

Malevolent Maine

Episode 16: The Last Gunslinger

Malevolent Maine is a horror podcast, and may contain material not suitable for all audiences. Listener discretion is advised.

INTRO

MEGAN: A crustacean cryptid who hides among the Downeast dunes. An airplane full of passengers that disappeared into thin air. And an apparent werewolf patrolling the woods of North Monmouth. These are the stories we'll be bringing you in upcoming episodes.

Hey, it's Producer Megan. The boys work hard to investigate the strange occurrences that happen, and when they're not out in the field, they're in the recording studio with me. We work hard to bring you the best stories we can. If you'd like to help, consider joining the Malevolent Mob on patreon. By becoming a patron you'll have access to behind the scenes information, exclusive podcasts, and more. If you're interested, go to www.patreon.com/malevolentmaine to sign up.

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You duck down the alley, taking the shortcut back to your car. Suddenly you catch a whiff of sulfur in the air. You hear the faint notes of a familiar song played on a guitar fading into the night, and a haunting, whistled melody fills your ears. Is that a man leaning against the wall, looking out at you from beneath the brim of a white cowboy hat. And why is there the ruddy gleam of firelight in his eyes?

This is Malevolent Maine.

Guys, what was that?

I saw it with my own eyes

No, seriously, what was that?

It's just not scientifically possible.

I can't explain it.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.

This stuff is wild, man. It's real wild.

But... what was that?

Listen closely, MMers. This week's episode was suggested by our longtime listener, Paul. Paul's an amazing musician who plays all over York County and a good friend of the show. If you get a chance to see him, we highly recommend it. So when Paul suggested we do a show about Virgil Dawson, we were happy to oblige.

Today's story takes us all the way back to 1956, to the city of Lewiston, Maine. Lewiston is Maine's second largest city and was at one point home to numerous textile mills and factories, and at one point was one of the premiere destinations in Maine. It's the place where Muhammad Ali had his second fight with Sonny Liston, the one where Alie stand triumphantly over the prone Liston, bicep cocked. The Boston Celtics played exhibition games in Lewiston during the Red Aurbach era.

Lewiston also has a rich history of musical acts. Jimmi Hendrix, Bruce Springsteen, Queen, and countless other bands have all played shows in Lewiston. But one name stands out amongst all

the other acts - Virgil Dawson - because his performance at the Lewiston Music Hall was his last.

Virgil Dawson was born outside Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1938. From an early age he was a gifted guitar player and he soon began performing local shows, dressed in his traditional black outfit with a low white cowboy hat. Like many of his contemporaries - Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and the others - rode a rising tide of popular rockabilly music.

Dawson was more Johnny Cash than Elvis, but he spent a good deal of time on the road with both of them. He was known primarily for his songwriting, which told complex stories of lonely cowboys who were forced to grow up in a world that didn't understand them. It was often said that going to see Virgil Dawson perform was like listening to an old time story teller, and that the audience would be taken away to empty plains and no name towns for the short time they spent listening to his crooning voice and his haunting guitar.

Dawson sang of hard cases, men forced into situations where they must choose the lesser of two evils, of women waiting forever for their lost cowboy to come home while their youth and beauty faded. He sang of hard choices, dangerous men apt to shoot first, and towns haunted by the ghosts of their past. Where Elvis was singing about heartbreak hotels and Cash was lamenting the boy named Sue, Virgil Dawson was painting soundscapes of down on their luck gunslingers willing to do what they use to survive. It was a darker, more somber sound than was strictly popular, but audiences found themselves captivated by his morose musical tales.

Slowly, Dawson was making a name for himself, first in the south, but soon all across the country. In fact, many theorize that had he not met his unfortunate act, he may have grown more popular than his contemporaries.

His songs are still known today. Ballads such as "Lost Prairie," "My Heart No Longer Beats," "My Last Six Friends," and "Forever

El Dorado." It's said that many of the early rock and rollers of the 60s and 70s tried to emulate Dawson's storytelling style, and many will still name drop him as personal inspiration.

While Dawson sang about dangerous men, by all accounts he was a pacifist. Off stage he was quiet, often sitting by himself, drinking a six pack of Lonestar beer. While there are plenty of stories of the carousing of his peers, it would appear Dawson avoided a lot of the late nights, drug use, and womanizing. He mostly kept to himself, and when he spoke it was often such a profound wisdom that others around him could not help but listen.

Which made his fateful trip to Maine all the more disturbing.

One last note about Virgil Dawson before his final story begins. Though considered quite handsome, he was quite shy when it came to the women. A poet on the stage, he became awkward and tongue-tied when face to face with adoring female fans. He would often leave these encounters red-faced and ashamed. He soon learned to avoid these situations all together, often slipping out a back door after his performance. This is important for what was to come.

In 1956 Virgil Dawson had a hit song, "Dusty Boot Blues," and was at the height of his popularity. He was on a whirlwind tour of the country, whose most recent leg had brought him to the Northeast, a place he hadn't played very often. One of those stops, a two night stint in April, was at the Lewiston Music Hall.

The first show was Friday, April 20th. It was a typical Virgil Dawson show. With the stage completely dark, except for a dull spotlight in the center of the stage, Dawson entered slowly, his guitar slung on his back. In his black suit and white cowboy hat, he seemed to float out of the shadows as the light went up. Like a spirit, he seemed to float at the front of the stage, until he reached for the microphone and delivered his well-known opening line:

"In the dusty deserts of the southwest, there was one rule - the rule of the gun. It was a harsh law, one that broke many men. I don't have a six shooter, but I do have six strings, and I'd like to take you back to that time. