morning of May 10, 1924, little more than five months after his trial, Wood once again made headlines when he broke from the North Carolina penitentiary in Raleigh, alongside fellow convict, J. H. Starnes, a larcenist from Forsyth County.³⁷ Wood began his escape in the prison supply room where he grabbed chair factory overseer L. A. Partin around the neck. Two compatriots, Starnes and another inmate, Sidney Gupton, then threatened to kill Partin with cane knives if he shouted the alarm.³⁸ With the overseer’s pistol in hand, Wood then requisitioned the automobile of prison physician Dr. J. N. Norman and, with the gun pressed against Partin’s ribs, forced him to make a calm show as he drove Starnes and Wood past an unsuspecting guard and out the prison gates.³⁹ The runaways drove into Raleigh’s Seaboard yards, where they strong-armed Partin from the car.⁴⁰ Pursued

³⁶ *The Greensburg Tribune*, 12 January 1931.

³⁷ “Force Prison Guard to Help In Escape: Two North Carolina Convicts Flee in Physician’s Automobile,” *Washington Post*, 11 May 1924. “Autoist Forced to Aid Escaped Murderer.” *Washington Post*, 12 May 1924. “Otto Wood Makes Daring Escape at State Prison: Seen In Greensboro Sunday and Slips Away Again,” *Lexington Dispatch* 12 May 1924.

³⁸ “Otto Wood Escapes Pen; Is Captured,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 15 May 1924.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

by a “bevy” of prison guards, Wood and Starnes paused outside of Raleigh, exchanged their car for a bakery truck, and then drove towards Durham.⁴¹

In the early morning hours of Sunday, May 11, the duo jumped onto the running boards of a Studebaker driven by M. D. Cline, a Durham native returning home from a weekend fishing trip.⁴² Starnes, who held a pistol through the window from his perch on the left running board, ordered Cline to surrender the wheel as Wood slid into the car.⁴³ As Wood drove slowly on slick roads back towards Greensboro, Starnes steadied his revolver on Cline from the back seat and bragged that “they had just escaped from the State’s prison.”⁴⁴ Wood flicked a match so Cline could see a news clipping. “See there. That’s my picture,” he boasted.⁴⁵ In a woodland area just outside Greensboro, the escapees ordered Cline out of the car, bound his hands, gagged him with a handkerchief, and tied him by his belt to a barbed wire fence.⁴⁶ After they removed \$30 and a watch from Cline’s pockets, Wood and Starnes shot their guns in the air with a “bravado” described as a pantomime of a “Wild West thriller.”⁴⁷ Cline’s testimony only added to the folklore that had already formed around Wood’s exploits and further solidified his image as that of an Old West desperado.

From Greensboro, the fugitives made their way west to High Point where Wood supposedly “compelled . . . at the point of a pistol” his “wife and small child” to accompany them as they continued their journey over the Virginia line.⁴⁸ As they crossed into Henry County, Virginia, Wood and Starnes drove on country lanes in order to bypass the more

⁴¹ “Otto Wood Makes Escape,” *Statesville Landmark*, May 12, 1924.

⁴² “Amazing Exploits of Otto Wood,” *Statesville Landmark*, May 12, 1924.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Danville Bee*, 15 May 1924.

populated sections of Martinsville and Rocky Mount.⁴⁹ Traffic policeman later reported that they had tried to flag down a speeding Studebaker in the locality of Schoolfield, just south of Danville, before the car “headed for open country” south of the North Carolina line.⁵⁰ Shortly thereafter, the fugitives once again turned the car northward toward the mountains of Virginia. Around 4:00 a.m. on May 12, 1924, a Roanoke City police officer noticed a mud-splattered car on the outskirts of the “Magic City.”⁵¹ Motorcycle-mounted police trailed the car to a field where Wood and Starnes fled from the vehicle (leaving the wife and child) and “darted off” into a nearby section of woods.⁵² At 6:00 a.m., a group of eleven officers surrounded the two escaped prisoners in a Norfolk and Western Railroad yard where they peacefully surrendered.⁵³ “No doubt exhaustion had much to do with the tameness of the end of the hunt,” wrote one Greensboro columnist.⁵⁴ The lawmen found only one weapon between the duo, a .25 caliber automatic revolver.⁵⁵

The sensational stories that surrounded the prison break solidified Wood’s persona as a tactful, albeit admirable fugitive with a well-timed sense of wit. Upon his return to prison after a two-day flight into southern Virginia, one reporter commented:

Wood makes it hard to hold what is unquestionably the right opinion about his activities. He is a bad egg, a dangerous man but somehow his engaging candor disarms criticism and takes all the pleasure out of news of his capture.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Statesville Landmark*, 15 May 1924.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ *Statesville Landmark*, 19 May 1924.

⁵⁵ *Statesville Landmark*, 15 May 1924.

⁵⁶ “Etiquette of Breaking Jail to Carolina,” *Hartford Courant*, 16 June 1924.

“I told Warden Busbee,” Wood remarked to the press, “that if I did not get a square deal I would be compelled to leave. He replied that if it was easy as that to go ahead.”⁵⁷ One article described the highlight of the escape as the fugitives’ return of the State Prison physician’s car.⁵⁸ The journalist painted the scene in broad comedic strokes and related how Wood “disliked the idea of putting the doctor to any unnecessary trouble, so he decided to leave the car where its owner would surely find it . . . the heart of the city of Raleigh . . . Capitol Square.”⁵⁹ Another reporter, not nearly as enthralled by Wood’s antics, took a more critical stance on North Carolina’s number one trickster:

Professional reformers will hardly get excited at the wild statements made by Otto Wood and his partner . . . charging brutal treatment and improper care at the state prison. Neither of these gentlemen might be called impartial witnesses. . . . It is an old trick for fellows like Wood to issue statements. He covets the limelight and it is written of him that he took great delight in reading the thrilling stories he furnished the papers by his daring escape.⁶⁰

Despite such sentiments, journalists throughout the Old North State recognized the potential gold mine of a twentieth-century “Jesse James.” “Fiction pales in comparison to the truth concerning the amazing exploits in which Wood now figures,” wrote one enthusiastic newsman.⁶¹ Aside from his questionable murder of Kaplan, the reports about Wood

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “No Basis For Reform,” *Lexington Dispatch*, 12 May 1924.

⁶¹ *Statesville Landmark*, 12 May 1924.

highlighted his relative lack of ruthlessness as he dodged across the countryside pursued by posses and scores of lawmen. The outlaw made for steady, front-page readership and subscribers pried through articles to discover more about the personality of the state's number one criminal.

Wood's celebrity caused a flurry of newspaper activity concerned not only with his actions, but also with the effectiveness of North Carolina's prison system and the general welfare of the state. The much debated issue of capital punishment emerged as a leading argument within articles and editorials that posed responses to those members of the public amused by the criminal's antics. "The Charlotte Observer thinks that the menace of a fellow like Otto Wood . . . is sufficient to answer to those who would abolish capital punishment," opined one North Carolina editor, "[b]ut the anti-capital punishment advocates center all their interest and sympathy on criminals. They are so taken up with the criminals that they never give a thought to the victims."⁶² In another article, a more jovial columnist offered a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that the state use Otto Wood as a form of traffic control. "If Wood and a few of his kind could be turned loose on the highways with instructions to hold up only those who violate traffic laws," the journalist quipped, "the speed fiends and road hogs would quickly change their ways."⁶³ The various social topics attached to Wood's name ranged across and encapsulated the troubles of a state struggling to keep steady control of its population as it entered into the Progressive Era of the mid-1920s. New roads and a prison population on the rise offered just two key problems, side-effects of economic growth that troubled politicians and private citizens alike.

⁶² *Statesville Landmark*, 15 May 1924.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Throughout the spring and summer of 1924, Wood added his own voice to the debates surrounding his persona. The outlaw's written opinions focused less on outside politics and more on his own personal troubles behind prison walls. Nevertheless, the statements he made to the press dovetailed perfectly into the ongoing arguments of newsprint commentators. In a few short lines, the infamous jailbird outlined the reasons behind his escape: "It is the harsh treatment that a poor devil gets that turns him against the public and society and the inhuman treatment."⁶⁴ In another post, the convict complained that his daily meals consisted only of "six salty crackers and a glass of water."⁶⁵ Wood further related that after "three negro prisoners brought him water in a talcum powder can to relieve his thirst," the warden ordered them moved to another part of the penitentiary.⁶⁶ "I am slipping this out," whispered the prisoner's pen, "and pray that whoever gets this letter will investigate at once."⁶⁷ With these letters, Wood shifted the blame for his crimes from himself to the society that built him—one that had failed to notice those mired in poverty and neglect in the midst of a progressive era.

Further newspaper coverage complicated Wood's plea and challenged the validity of his claims of harsh treatment by prison officials. *The Statesville Landmark*, in an article relayed from Raleigh, published the account of Greensboro lawyer Allen Adams who visited Wood in his cell on August 14th.⁶⁸ Instead of the dire conditions described in the bandit's letter to the press, Adams found Wood in a "sufficiently lighted and ventilated cell" where the inmate read and reclined on a "cot as good as the officers and the men of our army had

⁶⁴ *Statesville Landmark*, 5 June 1924.

⁶⁵ *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 28 August 1924.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 21 August 1924.

for use in the best canonments (sic).”⁶⁹ The lawyer commented on the decorated walls of the cell, graced by numerous images of “feminine pulchritude,” and described the scene as resembling that of “the average college freshman’s domicile” instead of the cell of a “person who has been constitutionally convicted of taking unlawfully the life of a fellow human being.”⁷⁰ Prison officials allowed Adams to offer Wood cigarettes and carry on a brief conversation during which Adams tried to discover the truth of the prisoner’s situation.⁷¹ “I asked how he was getting along,” Adams reported. “[Wood] replied that he had no complaint to make other than that Superintendent Pou would not let him go back to the chair factory from which he made his celebrated escape some three months ago.”⁷² After Adams read Wood’s “appeal” to the newspapers, the lawyer remarked that he “felt it [was his] duty to say something” due to the “gross inaccuracies and glaring mis-statements in Otto Wood’s letter.”⁷³

Reporters further used these glaring inaccuracies to cast Wood as a pampered convict with unrealistic expectations of prison life. “Not A Health Resort,” read a response to one of Wood’s early letters to the press.⁷⁴ “Wood ought to remember that the State prison is not a health resort catering to the well disposed and fat pursed,” remarked the columnist, “[but] rather a home for incurables like himself.”⁷⁵ The article acknowledged “things wrong with the prison,” yet admonished readers not to “fret over conditions as reported by this Wood.”⁷⁶ Despite this critical tone, the author took time to express personal sentiment about the treatment of prisoners and recommended that the prison system should focus more on

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ *Statesville Landmark*, 29 May 1924.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

humane conditions in order to rehabilitate those under its ward. In one final admonition, the journalist expressed hope that “no one will rave over the general subject of prison reform because of Otto Wood.”⁷⁷ Rather than suppressing any explosion of commentary, the article elicited more opinions. As one Richmond, Virginia, reader expressed his thoughts to the editor of *The Statesville Landmark*:

That perfect saint, the aforesaid Otto Wood, has got the cart before the horse: It’s the inhuman treatment that society gets at the hands of the criminal that causes society to restrain him. Society—and I use the word “society” to indicate law-abiding people—does not raise its hand against the individual until the individual has raised his hand against law and order. Otto Wood was at liberty to do as he pleased as long as what he pleased to do was not a transgression of the rights of other people.⁷⁸

In deference to the number of naysayers who confronted Wood, his image as a people’s champion against a corrupt society gradually began to surface as newspapers printed more columns about his adventures both outside and inside prison walls. No matter how much Wood supposedly enjoyed reading about his own exploits, his neighbors throughout the Carolina hills and the greater Southeast soon became equally indulgent. Publications such as the *Lexington Dispatch* suggested that the public disregard Wood—a sentiment borne out of knowledge of how intently the masses already read and listened to his words. The exhibition produced by the 1924 escape, an exercise in “crime with conscience,” served to completely lampoon the State of North Carolina and its prison system. As the stories of his

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 5 June 1924.

experiences flooded the press, the legendary phenomenon behind “Otto Wood the Robin Hood” received the dry kindling needed to burst into a wildfire.

Chapter 4: The Houdini of North Carolina: Otto Wood as a Criminal Celebrity, 1925-27

When it comes to personality, Otto Wood is vivid. His spectacular criminal career started with hold-up murder, followed by a hair-raising escape in which he used highway robbery and commandeered motorists as means to an end. Nor did a long prison term daunt his practical imagination. He laughed at bolts and bars and again took to the high roads, from which he was retaken only because he cheerfully risked all to renew his philandering in a flivver of rustic love. No more need be said for his versatility than to point out the loss of one arm was no more handicap to his attending to the wheel and the maiden than to his keeping a victim covered with his pistol hand, while he relieved him of his wallet. . . .Otto has given the word “ambidextrous” a new and mysterious definition. —*Statesville Landmark*, 15 November 1926.

“Why didn’t you leave North Carolina and stay gone when you had a chance?” This question rose from within the crowd of reporters and onlookers gathered inside the Iredell County jail on December 7, 1925. Throughout that day, hundreds of Carolinians, ranging from “banker to bum,” visited the cell of “North Carolina’s craftiest convict.” The impromptu “open house” offered an up-close view of Otto Wood, who greeted reporters and spectators alike from the comfort of his cell. “Oh, I like North Carolina: it’s a good state, besides all my people live here,” Wood explained to one reporter. “The real reason I didn’t

light out for West Virginia was on account of my mother. She asked me to come back and give up. . . . It's my babies and my mother that gets me worried."

Little more than a week had passed since Wood's second break from the state prison in Raleigh. "I had clothes under my prison clothes," Wood told the press, "so when I got a chance I got into the boxcar where I had been loading tile . . . just took off my prison clothes and rode out." From Raleigh, Wood traveled via freight train to Florence, Alabama. From there, he rode to Winston-Salem, where he stole a car and eventually drove to the coalfields of West Virginia. The extended "tour" finally culminated a week later with a "joy ride" around North Wilkesboro. The run ended near Mooresville, North Carolina, where Police Chief Otis Woodsides leveled a rifle at the windshield of Wood's car. The fugitive surrendered to Woodsides, who later described his captive as "very affable and agreeable." Upon his return to Raleigh, prison officials placed Wood in solitary confinement in hopes of impeding the possibility of any further escapes. The headlines relayed the highlights of Wood's break in the same manner as a recurrent sporting event, nonchalantly dubbing his second break the "Annual Vacation of Otto Wood."¹

In a twenty-two month period that spanned from the fall of 1925 to the late summer months of 1927, the myth of "Otto Wood the Bandit" rapidly took shape. The larger-than-life persona of the outlaw hinged on a series of escapes begun with the 1925 break that elevated Wood to the status of a celebrity. Through letters to the press, posed as orations to the people of North Carolina, as well as a bestselling autobiography, Wood took an active part in the mythmaking process. The escape artist and highwayman pitched his story in part by blaming the errors of his ways on his hardscrabble roots. As Wood constructed his portrait, he held up a mirror to the face of society and pleaded his case as a victim of a corrupt prison system.

¹"Annual Vacation of Otto Wood, Crafty Convict Ends," *Mount Airy News*, 10 December 1925.

The effort yielded a state of borderline mania as newspapers and the public both celebrated and criticized Wood's rebellion against authority.

The December 1925 "vacation" produced fervor among the press and led to published debates printed in the early months of 1926. Aware of the press's power, Wood acknowledged his own indulgence in the stories told about him by reporters and joked about their presentation. "I read the papers all the time. . . . [The *Greensboro News*] had a picture of me on the front page. Didn't think much of the picture," he quipped with a "gold-toothed" grin, "Ain't near as handsome as me."² In a more serious tone, Wood addressed charges of anti-Semitism and hostility towards the friends of A. W. Kaplan in Greensboro. "Some fellow named Huffman in Raleigh told the *Greensboro News* that I was on my way to Greensboro to get another Jew," Wood testified, "I never said any such thing and would like for the people to know I didn't."³ As to allegations of threats against the husband of an ex-wife, known simply to the press as "Mrs. Austin of Winston," Wood once again denied any intimation of violence.⁴ As the newspaper attention increased, he made sure to use all interviews to his advantage in order to spin his own story to the public.

Among those averse to the limelight placed on Wood, North Carolina Governor Angus W. McLean berated the focus on the criminal celebrity as "foolishness."⁵ "The fact that Wood succeeded in getting away without getting killed does not prove he is a hero," the governor remarked.⁶ Yet in the same issue of the *Gastonia Daily Gazette* that held the governor's comments, another article featured a noticeably admirable description of the famed bandit:

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "State Briefs," *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

⁶ Ibid.

Wood is not the common type of criminal and never has been a “bad man” in the sense which the public usually considers the term . . . a cold-blooded, “shootin’, fightin’, son-of-a-gun”. . . . He said he never had shot anyone and that it was beneath his code of ethics to do so. . . . Had it not been for his prison garb, an outsider would never have pictured him as a slayer and a “bad man.” He is above average mentally, has a pleasing sense of humor, and . . . can laugh heartily when he recalls some pleasing experience. . . . He has nothing that would denote subnormality (sic).⁷

Responding to the fascination with Wood’s escapes, McLean countered the outlaw’s “above average” image as he reiterated his belief in the security of the “facilities for guarding prisoners at the penitentiary.”⁸ He tactfully demeaned Wood’s fame as an escape artist, remarking that prison facilities “are not so perfect that they preclude the possibility of escape if a man is willing to sell his life.”⁹

Although faced with the bulwark of political opposition from North Carolina’s highest office, Wood circumvented any need to bargain with authorities by telling his story directly to the people. His appeal to the public began during the summer of 1926 in the form of a small, self-published pamphlet entitled *Life History of Otto Wood*. In thirty-four pages the repentant criminal presented his own personalized version of his life of crime and subvert the stories of those newspapers that depicted him as a murderer. Initial commentary on *Life History* proved lighthearted. One reviewer lauded the book in tongue-in-cheek fashion and suggested that with a more apt title, it “might have been called ‘How I Got In and Out Only

⁷ “Otto Wood Tells Story of His Life in Book,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

to Get Back In.”¹⁰ “[Wood] regards North Carolina as a great state,” chided another columnist, “and declares that he would rather be in state’s prison in North Carolina than a fleeing criminal elsewhere. No Rotarion, No Kiwanian, no nobody has ever said a finer thing about the state.”¹¹ Despite this stream of jokes, the precedent set by Wood’s publication proved unnerving to officials as the popular criminal delved into building his own public persona. “There is something out of keeping with orderly thought for the state to be allowing a cheap criminal to be publishing and selling such a book,” argued a *Mt. Airy News* reporter. “Mr. Wood should be bottoming chairs or even doing nothing rather than flooding the State with such literature as he can produce.”¹² The *Mt. Airy* writer further alleged that “somebody outside of the prison is making money on this deal,” theorizing that much of Wood’s publicity stemmed from commercial backing.¹³ Another journalist seconded the potential profitability of the outlaw image, acknowledging that “Mr. Wood has the mercantile instinct developed . . . the public will read the book.”¹⁴

Wood himself entered the war of words about his pamphlet and called attention to his sense of morality as overriding any desire for profit. The outlaw’s comments carried daggers cloaked under a white veil of repentance. “I realize now that you can’t beat the law, no matter how unjust it may be,” Wood lamented, “. . . that is why I have told this story of my experiences so that others who are tempted to go wrong may see that you have to pay one way or another for everything you do.”¹⁵ Revenue garnered from the sale of the book, the prisoner explained, would “give my two children some education” (“two children”

¹⁰ *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

¹¹ *Mount Airy News*, 15 July 1926.

¹² *Mount Airy News*, 9 September 1926.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 15 July 1926.

¹⁵ *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

presumably referred to a daughter and a son rumored to have been living with J. A. Wood, Otto's brother). Wood once again reiterated his lack of education as chief among the reasons for his "bad man" lifestyle. A July 1926 news article erroneously reported that "raised in the mountains of Wilkes county . . . Wood never went to school."¹⁶ The Raleigh reporter offered a review that cited the positive and negative aspects of *Life History*:

He [Wood] has something for everybody. For the preacher he has a didactic message, for the roughneck he has hair-raising experience, and for the women he has much love and many marriages. . . . The volume has suggestions of humor in it, but Mr. Wood is doing serious business. He realizes that popular sentiment is somewhat against him at present, but he thinks when the public reads his story of himself it will greatly relent. This is the really funny thing about his book. He denies the bad things said about him and in the most matter-of-fact way relates the record. For power of understatement Mr. Wood must take the cake.¹⁷

The press coverage built around the release of Wood's book consistently took a critical stance towards the genuineness of the work's "reformed man" message. "I am through now . . ." Wood countered in an interview, "you have no idea of the tortures a human being suffers when he is being hunted."¹⁸ The noted escapee reassured readers and proposed that the book's publication would prevent any further rebellion or chance of escape, especially due to the front cover which distributed his picture "all over the country."¹⁹ "How

¹⁶ *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

¹⁷ *The Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 15 July 1926.

¹⁸ *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 10 July 1926.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

about putting me to work?” Wood asked State Prison Superintendent George Ross Pou towards the interview’s close, “I’ll not slip off, honest. You know, solitary is beginning to make me sort of nervous.”²⁰ Though Pou vehemently protested Wood’s release from solitary confinement, the prison board overruled his pleas and allowed the convict to work in the boiler room, an area of the prison seen to reward Wood with more freedom while limiting his chance of escape.²¹

Two months later, on November 22, 1926, the *Danville Bee* announced the news both expected and feared by State Prison Superintendent George Ross Pou. “Otto Wood picturesque bandit-murderer and leader of state’s prison colony of literature made a clean-cut getaway early today” boasted the article’s opening sentence.²² The sarcastic reference to the prison’s “colony of literature” referred to the success of Wood’s book which, within a matter of just a few months, reportedly sold a respectable 500 copies.²³ This third “sensational escape” involved a missing latch pin from the prison’s rear gate that, coupled with a small gap in the iron grating, allowed the fugitive to “squeeze through.”²⁴ The last account of Wood’s presence on the prison grounds placed him as “turned out of his cell at 6:30” in the morning to relieve a fireman in the boiler house.²⁵ Though Wood’s escape most likely occurred before daybreak, prison officials failed to detect his absence until almost an hour later when he missed breakfast.²⁶ The boiler room fireman later explained that Wood never came to his post.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Danville Bee*, 22 November 1926.

²² *Danville Bee*, 22 November 1926.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *Statesville Landmark*, 22 November 1926.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

As the prison staff fanned out in a search of the immediate area, administrators focused their inquiries on the guards stationed at the rear gate.²⁸ The *Danville Bee* relayed that “the prison guards, J. R. Hux and his brother, were changing posts when the ‘bad man’ made his daybreak ‘gate-a-way.’”²⁹ “Prison inmates,” related the *Statesville Landmark*, “had observed Wood in conversation with Hux on several occasions and the guard appeared very friendly towards him.”³⁰ The Hux brothers, under suspicion of complicity in the escape, were charged with “gross negligence” and promptly fired.³¹ By contrast, Superintendent Pou received a recognition from the state prison’s board of directors who “publicly absolved . . . [him] of any responsibility in connection with the escape.”³²

With the disappearance, the State of North Carolina slowly awoke to the call for a manhunt. The event caught the attention of the press who readily advertised a reward of \$250 for Wood’s capture.³³ “After a day and night of futile search,” wrote one columnist, “North Carolina’s army of police and county officers today was organized into a giant man-hunting machine with one purpose in view.”³⁴ With the headline “Dragnet for Wood Extends 3 States,” *The Danville Bee* noted the enormity of the search for Wood.³⁵ “Descriptions of the convict already have been broadcast over the country,” the article assured the public.³⁶

Despite an early air of urgency within news reports, journalists in North Carolina and Virginia quickly calmed into a steady commentary on yet another of Otto Wood’s “vacations.” One reporter kidded that Wood escaped “two days ahead of his schedule

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Danville Bee*, 22 November 1926.

³⁰ *Statesville Landmark*, 22 November 1926.

³¹ *Danville Bee*, 22 November 1926.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Statesville Landmark*, 22 November 1926.

³⁴ *Danville Bee*, 23 November 1926.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

established last year.”³⁷ The writer declared that the outlaw embodied the traits of the recently deceased “Houdini,” honoring the famous magician’s tricks with his own “usual effective disappearing acts for the edification of the reading citizenry.”³⁸ Another report named Otto “The South’s Gerard Chapman,” in reference to the Chicago gangster who had recently died.³⁹ While numerous comparisons poured from the pens of newshounds, several of their contemporaries seized the opportunity to offer a more in-depth examination of the infamous bandit’s character. A writer to the *Statesville Landmark*, under the banner “Here’s An Old Familiar,” offered a brief examination of the celebrity criminal and placed the 1926 escape within the context of the previous “spectacles”:

Otto Wood just can’t abide a Thanksgiving season inside State prison. This is his third escape. Last fall he departed the institution just before Thanksgiving. One of Mr. Wood’s temperamental disposition can’t be thankful from inside prison walls, and so come the season for returning thanks he craves the open spaces. . . . Recently Wood published a book, or pamphlet, telling of experiences, in which he claimed that he had made a half dozen successful escapes from prison. He warned all and sundry that the straight and narrow was the only proper course and advised against trying the getaway once you were in. It doesn’t pay, he said. But it would seem that Otto, like many other writers, was unable to take his own advice.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Statesville Landmark*, 25 November 1926.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

“Otto Wood Loves the Limelight” headlined another article with the subhead “Officers Believe Escaped Prisoner Itches for Publicity and Will Break Out in Spectacular Manner Soon.”⁴¹ The column hypothesized that “Otto Wood may be depended upon to give the tip himself . . . unless somebody runs across him in the meantime, he will break loose some place to let the community know he’s about.”⁴² “That has been the history of Otto Wood,” the article continued as the author cited “wild automobile rides that made his [1924] dash a regular hare and hound race” and “an open motor tour over western North Carolina” in 1925.⁴³ The journalist further suggested that the desperado would not have broken out of jail without the intention to “break back into print.”⁴⁴ By the time these words made it to press, a flurry Otto Wood “sightings” had already been reported across western North Carolina and southern Virginia.

“Otto Wood champion jailbreaker of the state, murderer and bandit . . . was seen in the city [High Point, North Carolina] between 10:30 and 11 a. m.,” a post reported, alluding to November 22, the day of Wood’s escape from Raleigh.⁴⁵ The text outlined how three men spotted a suspicious character who matched Wood’s description eating at High Point’s City Hall café, located “within the shadow of the police station.”⁴⁶ A member of the trio noticed that “Wood entered the café boldly but kept looking about with cautious eyes and craning his neck to look behind the counter.”⁴⁷ One week later, a Chase City, Virginia, woman recalled seeing Wood in her hometown around the same date.⁴⁸ Practical jokers, determined to make the most of the tense environment surrounding Wood’s third escape, called the Greensboro

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 2 December 1926.

police station with the salutation “This is ‘Otto Wood’ speaking.”⁴⁹ Adding to the attention on Greensboro, a Salvation Army worker named William Miller recounted that while working in the State Prison, “he happened to see Wood” who supposedly made the “cryptic utterance,” “Tell your friends up in Greensboro I’ll be up to see them in a few days.”⁵⁰ On December 3, Danville, Virginia, police “singled out” a man who matched Wood’s description only to find that he “displayed two good hands and an entire absence of gold-plated molars.”⁵¹ The false alarms and phone calls continue to plagued lawmen into the middle of January 1927.

While Wood maintained a low profile throughout the latter part of 1926, members of the public began to make their opinions known about the notorious escapee through interviews, phone calls, and even poetry. In a bizarre phone call to the Greensboro police, an unidentified conspiracy theorist declared that Wood never really escaped the penitentiary but had been “put away” and killed by prison officials.⁵² The man further stated that if Wood “never was put away,” he felt that “Otto had been punished enough and that if he came by [his home] . . . [Wood] would get a nickel and a handout.”⁵³ A Kinston, North Carolina, Baptist congregation took issue not only with Otto’s criminal activities but also his claim to the title of “Most Widely Read Author In the State.”⁵⁴ The parishioners challenged that Reverend Dr. Bernard W. Spillman, “the foremost authority of the Southern Baptist Church,” held the title.⁵⁵ In an attempt at irony, the contributing journalist concluded that “Wood and Dr. Spilman as authors have something in common in that both point the way to a better

⁴⁹ *Statesville Landmark*, 6 December 1926.

⁵⁰ *Statesville Landmark*, 25 November 1926.

⁵¹ *Statesville Landmark*, 6 December 1926.

⁵² *Statesville Landmark*, 2 December 1926.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

life.”⁵⁶ With overtures towards comedic poetry, a Virginia writer dubbed, perhaps under a pseudonym, as “F. C. Betts” offered verse from the perspective of North Carolina’s Houdini:

Sung By Otto Wood.

I’m on my way from dear old Raleigh today.
 That’s why I’m feeling gay;
 I made my gate-a-way [sic] just before Thanksgiving day.
 George Ross Pou, please do not grieve,
 As I had to take French leave.
 Thirty years is a long, long time.
 To stay in Hotel Pou. Some day I’ll write you a line.
 Maybe in the good old summer time. —F. C. BETTS.⁵⁷

While Virginians waxed poetic, a Greensboro reporter took a small survey of the public opinion about the renegade in his hometown, the site of Wood’s one notorious murder:

Whether he just had to spend the Thanksgiving among more familiar and friendly scenes, or decided to increase the sale of his life, published some time ago, is not known—betting was about even on each of these propositions around the city yesterday. And it was somewhat interesting to hear the remarks of those who know

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Danville Bee*, 26 November 1926.

much of Wood's career, it being almost a universal sentiment hereabouts that since he was gone, he ought to stay gone by seeking entirely new fields."⁵⁸

The opinions and "literature" inspired by Wood's third break compounded as the outlaw himself remained silent. While some urged Otto to seek "new fields," Winston-Salem resident G. M. "Red" Austin boasted, "There is one man in North Carolina who is not afraid of Otto Wood and that is myself."⁵⁹ Austin, whose comment figured prominently in an extended "expose" on the bandit's history, married Wood's wife (the one by which Otto had two children) after she gained a divorce from the convict in December 1924.⁶⁰ The article continued to impart the elaborate tale behind the relationship between Wood and Miss Rushey Hayes, "a typical honest Wilkes county country girl" and "a member of one of Wilkes county's most highly respected families."⁶¹ As the newspaper recounted, the courtship read "like a page out of a book of fiction," where Wood convinced Miss Hayes that he worked as a "traveling salesman" while moonlighting as a "desperado."⁶² Caught up in the storytelling, the writer depicted an imaginative scene that encapsulated Wood's "reign of terror" throughout the western counties of the Tar Heel State:

At that time Otto was weaving the threads of life as automobile thief, holder-up of filling stations and general desperado. He was spreading all over Northwestern Carolina a mortal fear of him as did Jesse James in the years of long ago. Otto must have read the books on the manner of life led by the famous James brothers for he,

⁵⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 25 November 1926.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

like them, loved to ride up and down the Boone trail casting fear in the hearts of officers and others alike. It is said that in some places people looked at the setting sun with fear and trembling because Otto Wood might pass that way. . . . [T]he man she [Hayes] put her faith in was riding up and down the countryside stealing, holding-up, robbing and keeping other sections of the mountain country in mortal fear of his presence.⁶³

The highly stylized and dramatized portrait of Wood's crimes along the Boone Trail placed him within the hill country landscape of his youth. Though endowed with fictionalized scenes of how the setting sun produced fear and trembling, the article effectively framed Otto Wood's criminal adventures against the backdrop of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

As Wood's run extended deeper into December and the early weeks of 1927, newspapers nationwide continued to focus on the bandit's connection to both the mountains and to illicit liquor runners within his home region as part of his network for successful escapes. A Winston-Salem source pinpointed "an alleged bootlegger" that provided a stolen car for Wood to make his escape to Kentucky.⁶⁴ The *Nevada State Journal* featured a sketched portrait of Wood firing a pistol in an attempt to illustrate the story of "a country boy who 'made good' by going bad."⁶⁵ The article heralded "Otto Wood, North Carolina's notorious bad man, murderer, highwayman and outlaw . . . from the backwoods of Wilkes county."⁶⁶ Wood's crimes, attributed to "some queer kinks in his brain," made him the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ *Statesville Landmark*, 9 December 1926.

⁶⁵ "Outlaw 'Refuses' to Remain in Prison, Thrice Escaping," *Nevada State Journal*, 31 December 1926.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

“black sheep” of what the author termed an otherwise “good family.”⁶⁷ The mountainous region, though not the setting of Wood’s most famous crimes, in reality provided the backbone for his escapes as he often headed north and west towards family in West Virginia. For the purposes of sensationalized journalism, the mountains grew to represent the dark, yet beautiful provincial environment which could produce the dual character of a “colorful,” “dashing,” mountain “Lothario” and a bloodthirsty bandit-thief.

Unwilling to follow the advice to seek “new fields,” Wood broke his silence on December 4, 1926, in a letter from Ashland, Kentucky, to the *Greensboro Daily News*. The outlaw, in a manner deemed by one source as “spectacular as ever,” offered terms for his surrender to the state.⁶⁸ Dated November 28, North Carolina newspapers reprinted the fugitive’s proposal for terms and his statement of grievances:

I guess there are a good many people throughout the state that are very much interested in my whereabouts since my third escape. I haven’t went to Australia yet and don’t think I will go. . . . I won’t try and explain the great injustice that I have received at the state prison. I have no desire to remain a fugitive from justice. God knows my heart. I have no desire to break the law and won’t until I am forced to. I realize that when a man breaks the law he should be punished. I have been sentenced by the courts of justice to serve 30 years in the state prison and I don’t believe any man or woman that were in the court room but what won’t say that I got too much time. But I am willing to try and serve the time if I get the chance that other prisoners get. . . . If the governor would change my sentence to a chaingang or under some

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 6 December 1926.

superintendent and would assure me that I would be treated human [*sic*] I would give up to Chief Thomas at Winston-Salem within 48 hours after I have been assured that I would not get the torturing that I have got before and that I would be placed on the equal bearing of other prisoners. Personally I hold no dislike for Captain Pou and I will not try and criticize him through the newspapers. I wish him well, but I will try awful hard that he will never get me in his charge anymore. In case the good people wants to take this matter up they can get in touch with me through the newspapers.⁶⁹

Wood's bargaining and call for action on the part of the people of North Carolina infuriated prison Superintendent George Ross Pou, who offered a rapid fire response to Wood's proposition.⁷⁰ Governor Angus W. McLean, following a request from Pou, doubled the reward for Wood's detainment to \$500 and tactfully reiterated that "a revision of the prison law in 1925 automatically made an escaped convict an outlaw who [m]ay be killed by any citizen in the face of resistance."⁷¹ With Pou and McLean's combined dismissal of Wood's offer, the State of North Carolina decided to make this its final stand against Otto Wood's rebel-rousing antics.

The outlaw's appeal to the people to "get in touch" through newspapers drew ready replies in the early weeks of January 1927. Wood's reference to Australia in his November letter proved that he regularly read *The Greensboro Daily News*, which had printed a light-hearted suggestion that Wood "go to Australia" just two days after his third break.⁷² A Greensboro columnist, presumably writing with the knowledge that Wood might read his

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

commentary, chided the State of North Carolina and asked, “How much shall the state set aside for rewards for Otto Wood?”⁷³ The writer proposed that, since “Otto seems to be good for one escape a year,” “he certainly deserves a place on the budget.”⁷⁴ After another reported sighting of Wood in Kernersville, North Carolina, on January 6, “poet” F. C. Betts once again posted a submission to the *Danville Bee*:

Otto Wood, the slippery North Carolina convict was reported in Kernersville last week; he probably had heard George Ross Pou’s song.

He is on his way they say,

To dear old Raleigh today,

He’s been nearly two months away,

Spending New Year’s and Christmas day,

Since making his get-away.—F. C. B.⁷⁵

Little over a week later, on January 17, 1927, practical jokers called the Statesville Police Headquarters with a “tip” that “Otto Wood . . . had just left Taylorsville headed for Statesville.”⁷⁶ Before the police could ask for further details, the “Taylorsville party” hung up and left Chief Tom Kerr and three deputies to wait in vain for Wood’s appearance on the highway.⁷⁷ Continued pranks and satirical news articles only added to the folk hero popularity of Otto Wood as members of the public joined in the fun of his latest “vacation.”

⁷³ “Problem for Budgeters,” *Statesville Landmark*, 3 January 1927.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Danville Bee*, 12 January 1927.

⁷⁶ “Plays Joke on Officer,” *Statesville Landmark*, 17 January 1927.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

The fun ended on February 12, 1927, when a Terre Haute, Indiana, druggist retaliated during a “hold-up” and fired four shots into the chest of his attacker.⁷⁸ The failed robber first gave police the name “Edward Hazer,” but Indiana and federal authorities later identified the severely wounded man as Otto Wood.⁷⁹ According to one source, “a druggist shot him four times below the heart . . . but Wood survived as his vital organs were not touched.”⁸⁰ The outlaw, dressed in clothes and a watch stolen from a railroad brakeman as well as driving a car missing from Roanoke, Virginia, since January 10, now faced a threefold threat from the State of Indiana, the State of North Carolina, and the federal government.⁸¹ While North Carolina lobbied for his return to the state prison, Indiana held Wood for attempted armed robbery with a potential sentence of twenty years.⁸² Federal authorities also laid claim, citing Wood’s car theft as “interstate trafficking in stolen automobiles.”⁸³

While authorities debated Wood’s fate, newspapers once again waged war over his character. “Many who are inclined to admire Otto Wood are wondering if he did not permit himself to be shot,” wrote a *Gastonia Gazette* reporter. “He has always maintained that he used a gun only as a bluff, and that he has never shot anyone.”⁸⁴ The journalist further reiterated Wood’s claim that Kaplan’s murder in 1924 resulted from an accident and that “the blow he struck was not hard enough to cause death.”⁸⁵ By the *Gastonia* writer’s estimation, Wood constituted not a “vicious man,” but a good-natured rogue endowed with a “particular type of criminal insanity—a sort of ‘escapomaniac’—whose greatest thrill is to get in prison

⁷⁸ “Otto Wood Has Been Recaptured,” *Statesville Landmark*, 14 January 1927.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ “Question Is Whether Indiana Can Keep Otto Wood Until North Carolina Gets There,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 14 February 1927.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

and then get out.”⁸⁶ Another less-sympathetic columnist challenged that the “Otto kind are hopeless” and offered a brief, prophetic message:

The result is history. If and when Otto is returned and kept in close confinement after awhile there will arise a complaint from criminal sympathizers. They will say that he is being killed by degrees. . . . But the criminal sympathizers are always asking for them to have a chance, notwithstanding they take up their old tricks the moment they are given a fraction of liberty.⁸⁷

A week after Wood’s wounding, North Carolina won the custody battle, unfortunately no newspaper reports or paperwork have been located to explain why Federal and Indiana authorities acquiesced. On February 18, 1927, Wood, miraculously able to walk, manacled to a North Carolina state prison guard, boarded a train headed south back to confinement in Raleigh.⁸⁸ On a stopover in Cincinnati, an Ohio reporter questioned the captured outlaw about the motivations behind his third escape. “Every man is entitled to a little vacation,” Wood responded.⁸⁹

After a visit to Wood’s “Death Row” cell, politely termed the “Safe Keeping” quarters by prison officials, on February 22, 1927, a Raleigh correspondent reported that the man “notorious for more fact and fable than any other Tar Heel escapist” slumbered in comfortable conditions.⁹⁰ As the writer explained, Wood, “the only occupant of death row without an ordained funeral day,” lived in an electric lit cell with furniture that “does not

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *Statesville Landmark*, 17 February 1927.

⁸⁸ *Statesville Landmark*, 21 February 1927.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Otto Wood Back In State Prison On Solitary Row,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 22 February 1927.

fulfill its dread implications.”⁹¹ Despite the convict’s reported “comfort,” however, prison officials publicly expressed their disbelief at “the volume of mail coming to the prison from sentimentalists all over the state.”⁹² The ranks of those “sentimentalists,” described in an article entitled “Flappers Weep for Otto Wood,” consisted predominantly of young women who wrote to protest the “conditions” that Wood suffered under on death row.⁹³ In response, Superintendent Pou prohibited Wood from writing to newspapers or giving interviews.⁹⁴ Newsmen reported that in contrast to his publicized refusal of leniency, Pou showed some ability to relent in the face of Wood’s fan mail and promised to weigh the option of removing the outlaw from solitary confinement to work on a rock-busting gang.⁹⁵

Pou’s authority may have kept Wood from publishing any further pleas to North Carolina’s populace, but the state-wide popularity of the criminal proved hard to suppress. “Sales from his first book continue to pile up,” bragged the *Statesville Landmark*. “His escape gave good advertising to the little volume . . . which stands out as the best seller among North Carolina literary productions.”⁹⁶ A story from Thomasville, North Carolina, relayed the news that a robber, who “described himself as Otto Wood’s brother,” held up taxis in the area and claimed “he was on his way to Raleigh to open the state prison and liberate his ‘brother.’”⁹⁷ Though in reality no relation to Wood, this thief’s claim of kinship proved disturbing to Carolina lawmen as they tried unsuccessfully to squelch the spread of the “escapomaniac’s” notoriety. North Carolina State College joined the Otto Wood phenomenon with an April Fool’s edition of their weekly newspaper *The Technician*, in

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Flappers Weep for Otto Wood,” *Statesville Landmark*, 28 February 1927.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ “‘Otto’s Brother’ Up to His Tricks,” *Statesville Landmark*, 24 March 1927.

which students named “Otto Wood, champion cross-country man of North Carolina.”⁹⁸ An even more peculiar proposition to cash in on Wood’s fame resulted after a sideshow entrepreneur offered to rent the convict from the penitentiary and display him on tour in a cage.⁹⁹ Shocked by the sincerity of the showman’s offer, Dr. J. H. Norman, the State Prison Warden, declined what the exhibitionist termed “a good chance to make some money.”¹⁰⁰

By the end of the summer of 1927, Otto Wood’s celebrity throughout the state appeared to reach pandemic proportions. In a brief fall interview, no doubt gleaned without the blessing of Superintendent Pou, Wood proudly announced that he “disposed of about 1,000 copies of his book.”¹⁰¹ Despite the success, Wood stated that “[he did] not intend to do any more writing any time soon.”¹⁰² The reporter described the bandit’s cell as “literally covered with newspapers” that kept him aware of events outside of his cell.¹⁰³ With political tact, Wood declared his belief in capital punishment with the condition that “the guilt of anyone should always be proven before he is sent down the line to the chair.”¹⁰⁴ The interview stood as a victory in Wood’s campaign to gain public sympathy. With people statewide convinced of his mistreatment under the laws of his home state, Wood had arrived as North Carolina’s most notable criminal celebrity. The inauguration of a new governor further reinforced Wood’s notoriety as the infamous convict evolved into a well-publicized experiment in reform politics.

⁹⁸ “Pick Otto Wood As Champ Runner,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 2 April 1927.

⁹⁹ “Wanted to Put Otto Wood In Cage and Exhibit Him,” *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 4 July 1927.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ “Otto Wood Gives Out Interview,” *Statesville Landmark*, 21 October 1927.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

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Chapter 5: The Renegade and the Reformer: Governor O. Max Gardner's "Experiment in Humanity" and the Fourth Escape of Otto Wood, 1928-1931

"Tho' OTTO WOOD seems no good, Raleigh can't keep him if she would," pipes Prof MacBetts, commenting on the prisoner's last getaway. —*Danville Bee*, 17 July 1930.

"Mr. Will Rogers,
Hollywood, California,

Otto Wood, Carolina outlaw and will-o-wisp in sensational escapes from the state prison, who was killed here Wednesday by Salisbury police, arrived in a stolen automobile from your hometown., Claremore, Oklahoma. Thinking perhaps only citizen of Claremore able to own car might be you, want to render our usual service by sending you this information.

Chamber of Commerce" —*Salisbury Post*, 5 January 1931

In July 1930, Augusta, Georgia, native John Lewis Powell sauntered his way through the midsummer heat of the North Carolina piedmont in search of work. A former mill worker, Powell had left Richmond, Virginia, with the intention to hitchhike to Atlanta, Georgia, where he hoped his prospects for employment would improve. Crippled by an

automobile accident, Powell suffered from a noticeable limp in his left leg as well as an incapacitated left arm. As he traveled through the Carolinas, the unfortunate hitchhiker found himself dogged by peace officers and halted a total of fifteen times while heading south to Spartanburg, South Carolina. In one instance, as he bathed his feet in a stream near Charlotte, Powell found himself surrounded by five policemen and taken to the city jail. A letter composed by Gaffney, South Carolina Chief of Police O. F. Alderholdt proved the only means for Powell to confirm his identity and continue his slow trek to Atlanta.¹ Powell's story, reprinted in newspapers across the South, represented the most popular tale of misidentification made by police as they searched for the whereabouts of Otto Wood. The witch hunt that victimized Powell constituted a minor incident in the hysteria that surrounded Wood's fourth flight from Central Prison in Raleigh. The heightened intensity of the manhunt owed much to the events that occurred in the year prior to the escape. After a two-year silence in solitary confinement, Wood had reemerged in the spring of 1929 with the help of a political ally, an entrepreneurial governor whose penchant for publicity inadvertently set the stage for the outlaw's final run.

Inaugurated to the office of Governor of North Carolina in January 1929, Oliver Max Gardner possessed a background that made him well acquainted with the rural environment which produced Otto Wood.² The son of a Confederate veteran and country doctor Oliver Perry "O. P." Gardner, "O. Max" lost his mother at the age of ten and spent much of his childhood on house calls with his father in the vicinity of Shelby, North Carolina.³ In his travels with O. P., the young Gardner became acquainted with the plight of the rural poor

¹ "Otto Wood's Double," *Spartanburg Herald-Journal*, 17 July 1930.

² Joseph L. Morrison, *Governor O. Max Gardner: A Power in North Carolina and New Deal Washington* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

within his home state.⁴ Among the sayings passed to Gardner from his father was one that directly supported Wood's claims of educational deficiency as the root of his crimes—"Ignorance was the mother of poverty and the grandmother of crime."⁵ Gardner carried this quotation in his conscience as he entered into the governorship and demanded reforms within the practices of the State Prison system. "The object of our penal system is, in part, to bring about reformation," stated Gardner in a 1928 stump speech. He continued this thought by outlining the need for improved educational standards, particularly for "young boys, even though they may be inclined toward a life of crime."⁶ To the idealistic legislator, an effort to reshape the entire state from the bottom up opened an opportunity to realize his vision of North Carolina as an agriculturally-based society rich in its human resources.

The new administration under Gardner recognized that the State Prison system constituted a key battleground in their attempt to modernize the state of North Carolina. By initiating a concentrated, highly publicized campaign to reform prisoners by vocation and education rather than by punishment, Gardner and his constituents believed that they could demonstrate the power of their populist approach to social issues. In his first Biennial Address to the North Carolina General Assembly, Gardner stated the need for "a modern plant" to replace "the unsafe, costly, unsanitary, and wholly inadequate central prison."⁷ He further suggested that the state set up more sanitary prison farms where the inmates could practice the production of foodstuffs and thus act as beneficiaries to their fellow citizens through agriculture.⁸ Six months after this address, Gardner ordered prisoners removed from

⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Edwin Gill, Secretary. *Public Papers and Letters of Oliver Max Gardner: Governor of North Carolina 1929-1933* ed. David Leroy Corbitt (Raleigh, NC: Council of State for the State of North Carolina, 1937), 32.

⁷ Ibid., 599.

⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

work leases to the Carolina Coal Company, which brought annual revenue of \$90,000 to the penitentiary.⁹ The action came as the result of accidents that involved electrocution, elevator malfunctions, and a prisoner crushed by a coal car.¹⁰ “Governor Max” advised that the prison board loan their inmate population to construction jobs less hazardous to their safety, specifically to the building of roads and highways—another of his pet projects for the improvement of the Tar Heel State.¹¹

Under the supervision of Gardner’s administration the North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare published a pamphlet on both the historical and contemporary problems within the State Prison. Entitled *Capital Punishment in North Carolina*, the report selected twenty-six prisoners to profile in criminal case studies that compiled their various backgrounds, mental deficiencies, and personal histories. As “Case E,” Otto Wood featured prominently in the study, which offered an extended examination of his personality:

The prisoner is rather histrionic but shows some finesse. He walks into an audience with a somewhat self-important air, seems perfectly at ease, talks frankly, does not show any unusual emotional reaction, is neat in his appearance. . . . He talks rather loudly, using incorrect English, but trying to use impressive words and phrases. . . . He has very definite wanderlust; and Jesse James type of hereditary criminal propensities. He expresses himself as being entirely fearless—and the examiner believes he is. . . . He seems to be unmoral and unsocial rather than immoral and anti-social, and these characteristics, it is believed, developed partly out of his native endowment and partly out of his environmental influences. He is an extrovert of a

⁹ Ibid., 490-491.

¹⁰ Ibid., 490.

¹¹ Ibid., 490-491.

pronounced type, and is willing to make any decision, take any chance, or do anything the occasion requires, on a moment's notice. He expresses sorrow for having done wrong immediately afterwards, but this remorse, if it may be called remorse, quickly leaves him and he will do the same thing or worse upon the next occasion. . . .If one had to be bound by a definite psychiatric opinion, he might be put down as a mild hypomaniac.¹²

The bulletin also offered the supposition that Wood, despite his reported physical age of thirty-three, possessed a mental age of ten years and four months.¹³ The results of the study produced a profile rife with inconsistencies that painted Wood as a “hypersexed,” non-alcoholic ex-bootlegger suspected to suffer from “early locomotor ataxia” (jerky body movement/paralysis) due to “spinal syphilis.”¹⁴ All of these characteristics melded into a portrait of a victim, a neglected individual who had fallen into criminal activity due to a lack of proper development in his childhood years.

The findings about Otto Wood and his fellow convicts within *Capital Punishment in North Carolina*, gleaned mostly from basic psychiatric observations and from personal interviews, supported Governor Gardner's social reform message that stressed attention to education and poverty as a means to suppress crime. The pamphlet's introduction featured an array of language suitable to Gardner's platform:

¹² North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare, *Capital Punishment in North Carolina* (Raleigh, NC, 1929) 84-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

The prisoners in death row are there because the people of North Carolina wish them to be or are indifferent to or ignorant of the social factors responsible for their situation. . . .

[A citizen] will see among these condemned men the poor and the ignorant—for the affluent and educated are seldom found in the death cells—the feeble-minded, the insane and the psychopathic. By talking to them he will discover that some of them are so simple in mind that they have little conception of the seriousness of their situation. . . .

[A citizen] may be led to wonder whether there may not be children in his own community who are starting on the same path, and if so, whether he cannot do something about it. And if these impressions give him a feeling of responsibility, the purpose of this study will have been largely accomplished. . . . The North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare hopes thereby to stimulate a sane, popular interest in a tragic human problem, from which, it is hoped, will come an enlarged social program of prevention.¹⁵

With the burden of North Carolina's crime wave placed on the shoulders of the public, Gardner continued his crusade with further visits to the State Prison at Raleigh.

In April 1929, Wood and Gardner came face-to-face during one of the governor's tours, one no doubt undertaken to inspect the inadequacies of Central Prison's facilities.¹⁶ The man that greeted Gardner bore little resemblance to the wily criminal previously described by newspaper accounts. Instead, the inmate seemed a gaunt, frail figure shriveled

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ "Otto Wood Rank of "A" At State Prison," *Mount Airy News*, 22 May 1930.

by two years filled with extreme isolation in the tense environment of death row.¹⁷ Within his two years in solitary, despite the reportedly comfortable conditions, Wood's health declined steadily and left him with a hacking cough that made the politician fear it might soon kill the notorious prisoner.¹⁸ With the convict barely able to walk around his cell, the prison doctor recorded Wood's condition as emaciated.¹⁹ A conversation between the outlaw and the reformer led Gardner to order his removal from solitary confinement back into the general population of the state prison.²⁰ "O' Max" decided to conduct an "experiment in humanity" for his already burgeoning project set to restructure prison facilities and practices that he viewed as plagued by chronic inefficiencies and misuse of public funds.²¹ When asked to comment on his choice to let the famous escape artist "off his leash," Gardner stated that he was "taking a chance [to see] if a man who has gone as far down hill as [Wood] can go back up."²² As he underlined his act of clemency as a reformist message to his detractors, the governor reminded Otto that his conduct would determine the fate of his fellow prisoners and admonished him not to abuse the leniency shown to him.²³ To his credit, Wood seemed to take Gardner's words to heart and reinvented himself to appear a model example for the overhauled prison system dreamt up by his new political ally.

Although the prison reform movement with Otto Wood as a figurehead proved an early success, Gardner's attempts to reform the state outside of the prison walls met a substantial number of stumbling blocks. The most notable of these, the Gastonia Mill Strike of 1929, brought "unwelcome national attention" to the Old North State and challenged the

¹⁷ Wood, *Life History* (Postscript), 36.

¹⁸ Kinney Rorrer, "Off the Record: Otto Wood the Bandit," *The Old Time Herald* 9.6 (Winter 2004-2005):18.

¹⁹ Manly Wade Wellman, "Otto Wood Kept Law on the Jump," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 10 January 1954.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

²¹ "Otto Wood Makes 4th Escape From State Prison," *The Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 17 July 1930.

²² Billy Arthur, "The Slipperiest Jailbird," *The State* (March 1988), 31.

²³ *Ibid.*, 31.

progressive governor with an outbreak of mob violence.²⁴ The onset of the Great Depression in the fall of 1929 also added to the strain as Gardner scrambled to balance the implementation of new programs with the struggle to prevent economic collapse. Within his first year in office, he had diverted \$6.5 million to the equalization of school systems in the most impoverished areas within North Carolina.²⁵ The governor also diverted an additional \$1.25 million to the easement of property taxes, a gesture that catered to farmers in “the poorest eight-month counties” recorded for 1929.²⁶ Yet, by the fall of 1929, the feasibility of any further large-scale programs became jeopardized as the nationwide bank crisis extended across the state.²⁷ In 1930 alone, ninety-three North Carolina banks with deposits of over \$56 million closed.²⁸ In an effort to alleviate the early strains suffered by Carolinians under the Depression, Gardner promoted such morale building events as “live-at-home” days, held throughout the week of December 15-21, 1929.²⁹ The week celebrated self-sufficiency among the public and invited statewide pride through meals that featured only “products from North Carolina farms.”³⁰ Through these efforts to appease the populace, Gardner displayed the same magnanimous personality and a penchant for showmanship that served as his hallmark approach to political reform.

By May 1930, Otto Wood, the “experiment in humanity,” displayed a character suitable enough to validate Governor Gardner’s progressive approach to correctional institutions.³¹ In the wake of Gardner’s visit, Wood appeared as a model prisoner, indulging

²⁴ Morrison, *Governor O. Max Gardner*, 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹ *Mount Airy News*, 22 May 1930.

in such productive activities as the management of a prison delicatessen and canteen.³² He even displayed charity towards other prisoners as a partner in fellow inmate and convicted murderer William Campbell's maintenance of a small animal collection, referred to by the press as the "Carolina State Prison Zoo."³³ A report on Wood's condition in October 1929 depicted him as "well pleased" and eager to keep his job in charge of the prison delicatessen and soft drink stand where "he tells all who come within his range that he is satisfied these days."³⁴ By his actions, Wood implied that he possessed no reason to make any further runs from justice and desired to live up to the wholesome image of Gardner's "model prisoner."

Skeptical of Wood's sharp change in character, a Raleigh columnist mocked him as "mad" and referenced the convict's 1926 *Life History* as a parallel situation in which his "goodness" had been sold to the people.³⁵ The *Statesville Landmark*, in a detailed description of Wood's illness upon release from solitary confinement, showered Wood with a stream of faux praise and named him "Greensboro's most illustrious literarian [sic] since that city lost O. Henry and Wilbur Daniel Steel."³⁶ The same issue of the Statesville newspaper intimated that the convict's illness had been only a minor reaction after the newly released prisoner "ate too much food for his own good and was stricken down with something akin to acute indigestion."³⁷ The article further argued that Wood "does not bear the best name at the prison and he keeps the colony awake when he is at large."³⁸ Considering the three escapes from the North Carolina State Prison, reporters covered the story of the outlaw's removal from solitary with a wary eye. Gardner had played a dangerous game and the risk left

³² "Murder Convict Keeps Carolina Prison Zoo," *Sarasota Herald*, 6 January 1930.

³³ "Murder Convict Keeps Carolina Prison Zoo: Has White Rats, Bears, and Many Other Animals," *Florence Times Daily*. 14 January 1930.

³⁴ "Otto Helping Run Soft Drink Stand," *Mount Airy News*, 31 October 1929.

³⁵ "'A' Grade," *Mount Airy News*. 22 May 1930.

³⁶ "Otto Wood's New Freedom Makes Him Ill," *Statesville Landmark*, 22 July 1929.

³⁷ "Otto Spends Only Brief Confinement in Hospital," *Statesville Landmark*, 22 July 1929.

³⁸ "Freedom Makes Him Ill," *Statesville Landmark*, 22 July 1929.

columnists divided on whether the outcome would ultimately prove beneficial to the governor's reputation.

Despite the skepticism of the press, Otto Wood "the reformed man" gained further recognition when he received the classification of an "Honor Grade" or "A Grade" prisoner, reinstated with the maximum amount of privileges that he could be afforded behind bars.³⁹ With subtle fanfare Gardner personally knighted Wood with his "A" grade.⁴⁰ The *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* printed a column that described the outlaw's promotion:

Otto Wood, once the toughest guy by his own admonition in the North Carolina state penitentiary, Tuesday took his place among "honor grade" prisoners, softened by the kindly acts of a chief executive who was, as Otto said, "willing to give a guy a break". . . . Governor Gardner had a talk with Otto. He promised him better quarters and a chance to exercise if he would promise in turn not to break jail. Otto promised.⁴¹

Wood stated to Gardner in front of the press, "I won't offer you my word of honor, because that wouldn't be much; but you can be sure of one thing, I'll never run away as long as you are Governor."⁴² With one brief statement, Wood became Gardner's self-created monster, an experiment fully envisioned yet unresponsive to control. Though restructured as a model to his fellow prisoners and the public of North Carolina, Wood's constant desire for more elbow room almost instantly outweighed his dedication to reform.

³⁹ "'A' Grade," *Mount Airy News*, 22 May 1930.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "Otto Wood Put in Honor Grade," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 22 May 1930

⁴² "Experiment in Convict Honor Fails," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 July 1930.

Shortly after 6:00 p.m. on July 10, 1930, Governor Gardner received notification from Warden H. H. Honeycutt that Otto Wood had escaped—a fact noticed after the prisoner failed to report for evening lock up.⁴³ A massive net hastily formed around the prison grounds failed to ensnare Wood as expected and soon an all-out panic of radio, telephone, and telegraph reports surged nationwide.⁴⁴ When asked to comment on his Wood's escape, Gardner lamented: "I do not regret releasing him from solitary confinement, but I do regret his betrayal of my trust in trying to treat him humanely as other prisoners at State's prison are."⁴⁵ In another interview, Gardner expressed "confidence that the wily convict would be captured" and afterward sent to the "Caledonia Prison Farm."⁴⁶ While the governor's comments displayed his continued commentary on the State's Prison, Otto's fourth flight from the institution due to Gardner's own petitions for leniency left the politician temporarily strapped in the pursuit of any further arguments focused on social reforms for crime prevention and better treatment for prisoners. The escape signaled a major setback in a campaign intent on aiding inmates at the State Prison and also prompted North Carolina officials to revise their stance on Wood as a potential hazard to the general public.

"Prison Walls Do Not A Prison Make for Otto Wood" boasted the July 21st issue of the *Hartford Courant*. The same newspaper displayed a grainy picture of Wood, a wide smirk noticeable on his lips.⁴⁷ While the topic of Wood's fourth escape served as front page news nationwide, North Carolina journalists once again traded assessments of Wood's infamous popularity. "He does not have the imagination of the public as he once did," a Raleigh columnist acknowledged. "He has been advertised too much. He has written a book

⁴³ Wood, *Life History* (Postscript), 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁵ "Man Breaks Promise Not to Quit Jail," *San Jose Evening News*, 11 July, 1930.

⁴⁶ "North Carolina Escape Artist Is Still At Large," *Anniston Star*, 12 July 1930.

⁴⁷ "Carolina Prisoner Makes Fourth Escape," *Hartford Courant*, 21 July 1930.

too and North Carolina people do not like men who write books.”⁴⁸ In an editorial entitled “Hope He Stays Away,” the *Statesville Landmark* critiqued Governor Gardner and his experiment.⁴⁹ Focusing on the plight of individual prisoners, the Statesville column politely berated Gardner’s well-publicized attempt to reform Wood:

We [North Carolina] are more than anxious to experiment with him [Wood]. Our folks have tried and failed signally. . . . It is a conceit of some people who think they can transform criminals by kindness to attach too much importance to their personality. . . . Governor Gardner had a good purpose. He had learned something by his experiment that will be profitable. There is no objection here to these experiments but we’re hoping that if Wood comes back, or other prisoners are used as experiments, that the procedure will be carried out with a maximum of quiet and a minimum of parade and glorification. Otto Wood has been paraded and played up until he was no doubt convinced he was a hero. . . . That wasn’t kindness to Otto; and the parading of such people is entirely too common down Raleigh way, wasn’t good for their mental health nor the mental health of criminals generally. We’re strong for the kindness business within bounds. But the semi-hero stuff, the constant playing up of some convict by the Raleigh news writers, somewhat of a habit with them, produces a great weariness in many people; and that is one reason we hope Wood will keep going.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ “State Officials Believe Wood Will Be Recaptured,” *Statesville Landmark*, 17 July 1930.

⁴⁹ “Hope He Stays Away,” *Statesville Landmark*, 17 July 1930.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The Statesville columnist reiterated the disapproval of the state's handling of Wood in a September article. "Seeing that our folks have shown themselves incapable of handling this criminal desperado," critiqued the *Landmark* writer, "there was a general hope that he [Wood] would stay away."⁵¹ Despite this hope, the newsman acknowledged that Wood's "love" of the "limelight" and "the thrill he gets from exhibition" made the desperado's reappearance in North Carolina inevitable.⁵² The sentiments of the Statesville reporter displayed a weariness with Otto Wood among a contingent of North Carolinians. Though still a popular figure, Wood, a featured criminal within newspapers for nearly twenty years, had seemingly overstayed his welcome. The hope that he "would stay away" became an often repeated catch phrase as his fourth flight from prison extended through the remainder of 1930.

Reports of Wood's movements after his escape flooded newspapers throughout the duration of the summer of 1930. "Has Otto Wood Passed This Way?" asked a Statesville source after a gas station robbery in Iredell County.⁵³ A Raleigh column, relayed in the *Anniston (Alabama) Star*, reported the disappearance of the bandit's widowed sister-in-law Celia Byrd, a frequent visitor to Wood in Raleigh around the time of the escape.⁵⁴ In a follow up to the story on Byrd, a release from Greensboro posited that the missing widow eloped with Wood on a trip through several western states.⁵⁵ Letters received by Mrs W. P. Byrd, Celia's mother, followed the couple as they traveled through "Missouri, New Mexico,

⁵¹ *Statesville Landmark*, 22 September 1930.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ "Has Otto Wood Passed This Way?" *Statesville Landmark*, 14 July 1930.

⁵⁴ "Woman Believed Connected With Escape of Wood," *Anniston Star*, 14 July 1930.

⁵⁵ "Otto Wood Married and on Honeymoon," *Statesville Landmark*, 8 September 1930.

and . . . California.”⁵⁶ When asked for a comment, Byrd’s mother remarked, “My daughter is well thought of and I do not believe she would stay with a man to whom she was not married.”⁵⁷

A September 19 story from High Point, North Carolina, heralded the return of Otto Wood to the Tar Heel State. Under the headline “Otto Wood and Paramour Kidnap Child From High Point School,” *The Wilkes Journal-Patriot* relayed an intense tale that delved deep into the affairs of Wood’s family.⁵⁸ After a night spent at the Arthur Hotel in High Point, Wood and his “bride” traveled to the Grimes Street School to pick up Celia’s two daughters, Lucile, age six, and Pansy, age eleven.⁵⁹ While Lucile agreed to accompany the couple, Pansy refused and declared her wish to stay with the Byrds, the grandparents who had looked after the children in Celia’s absence.⁶⁰ The newspaper printed part of Pansy’s subsequent emotional deposition: “I saw Otto sitting out front in an automobile and asked mama if that was not Uncle Otto . . . she told me it was a taxi cab driver. But I know Uncle Otto and I know it was him.”⁶¹ W. P. Byrd, Celia’s father, issued an equally emotive call that Wood be brought to justice and challenged the state to offer a higher reward for his capture:

It seems to me the state would be more interested than it seems in getting Otto back in prison. Every state official knows he [Wood] is a dangerous man. I do not care so much about my daughter going away with him. If she was crazy enough to go that was her business. She is grown and old enough to know better. But I do hate to think

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Otto Wood and Paramour Kidnap Child From High Point School,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 25 September 1930.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

of my little granddaughter [*sic*] with him, using her to help him get away with his mean tricks. . . .

There is no doubt about him bein [*sic*] armed. He always goes prepared for an emergency. He will attempt a holdup before the first of the week. He must get money from some place and he can't earn it honestly. . . . I just dread to think of my little grandchild being with them I am afraid she is going to get killed. I wish the state would get into this case and get back for me the little girl. . . . It is the duty of North Carolina to go after Otto and I hope state officials will realize the duty.⁶²

The article also mentioned that Otto and Celia Wood traveled “heavily armed” alongside another fugitive from the state named Bill Payne.⁶³ “Any attempt to stop them will be very dangerous,” warned the report, “for they [the police] know Payne will try to shoot his way out. He has such a reputation and there is no question what Otto will do when cornered.”⁶⁴

With the sympathies of Wood's family, the state, and the press polarized, the outlaw's flight took a desperate turn as his run extended into the fall. Although newspapers still acknowledged Wood's picturesque qualities with nicknames and phantom imagery—using nicknames like “the will-o'-the-wisp” and the “ghost”—concern began to build within their texts that Wood no longer exhibited the same playful demeanor that hallmarked his earlier escapes.⁶⁵ Governor Gardner and the state's failure to acknowledge Wood as a threat, as well as the lackluster nature of their pursuit, proved a common theme within Carolina newspapers. Although Wood had once denied any bloodthirsty actions, the climate of 1930, perhaps due

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “Richard Croker Object of Search,” *Statesville Landmark*, 17 November 1931.

in no small part to the advent of the Great Depression, gave a heightened air of desperation to his run. He himself more than likely felt the strain of the economic downturn which had occurred during his time behind bars. With less money to steal, the people of North Carolina proved less likely to forgive a robber purported to prey on roadside businesses. The 1930s constituted a new decade, one with a sense of instability that did not bode well for Wood's prospects as a fugitive.

On October 9, North Carolina issued a proclamation that officially dubbed Wood an outlaw with a price of \$250 for his death or capture.⁶⁶ The State Prison added an additional \$125 to the dead or alive bounty.⁶⁷ Governor Gardner, still convinced Wood was not worthy of the term outlaw, lobbied against the placement of such high rewards for his failed experiment and insisted that more publicity would only fuel the momentum of the fugitive's run.⁶⁸ State Prison Warden Honeycutt reminded Carolinians that "Otto is such a publicity hound [that] if he thought he would get a big headline in the papers he would try almost anything . . . he is pretty shrewd and may give us a lot more trouble."⁶⁹ In response to Honeycutt's prophecy, a rash of Otto Wood sightings extended across much of northwestern and north central North Carolina throughout September and October of 1930. Forsyth County officers cornered a man who matched Wood's description between Rural Hall and Winston-Salem, yet failed to capture the suspect when he leapt from his automobile and escaped.⁷⁰ Another report claimed that an Iredell County man saw Wood as the fugitive drove through Statesville "going out in the direction of Hickory."⁷¹ A traveling salesman named F. F. Reid

⁶⁶ "Price Is Set By State On Otto Wood: Declared Outlaw by Governor and Reward Is Raised for Apprehension." *The Mount Airy News*, 9 October 1930.

⁶⁷ "Otto Wood Has Price On Head," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 9 October 1930.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ "Warden Honeycutt Describes Otto as 'Publicity Hound,'" *Statesville Landmark*, 22 September 1930.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ "Otto Passes Through and Only Red Light Stops Him," *Statesville Landmark*, 22 September 1930.

contacted the Winston-Salem police force for a photograph of Wood, whom he claimed had robbed him and stolen his car in Roanoke, Virginia.⁷² Soon thereafter, police found a car reported stolen by Wood from David Massey, a former North Carolina State Prison guard, within the city limits of Roanoke.⁷³ At about this same time, the staff at a High Point lunch counter claimed Wood and “Mrs. Robert Wood, his alleged travelling companion” visited and ate at the stand on September 24th.⁷⁴ Raleigh police reported the finding of a check “made out to Otto Wood” on “the floor of a local hotel,” but acknowledged the discovery as a false alarm and “practical joke.”⁷⁵ As the reports of sightings streamed in to authorities across the state, lawmen scrambled to catch up with the outlaw whose sporadic appearances made him nearly impossible to pin down.

In November 1930, a month after the state levied the price on Otto Wood, the escape artist was captured and then set free by authorities near Tulsa, Oklahoma.⁷⁶ The officer who apprehended Wood mentioned finding the outlaw sleeping in a car with a woman and six-year-old child.⁷⁷ The officer let the trio go due to the fact that he found nothing unusual about families sleeping in cars. Not until he was shown a photograph did the policeman recognize North Carolina’s most wanted man.⁷⁸ “Otto Wood Back for Christmas” headlined the December 24, 1930, *Statesville Landmark*, which reported Wood as having circled his way back to North Carolina in the company of three “companions” that included “a woman and a child” as well as “a man who was driving.”⁷⁹ Wood and his companions stopped for “a soft

⁷² “Otto Wood Up to His Old Tricks,” *Statesville Landmark*, 22 September 1930.

⁷³ “New Angle Escape of Otto Wood Discovered,” *Burlington Daily Times*, 22 September 1930.

⁷⁴ “Otto Is Reported Back In Guilford,” *Statesville Landmark*, 25 September 1930.

⁷⁵ “State News,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 16 October 1930.

⁷⁶ “Otto Wood, North Carolina Escape Artist Arrested But Freed Before Identity Known,” *Burlington Daily Times*, 7 November 1930.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ “Otto Wood Back for Christmas,” *Statesville Landmark*, 24 December 1930.

drink” at Terrace Gardens between High Point and Winston-Salem in a “Packard automobile.”⁸⁰ The apparent nonchalant demeanor of Wood’s run held through December as the desperado lay low throughout the Christmas season.

At 1:45 p.m. on December 31, 1930, Salisbury, North Carolina Police Chief R. Lee Rankin received information that a man who matched Wood’s description walked the streets of the city.⁸¹ Accompanied by Deputy J. W. Kesler, Rankin found Wood and a companion, later identified as Ray Banner Barker of St. Paul (Virginia, erroneously reported as Minnesota), as they walked along Innes Street located only a block and half from the town’s police station.⁸² When two officers noticed Wood’s distinctive club foot and the way he hid his left hand from view, Kesler and Rankin pulled their car up to the curve where Rankin exited and walked up on the street to confront Wood.⁸³ “Otto Wood, let me see your hand,” Rankin said.⁸⁴ Wood replied, “Here it is, damn it” and produced a .45 caliber pistol from his pocket.⁸⁵ The fugitive then attempted to hold up the officers as he forced Rankin back into the car and ordered the policemen to drive him out of town at gunpoint.⁸⁶ *The Burlington Times* related the scene of the shootout that followed in detail:

As Wood climbed into the car with a threat to the men to drive him out of town or [they] would be killed. Chief Rankin leaped from the car and fired. The bullet struck Wood in the leg and he returned fire as he leaped from the car. In the meantime, Kesler brought his gun into action and fired twice. Wood shot again and then Chief

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Thomas, “Last Shootout,” *The State*, 13.

⁸² “Otto Wood Killed By Salisbury’s Chief of Police,” *Robesonian*, 1 January 1930.

⁸³ “Otto Wood Shot to Death at Salisbury Today,” *Burlington Daily Times*, 31 December 1930.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Noted Criminal Shot to Death in Police Fight,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 1 January 1930.

Rankin sent his second bullet crashing into Wood's mouth and face. The charge, fired at close range, fairly blew one side of Wood's face off.

Barker, Wood's companion stood by and watched the battle, Kesler said. The heavy caliber pistol officer took from him was not loaded. . . . He said Wood had picked him up a night ago and that he did not know who he was at the time.⁸⁷

Police later determined that Roy Banner Barker held no criminal connection to Otto Wood and found him guilty only of illegally "carrying a concealed weapon."⁸⁸ Barker told lawmen he found Wood "a big hearted companion" and told only that they visited Wood's "relatives and friends" in the western portion of North Carolina prior to their arrival in Salisbury.⁸⁹

In a passionate response to Wood's death, the *Mt. Airy News* absolved Governor Gardner of any foolhardiness in his treatment of the deceased outlaw. "Governor Gardner was not hard to persuade," explained the report as its author reiterated how the "heart of the executive always beats double time for any fellow who is victim of the strength of the state."⁹⁰ The newspaper stated that Gardner "inherited" Wood from former governors Morrison and McLean and lauded the latter for his stand, which had placed the escape artist in solitary.⁹¹ Prisoners in the penitentiary, though they felt "regret that Mr. Wood had to die," reportedly held the "bitterest" sentiment against the bandit for his betrayal which left them in "misery."⁹² The *Mt. Airy* article concluded that Wood's "treacherous treatment of Governor Gardner was a terrible blow to the welfare of every man and woman in the service of the

⁸⁷ "Otto Wood Shot to Death at Salisbury Today," *Burlington Daily Times*, 31 December 1930.

⁸⁸ "Companion of Otto Wood Is Paroled By Governor Gardner," *Burlington Daily Times*, 25 February 1931.

⁸⁹ Otto Wood, *Life History of Otto Wood* (Reprint, The Record of Wilkes: North Wilkesboro, 2011), 20.

⁹⁰ "Pistol Battle With Officers Is Fatal to Otto Wood," *Mount Airy News*, 1 January 1931.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

state.”⁹³ Although Wood’s betrayal had exposed flaws in Gardner’s push for a prison system intent on rehabilitation, the governor’s overhaul of the Central Prison at Raleigh would eventually succeed. By February 1931, officials at the prison reported their population as “gaining at [a] fast rate.”⁹⁴ After receiving a record twenty-five prisoners received in a single day, Governor Gardner and prison officials pressed for the building a new prison plant.⁹⁵ The result yielded the construction of over thirty camps by the end of 1931 which removed prisoners from the overcrowded cells in Raleigh.⁹⁶ The sanitary conditions at these camps, though a marked improvement over Central Prison, were complicated by the lack of statewide funding and constituted at best a flawed victory by the time Gardner left office in 1933.⁹⁷

During the months that preceded the violent gunfight in Salisbury, Wood’s popularity had waned. His failure as political pawn under the control of Governor Gardner and his false promise to the state translated his previous persona of a harmless, “honest” criminal to that of a “mad,” dangerous outlaw altogether untrustworthy in nature. Yet, despite the negative press prior to Wood’s death, the spectacle produced by his violent end once again reshaped the bad man’s image. The New Year’s Eve gunfight yielded a Wild West style conclusion to a lifelong crime spree and, in the months that followed, elevated Otto Wood to the status of a mythicized, historic folk hero—North Carolina’s latter day Jesse James.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ “Prison Population Is Gaining at Fast Rate,” *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 12 February 1931.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Morrison, *Governor O. Max Gardner*, 94.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 95.

Chapter 6: “Step It Buddies and Listen to My Song”: Otto Wood as a Folk Hero, 1931-2012

“Lythe and listen, gentlemen,
 That be of frebore blode;
 I shall you tel of a gode yeman,
 His name was Robyn Hood.” —*The Gest of Robyn Hood*, circa 1400.

“Step it up buddies and listen to my song,
 I’ll sing it to you right but you might sing it wrong,
 A story about a man they called Otto Wood,
 Can’t tell it all but I wish I could.” —“*Otto Wood the Bandit*,” by Walter “Kid”
 Smith and the Carolina Buddies, 1931.

On Tuesday, February 24, 1931, Walter Smith stood behind a microphone at Columbia Studios in New York City ready to record a new selection of “hillbilly” songs. After the early success of the recordings of Fiddlin’ John Carson in the mid-1920s, artists and repertoire men from burgeoning labels such as Columbia and Victor had traversed through mill towns and railroad hubs south of the Mason-Dixon Line in search of talented singers, musicians, and practitioners of country music. Auditions held in urban centers, such as Victor “A & R man” Ralph Peer’s notable Bristol Sessions, attracted a stream of working

class hopefuls keen on both recording their songs and collecting at least some small profit from the hillbilly music craze. Farmers such as the Carter Family, a tuberculosis-plagued railroad brakeman named Jimmie Rodgers, and a former freight-hauling wagoner dubbed Uncle Dave Macon all gained popularity as they established themselves among the first professional stars of country music.

A native of Carroll County, Virginia, Walter “Kid” Smith represented another such character in the cast of homegrown musicians who figured into the infancy of the country genre. Smith began his singing career in the musical culture surrounding the textile mills of Spray, North Carolina. A former sawyer and mill hand, he first earned his nickname Kid in the boxing ring.¹ By the late 1920s, inspired by neighbors such as the popular banjoist and singer Charlie Poole, the middle-aged Smith had altogether forsaken his earlier occupations for a career as a singer and composer. Backed by guitarist Norman Woodlief and fiddler Odell Smith under the moniker of The Carolina Buddies, Kid prepared for his February 1931 session a composition tailor-made to the ears of his neighbors in the foothills of North Carolina and Virginia.² This surefire hit ripped inspiration from recent newspaper headlines to construct a story-song full of action, dialogue, and tragedy. As Smith sang into the microphone, a nearby machine revolved while a needle cut small ridges into a wax disc and chiseled out a 78 rounds-per-minute memorial to the life and death of “Otto Wood, the Bandit.”

Initial reactions to the death of North Carolina’s most noted criminal on New Year’s Eve 1930 varied from author to author as various journalists and latter day philosophers attempted to reveal their own truths about society as encapsulated by the deceased outlaw.

¹ Kip Lornell, *Virginia’s Blues, Country, & Gospel Records: 1902-1943: An Annotated Bibliography* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 170.

² *Ibid.*, 170

The earthbound afterlife provided to Wood by these commentators balanced his image on a precipice that teetered above the gulf between folk hero and infamous sociopath. The *Wilkes Journal-Patriot* offered a brief eulogy that highlighted the events of Wood's life—"lived . . . longer than was expected"—and lauded him as the "Will o' the Wisp" of North Carolina in celebration of his "many and varied escapes."³ Another report, published in the *Mt. Airy News*, offered a decidedly lengthy analysis of Wood's life and character. The column also addressed the conflicted sentiments held by North Carolinians in the wake of his death:

Every man who is not afraid to express his sentiments will admit that there is something about a daring man like Otto Wood that appeals to him. We all have admiration for the man who has no fear. With the passing of Mr. Wood there will be all kinds of reactions. Some will take him as a huge joke, a silly man who was able to treat a great state with impudence and laugh in the face of law and order. Others see him a man persecuted and justified in getting some kind of revenge for the ill treatment he received. Many will think of him as a victim of some kind of mental derangement and a man who should have been confined in the department for the insane.⁴

Following up on the charge of mental derangement, the *Mt. Airy* writer speculated that Wood perhaps possessed a "defective brain," had "been spoiled in training," or "may have been both a victim of heredity and training."⁵ The columnist ultimately claimed that the fault behind Wood's lifetime of crime grew from roots in either his education or in the "mistakes"

³ "Otto Wood, Notorious Bandit, Killed in Salisbury Yesterday," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 1 January 1931.

⁴ "Otto Wood," *Mount Airy News*, 1 January 1931.

⁵ *Ibid.*

of “old Mother Nature.”⁶ “The real sorrow,” the *Mt. Airy News* lamented in a stern air of social commentary, “should be that any such condition should exist that makes possible an Otto Wood.”⁷ In one final paragraph, the newsman proclaimed Wood “a misfortune and calamity for his day and generation . . . a freak, a man out of the ordinary and unable to make his life conform to the times in which he lived.”⁸

“Mothers Will Need New ‘Bogey Man’” lamented the January 5, 1931, edition of the *Statesville Landmark*.⁹ The text explained the origins of an “Otto myth,” a tale often told by “Raleigh mothers” which explained that Otto “carried a big sack over his shoulder” to steal away spiteful children.¹⁰ During Wood’s repeated escapes, the article recalled, the fanciful lecture on the “legendary character” was frequently used to make children mind their elders.¹¹ A more serious column published in the same issue, entitled “Thanks For the Removal of a Menace,” portrayed Wood as a real-life monster and justified his death as “a desperate remedy for a desperate man.”¹² The author chided lawmen who “called too long with Otto Wood” and opined that the celebrated convict “had his chance, a far greater chance than he deserved” to redeem himself.¹³ The columnist further posited that Wood “playacted” his way into the sympathies of the public and onto newspaper headlines:

Wood’s career, his appeal to the spectacular, made him a sort of hero in the eyes of those to whom the dramatic appeal regardless of its content or the purpose of its content or the purpose of the play that produces the acting. To this glorification

⁶Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Mothers Will Need New ‘Bogey Man,’” *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² “Thanks For the Removal of A Menace,” *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931.

¹³ Ibid.

newspaper reporters who have made a business of playing up the fellow, made large contribution. By implication some seem to regret his death. . . . They are a-meanin' no harm but the harm that may be done by contributing to the dare devil plays of hardened criminals, murderers and potential murderers, is self-evident. Others will lament the "poor boy" that "never had a chance" and other stuff like that. He [Wood] had all sorts of chances and proved himself unworthy of every opportunity for reformation.¹⁴

The article also reminded readers that the "duty of the government" and "all good citizens" must focus on "public protection" and the "killing" of men such as Wood by necessity.¹⁵

"The law dallied long with Otto Wood in North Carolina," the reporter bemoaned, lauding the fact that "more lives were not sacrificed" before Wood's final shootout.¹⁶

Despite the negative critiques on Wood's life, the events that occurred as his body waited for burial in the Salisbury morgue began to sway public opinion and gradually restored him to the status of a victimized hero. Celia Byrd, the supposed bride and travelling companion of Otto Wood, sent a telegram home to High Point, North Carolina, to confirm his death.¹⁷ The reply read: "O. H. Wood dead. Come home. We want you."¹⁸ Celia and her daughter returned home on January 2, 1931, a reunion that once again captured the attention of the press.¹⁹ The outlaw's family, headed by Otto's mother Ellen Wood, requested his body for burial in Coaldale, West Virginia.²⁰ Luther Wood and Clarence Blizzard, a brother-in-law

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Mrs. Celia Byrd Wires Her Mother," *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Mother of Bandit Asks For His Body," *San Antonio Express*, 2 January 1931.

from Coaldale, traveled from West Virginia to Salisbury, but returned home after “they could raise no funds for burial.”²¹ On the same afternoon, Duke University offered a competing bid of \$50 to transport the body to Durham for use in the medical school, a standard practice for unclaimed bodies of escaped convicts.²² W. P. Byrd, the father of Wood’s “paramour,” after a failed attempt to take out a loan in order to pay for a burial, stated that he “would have been satisfied if the body had gone to a pauper’s grave rather than to a medical school.”²³

While the family hurried to rescue Wood’s remains before authorities accepted Duke’s offer, North Carolinians rushed to catch an up-close glimpse of the criminal celebrity. In a retrospective on a January 1931 issue, the *Salisbury Post* recounted that during the period when authorities debated over the fate of the unclaimed corpse, a local undertaker publicly displayed Wood while “thousands of persons . . . the number as high as 20,000” streamed by the bandit’s remains.²⁴ The article described how the crowds made “much comment” about “Otto’s left arm, minus a hand” as well as his “three front gold teeth.”²⁵ The *Post* reporter expressed wonder at how the undertakers took care to lower the grotesque quality of the exhibition and reconstructed Wood’s face so that the wounds which killed him “could hardly be seen.”²⁶ After the exposition, Salisbury citizens, upon hearing that Wood’s family possessed no money to bury their son, collected more than sixty dollars for a train ride for the body and funds to provide for the outlaw’s burial in Coaldale, West Virginia.²⁷ “Local citizens hearing that no funds were available for the burial,” described the *Salisbury Post*,

²¹ “Local Chapter Which Ended Story of Otto Wood’s Life Is Closed When Body Is Sent To W. Virginia,” *Salisbury Post*, 5 January 1931.

²² “Otto Wood’s Body Still In Salisbury,” *Statesville Landmark*, 5 January 1931.

²³ “Local Chapter Which Ended Story of Otto Wood’s Life Is Closed When Body Is Sent To W. Virginia,” *Salisbury Post*, 5 January 1931.

²⁴ “Post Gave Detailed Account of Shootout,” *Salisbury Post*, 31 December 2010.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

“wired Mrs. Wood that they would send the body of her son if she desired to bury it.”²⁸ The embarkation of Otto Wood’s body from the Salisbury station attracted an outpouring of sympathy from Carolinians as hundreds gathered to watch the casket, bedecked by “a number of floral designs contributed by local persons,” loaded onto a rail car.²⁹

The burial of Otto Wood near his mother’s home in the hills of West Virginia by no means signaled the extinguishment of his celebrity. “Otto Wood Is Here!” shouted an advertisement in *The Burlington Daily Times*, the bold square inviting “Every Citizen in This Community” to the Alamance Hotel for a “Sensational Prison Show.”³⁰ Instead of Otto Wood’s body, the hotel lobby featured a free display of “Life-Like” wax dummies, the most prominent in the likeness of the recently deceased one-handed bandit.³¹ The publicity stunt apparently enjoyed some popularity with the public and continued through the fall of 1932.³² Wood’s dummy stood within “a complete line up of all criminals of any national notoriety” that began with “Jesse James and his gang” and concluded with “Harry Powers (American Blue Beard)” alongside “Scarface Al Capone.”³³ Following on the heels of the exhibit, Greensboro newspaperman C. R. Sumner announced his intention to publish the story of Otto Wood, entitled “The One-Handed Terror of the South.”³⁴ *The Lexington Dispatch* described Wood’s life as one suitable to memoriam in a “detective story magazine.”

²⁸ “Local Chapter Which Ended Story of Otto Wood’s Life Is Closed When Body Is Sent To W. Virginia,” *The Salisbury Post*, 5 January 1931.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ “WANTED!” *Burlington Daily Times*, 20 March 1931.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “An Extraordinary Presentment Offers Itself Opposite the Alamance Hotel,” *Burlington Daily Times*, 11 November 1932.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ “Thrilling Story of Otto Wood’s Life Subject of Story,” *Lexington Dispatch*, 22 May 1933.

The name and legend of Otto Wood, ‘the one-handed terror of the South,’ comes to the fore again, not with the violent emphasis of a few years ago, but with equally startling force from the pages of a detective story magazine which went on the stands last week. . . . It is a thrilling, absorbing piece that Sumner has woven about the misdeeds of the daring Otto Wood, whose amazing career rivaled that of Jesse James, Billy the Kid, and others famous in the outlaw history of this country.³⁵

After a wealth of comparisons to Jesse James throughout his life, in death Wood took his place among the lexicon of uniquely American criminals. The Jesse James parallel gained further accentuation as the Robin Hood qualities of Otto Wood’s exploits became celebrated in popular memory.

The first to give a “Robin Hood-esque” lyrical tribute to North Carolina’s most famous outlaw were Bob Cranford and A. P. Thompson, a duo of Tar Heel musicians popularly associated with a string band known as The Red Fox Chasers.³⁶ In a recording session for Gennett Record’s subsidiary Champion label held at Richmond, Indiana, on January 27, 1931—less than a month after the bandit’s death—the pair waxed a guitar and harmonica duet with harmony vocals that eulogized the life and times of Otto Wood.³⁷ Set to a tune easily recognizable as the traditional ballad of “Jesse James,” Cranford and Thompson’s harmonies delivered a story that followed Wood from his days as a brakeman on the railroad to his last moments during the shootout on the streets of Salisbury. The ballad’s opening line even parodied the older lyrics about Jesse James and replaced “Jesse James, we

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Tony Russell and Bob Pinson, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 731.

³⁷ Ibid.

understand” with “Otto Wood we are told, was mighty brave and bold.” Despite the time limitations set by the recording technology of the era, the Carolina musicians managed to fit plenty of narrative detail into their short ballad that clocked in at just under three minutes long. The story-song repeated Wood’s own often told tale to the press of the loss of his hand in a railroad accident and loosely paraphrased Rankin’s words spoken before the first shots of the outlaw’s last gun battle. Though the song stuck mainly to the facts as told by newspapers, the composition displayed some hints of sympathy towards the latter day highwayman. “He was known throughout the land, for he had one only hand,” one verse noted then flaunted how the bandit nonetheless “in bravery traveled on his merry way.”³⁸ In a slight contrast, the flip side of Cranford and Thompson’s “Otto Wood” featured a similar story-song about Charlie Lawson, a Stokes County farmer who made headlines for the murder of his family on Christmas Day 1929.³⁹ The disc, which paired two bloody accounts of crime, sold well and became the most financially successful of the Otto Wood ballads.

Following on the heels of Cranford and Thompson’s recording, Walter “Kid” Smith, another North Carolina musician eager to cash in on Wood’s story, traveled to New York City to pitch his own composition entitled “Otto Wood, the Bandit” to a major recording label.⁴⁰ Smith’s “Otto Wood,” much like Cranford and Thompson’s, also made use of a more traditional melody, in this instance a fiddle tune known as “The Little Methodist.”⁴¹ Kid and his band The Carolina Buddies first auditioned the song for the Victor company, but after being rejected took the song to Columbia.⁴² Arranged by fellow mill town musician Posey

³⁸ “Otto Wood,” *In the Pines: Tar Heel Folk Songs and Fiddle Tunes* (Raleigh: Old Hat Records, 2008).

³⁹ Kinney Rorrer, “Off the Record: Otto Wood the Bandit,” *Old Time Herald* 9.6 (Winter 2004-2005): 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴¹ Patrick Sky, “Otto Wood the Bandit”: A North Carolina Ballad,” *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 41.1 (Winter-Spring 1994):43.

⁴² Rorrer, “Off the Record,” 19.

Rorrer, a fiddler known by Columbia for his work with Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, the February 25, 1931, recording session assured that Smith's record would reach the public while the memory of Wood's death still lingered vividly in their conscience.⁴³ *The Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, upon Smith and the Carolina Buddies' return from New York, recognized the recording with the headline "Otto Wood to Achieve Immortality in Verse."⁴⁴ The *Journal* column announced that, though "shot and killed," Wood "is to live within the realm of 'canned music'" and offered a brief description of the recording trip:

Walter Smith, Norman Woodlief, and Odell Smith, a singing trio from Leaksville, N. C., passed through here today on their way home after having visited New York where they made a record of their new song, "Otto Wood, the Bandit," for a well known recording company. The ballad is one detailing the life of Otto Wood ever since he came into the public eye.⁴⁵

Smith's "Otto Wood, the Bandit," accompanied by a catchy, syncopated guitar and fiddle duet, possessed the sound of a lighthearted romp which empathized with Wood and recounted his adventures. "Otto, why didn't you run?" begged the song's chorus alluding to the gunplay at Salisbury, "When the sheriff pulled out his .44 gun." With a bit of artistic license, underlined by the reference to Chief of Police Rankin as "the sheriff" with his .38 police issue revolver recast as a ".44 gun," the song once again aligned Wood with the imagery of the Old West. The lyrics claimed that "he loved the women and he hated the law and he just wouldn't take nobody's jaw," an accentuation of Wood's rough, roustabout

⁴³ Rorrer, "Off the Record," 19.

⁴⁴ "Otto Wood to Achieve Immortality in Verse," *Wilkes Journal-Patriot*, 12 March 1931.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

personality. More original and poignant than Cranford and Thompson's take on the noted outlaw, the chorus of Smith's composition asked a question about Otto Wood's character that many North Carolinians had no doubt pondered since the Salisbury gunfight— "Why hadn't Wood run?" Why would an outlaw known for a lifetime of escapes and flights suddenly engage in battle with police? Wood's career prior to 1931, except the murder charge for the incident with Kaplan in 1923, held little to suggest that Wood used a gun for anything more than a prop. The previous violence exhibited by Wood seemed only a means to hinder those on his trail and, when finally cornered by lawmen, he always surrendered without a fight. Underneath a bouncy melody, Smith's prose pleaded to know what changed Wood and caused him to return fire at Salisbury. The unanswered question cast the Salisbury gunfight as a minor tragedy, a hindrance in the public's ability to understand a personality that possessed all the hallmarks of a folk hero.

Among those attracted by Walter Kid Smith's ode to "Otto Wood, the Bandit" was Bernard "Slim" Smith, a locksmith and inventor turned hillbilly songster from northern Mississippi.⁴⁶ More talented as an entrepreneur than a songwriter, Slim Smith by 1931 had claimed a history of modest success in the music business with such compositions as the "Farm Relief Song," a topical piece on the plight of southern farmers recorded multiple times by the popular singer Vernon Dalhart.⁴⁷ Slim likely stumbled upon Kid Smith's "Otto Wood" by happenstance in a visit to Victor studios during the Carolina musician's audition.⁴⁸ Kid Smith later remembered someone taking notes during his audition of "Otto Wood, the Bandit." Music scholar and historian Kinney Rorrer later surmised that "the 'note taker' may

⁴⁶ Tony Russell, *Country Music: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁸ Rorrer, "Off the Record," 19.

have been Bernard Smith.”⁴⁹ Better acquainted with the sounds of urban vaudeville than Kid Smith’s Carolina Buddies, Slim Smith jazzed up the lament for the outlaw with a jumpy swing guitar rhythm and solos by Hawaiian steel guitarist “King” Benny Nawahi. Smith’s vocals, though flat and somewhat disjointed in meter, delivered a mesh of lyrics from the two previous Otto Wood ballads as well as other lines probably inspired by newspaper accounts:

Now listen folks while I sing this song,

I’m tellin’ the truth but it may sound wrong,

It’s all about poor Otto Wood,

I’m sure he did everything he could,

T’was in the pawnshop one rainy day,

The truth may hurt but I must say,

He struck his man with awful blows,

And here’s the way the story goes,

They spread the news as fast as they could,

The sheriff said, “People, catch Otto Wood!”

“The murder, it’s murder, the second degree,”

And the judge sent Wood to the penitentiary,

He was sent to the pen but it did no good,

It wasn’t strong enough to hold Otto Wood,

He managed some way to get outside,

⁴⁹ Ibid, 19.

And with his pistol he demanded a ride,
And no one knows how he got his gun,
But we do know that Otto won't run.

They finally caught him a way out west,
But had to shoot him in the chest,
They brought him back and got him well,
And locked him into a dungeon cell,
And there he stayed for days and days,
Until he promised he'd change his ways,

He was a man who would not run,
And he always carried his .44 gun,
He loved the women and hated the law,
And just wouldn't take nobody's jaw,
He thought he was an awful bet,
But now he leaves a story that's sad,

And here's the way the story goes,
They spread the news as fast as they could,
The sheriff said, "People, catch Otto Wood!"
"It's murder, it's murder in the first degree!"
And they sent poor Wood to the penitentiary,

He rambled out west and all around,
And when he came back to the southern town,
He was met by Rankin and Kesler they say,
And there he had everything his way,
He defended himself the very best he could,
But the law laid claim for Otto Wood.

Slim Smith's verses repeatedly used the words "awful" and "poor" as descriptive of Otto Wood and his acts. Even the darker stories of Wood's life, the murder of Kaplan included, Bernard Smith cast as "awful," unfortunate events that happened to Wood rather than having been caused directly by him. Poor Otto Wood, the victim, suffered through his life, a rebel who tried to live by his own terms. These terms put him at odds with the state and led to his martyrdom at Salisbury. The song echoed the *Mt. Airy News*' assessment of Wood as "a man out of the ordinary" and a man "unable to make his life conform to the times in which he lived." By Smith's account, Otto Wood, an old west character in the automobile age, was cornered by forces beyond his control. His death, though lamentable, constituted a necessity in order for the Progressive South to move forward. With characters like Wood relegated to the "rogues gallery" of the past, with society cleansed, the reform movement that previously experimented with Otto Wood could march on without impediment. Slim Smith's composition pointed to the grey area where neither Otto Wood nor the state adequately represented the villain. In the true spirit of ballad tradition, Wood left "a story that's sad," a violent warning for the benefit of all those who heard the verses.

A year later, a fourth Otto Wood ballad by North Carolina textile worker and songsmith Dorsey Dixon appeared on April 28, 1932, in the *Rockingham Post-Dispatch*.⁵⁰ Dixon's homiletic song, entitled "The Shooting of Otto Wood," lifted language from earlier ballads, most notably the 1912 ballad of Virginia outlaw Claude Allen, to summarize the fugitive's final days:

Watch your step as you travel this life,
 Don't make that great mistake,
 And the cry out for mercy
 And help for it may be too late,

Otto Wood is now peacefully sleeping
 Beneath the cold, cold clay,
 But, oh, the stand he must take
 In that Resurrection Day!⁵¹

With an added dose of spiritual reckoning, Dixon transported Wood's story to higher moral ground. Wood's fault lay not in "mental deficiencies," but in a deficiency of the spirit that held repercussions far beyond the grave. The tragic figure forsook the narrow path of the Christian life for his own crooked path to destruction. By Dixon's account, no matter how heroic Wood may have seemed in life and lore, the outlaw's sins would plague him in the afterlife.

⁵⁰ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 375.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 375.

Dixon's song seems to have never made it to the recording studio. With the economic downturn of the Great Depression, record labels cut their losses and sacrificed the niche markets of hillbilly and race records. Kid Smith's "Otto Wood, the Bandit," released in April 1931, sold 2,713 discs, numbers termed "respectable" by country music historian Kenny Rorrer who acknowledged that "other records were selling by the hundreds by this time."⁵² Slim Smith's version, recorded and released earlier on March 27, 1931, outsold the Carolina Buddies' record with a sales of 3,138 copies.⁵³ Despite returns well short of "hit" records, the songs recorded by Cranford and Thompson, Walter Kid Smith, Bernard Slim Smith, as well as the stanzas by Dorsey Dixon, all represented a shift in the tradition of ballad making. Their songs continued the practice of songsters who observed notable events contemporary to their own time and memorialized them in verse. As explained by ballad scholar J. C. Hodgart, among the functions of balladry as passed down from the British Isles was the means to celebrate locality:

[Ballads] are about minor events in national history, which are, of course, major events for local community, some of which have been recorded in historical documents. There is no clear dividing line between these ballads and the properly historical, except they do not as a rule show the same traces of professional minstrelsy. They record heroic actions like cattle-raiding and bridestealing, murders, and intrigues.⁵⁴

⁵² Rorrer, "Off the Record," 19.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

The musicians who recorded the Otto Wood ballad promoted an outlaw local to North Carolina and the Southeast, yet functioned under a new environment created by national recording labels. Instead of the ballad sheets of the Old World, these musicians used the modern “canned music” to preserve and disseminate their songs. “Although they were professional musicians,” wrote music scholar Patrick Sky, “the Carolina Buddies were steeped in the tradition of Southern ballads and songs, and the songs that they were likely to write would be traditional in flavor.”⁵⁵ These pioneers of country music bridged the divide between the story-songs passed down in the foothills of the Southeast and the industrialized atmosphere created by the labels that spawned the country genre of music.

Unfortunately for Otto Wood’s legacy, the advancement of technology stifled the ballads from attaining the prominence of more traditional songs such as “Jesse James.” “His [Wood’s] immortality was in the hands of traditional musicians operating within a popular culture format that had its seasonal popularity,” wrote Patrick Sky, “and his reputation was soon buried by the next season’s hits.”⁵⁶ Sky concluded that just as Wood “had the misfortune of being born generations later than Jesse James or Robin Hood,” his memory suffered the same fate as modernization removed the songs about him from the oral tradition and left them static in the form of records.⁵⁷ Not until Doc Watson performed the Carolina Buddies’ “Otto Wood, the Bandit” during the 1960s would a song about the Carolina criminal once again find a broader audience.⁵⁸

In part due to Doc Watson’s revival of the song, public interest in Otto Wood reemerged in the 2000s, nearly three-quarters of a century after the outlaw’s death. *The*

⁵⁵ Sky, “Otto Wood,” 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁸ See Doc Watson, *The Best of Doc Watson 1964-1968* (Vanguard, 1999).

Record, a newspaper local to Wood's home region of North Wilkesboro, printed a series of articles on Wood throughout December 2004 and sold reprinted copies of Wood's *Life History*.⁵⁹ Among those featured in the retrospective was Thurmond Sparks, Wood's second cousin, who recalled the Robin Hood-like qualities of his relative: "My mamma told me a lot about him. . . .She said he wouldn't rob from a poor person. I think he was a good man. He wasn't bad to fight. He didn't want to harm anybody. He just wanted to rob."⁶⁰ Hubert Foster, another of Wood's cousins, remembered a similar story: "People loved to see him come. He was kind of like Santa Claus. Back then, times were tough. He'd bring people clothes, like shirts and overalls. They knew he had stole them from somewhere, but they didn't care."⁶¹ In addition to the series the Elkville String Band, a group of veteran Wilkes County musicians formed as part of the cast of the local drama, "Tom Dooley: A Wilkes County Legend"—which celebrated another Wilkes County "bad man"—generated further regional enthusiasm for Otto Wood tales with their own recording of Walter Kid Smith's composition.⁶² Spearheaded by *The Record's* editor Jerry Lankford and publisher Ken Welbourn, the community of North Wilkesboro dramatized Wood's exploits with the 2011 outdoor production "Otto Wood: The Bandit."⁶³ The play featured a local cast and drew audiences that included Wood's family as well as several elderly people familiar with him from their childhood.⁶⁴ The success of the performance reignited Wood's popularity in the vicinity of Wilkes County and has inspired a present campaign to underline his significance as a figure in western North Carolina history and lore.

⁵⁹ *The Record*, 24 November 2004.

⁶⁰ "Otto Wood Recalled As Likeable Outlaw," *The Record*, 8 December 2004.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² See Elkville String Band, *Over the Mountain* (Mountain Roads Recordings, 2008).

⁶³ "Otto Wood Draws Crowds, Relatives of Famed Bandit," *The Record*, 22 June 2011.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In the transformation to folk hero, Otto Wood's image has gone full circle; the downturn in public opinion that precluded his death eventually dissipated as hindsight painted him to embody a tough, yet sympathetic icon of a bygone era. His death, timed perfectly with the opening pangs of the Great Depression, solidified his role as a folkloric character, later framed by the more noted names of John Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd, two later examples of "Depression desperados" perceived to display Wood's same "criminal with a conscience" persona. Thanks to Wood's legend, sources on the outlaw, once as elusive as Wood himself, have emerged and provided scholars with an opportunity to better understand the man behind the songs and stories. Otto Wood, a historical personality more suited to "immortality" through song rather than statue, constituted an individual significant within the conscience of those contemporary to the time in which he lived. Now, in the twenty-first century, a criminal once viewed as driven by his own selfish desire to live his life in defiance to law has united a community and inspired many to reexamine his life in order to discover more about a story unique to the chronicles of North Carolina history.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Speaking of getting tired, old, etc., as most of us are inclined to do as we move into another year, here is something that will make a lot of North Carolinians—especially those in the western counties—feel old.

Otto Wood, the nearest thing North Carolina had to a Dillinger-type roustabout in the roaring '20s, never lived to see 1931 move on the scene.

25 years ago last Saturday . . . Otto Wood was killed in an old-fashioned gun battle with Salisbury's chief of police, R. L. Rankin.—“FEELING OLD DEPT.,” *Spring Hope Enterprise*, 5 January 1956.

When viewed within the context of primary sources, Otto Wood—the man and the myth—provides a study of a person and a persona created within a time of intense social change. Wood's life coincided with the beginning of the Progressive Era in the 1890s, reached its midpoint in the atmosphere of reform politics in the 1920s, and culminated during the Great Depression. Although Wood's motivation for his criminal activities was chiefly for personal gain, he still reacted to and lived under the political and social environment that influenced the common class of white southerners during his lifetime. The narrative arch of

Wood's story, full of attention-grabbing exploits of car chases and gunplay, offers behind its spectacle subtle hints of experiences and issues encountered by North Carolinians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Wood's life constituted a historical cross section important to the foothills and mountains of Appalachia, the State of North Carolina, and the broader history of the southern United States.

The examination of Wood's earliest years in Wilkes County and the coalfields of West Virginia provides a glimpse into the culture of rural people in the late-nineteenth-century South. Wood may have been exceptional for his childhood "wanderlust" and train-hopping, but his nomadic nature was by no means an anomaly. Movement for better occupational opportunities was a fact of life necessitated by the economic realities of the rural South in the early 1900s. The neglect that Wood reported as prominent to his home life in Wilkes County prompted him to enter the cycle of travelling for better prospects early in his childhood and, through extended family connections, led him to the coalfields of southern West Virginia. The teenage years Wood spent in the rough environment of the pre-unionized coalfields exposed him to a lifestyle that focused on survival and profit by any means necessary. The economic conditions of this time and place, in addition to the physical limitations on employment caused by Wood's crippled hand and foot, placed the young man on a social fringe where this mindset of survive and profit was taken to the extreme. The introduction of rail systems and the automobile within Wood's lifetime also allowed for an increased mobility not previously available to people from his region. Much like the mindset of survive and profit, Wood used this mobility to the extreme throughout a lifetime of car thefts and train-hopping.

Wood's rise into the public spotlight in the 1920s coincided with a trend of progressivism in the southern political climate. The outlaw's roots in the rural landscape of western North Carolina contrasted with the suave appearance noted by reporters who visited him at his cell in Greensboro after his arrest for the murder of A. W. Kaplan. The Otto Wood of 1923 and 1924 encapsulated an image of the dual nature of a South on the brink of social and economic reform—he was a commoner with a “provincial” background who rose into the public spotlight as a “self-made man” (albeit one self-made through crime). Transformed in image from “the Outlaw of the Boone Trail” and a regional scourge in western North Carolina, to a controversial individual of statewide importance, the reports on Wood's criminal nature and the debates inspired by his actions revealed much about the society that critiqued him. The discourse within newspapers, prompted by Wood's actions, all asked a central question—How could North Carolina be progressive in its stance towards crime and punishment? Aware of this debate, Wood entered the argument through written statements to newspapers and endeavored to establish himself as a victim of a corrupt and antiquated prison system.

At the height of his fame in the mid-1920s, Wood cashed in on his celebrity with the publication of his *Life History*. The language featured in the manuscript further attached him to reformist politics focused on the eradication of poverty and the uplift of the South through education. Wood's escapes from 1925 to 1927 received extensive coverage in the press and framed the most intensive period of the fugitive writing directly to newspapers. Through his letters, from both the prison cell and hideaways up and down the spine of the Appalachian foothills, Wood stated his case as a victim of a lifetime of impoverished neglect and the cruel conditions of the penitentiary. Wood's carefully constructed pleas and attempts to bargain

with North Carolina's government, simultaneously cast a light on the issues of education, poverty, and crime within the outlaw's home state.

As the 1920s drew to a close, Governor O. Max Gardner recognized Wood's potential as a poster child for his reform-driven political platform that focused on the same issues that had hallmarked Wood's attempts to justify his criminal lifestyle. The infamous convict encapsulated everything that the governor wished to restructure within his state. Gardner picked Wood, North Carolina's most publicized criminal, to conduct "an experiment in humanity" so that he could demonstrate his powers of social reform from the bottom up. Wood used Gardner's willingness to experiment to allow for his last flight from prison, a misguided decision that polarized the public against displaying any amusement at his crimes. The onset of the Great Depression during these final years caused the public to drop all tolerance for Wood's antics and prompted Carolinians to reconceive their views on Wood as a dangerous outlaw.

Wood's death removed him as a perceived threat to society and allowed him, through hindsight to attain the status of a folk legend. The deceased bandit came to embody an outcast, a remnant of an earlier time when North Carolina was still a frontier. This image skewed the reality of Otto Wood's lifetime and ignored the modernization and industrialization that had produced the outlaw more than any remnant of a frontier past. Historian Eric Hobsbawm, in a study of outlawry throughout history coined the term "peasant bandit" to name the criminal type characterized by Otto Wood. Hobsbawm contended that the "peasant bandit" represented a phenomenon that emerged whenever rural societies met industrialization—an environment in which criminals pitted the landscape

against the newfound wealth and population of industry for personal gain.¹ Early-twentieth-century North Carolina held the exact conditions that welcomed a peasant bandit and provided Wood with a predominantly rural landscape to hide his movements between strikes on urban centers such as Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Roanoke.

As more sources emerge concerned with Otto Wood's background and criminal activities, the complexity of his character becomes increasingly layered. In a surprising number of accounts, Wood's descriptions of his movements and crimes appear reasonably factual and point to the validation of his reputation as an honest criminal. The wealth of information concerned with Wood's lifetime forms a hinge on which a gateway into the study of the society around him can further be constructed. Otto Wood was a singular character who emerged in a time and place unique in American history and is therefore deserving of further scholarship that delves into both his life and his legend.

¹ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Orion, 2010).

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Mr. McKenzie possesses a forthright interest in the history, folklore, and musical traditions of the Appalachian region, particularly the Blue Ridge Mountains of southwestern Virginia. He is a musician and performs on variety instruments for concerts and square dances across the United States and abroad. His parents are Jim and Kim McKenzie of Rural Retreat, Virginia.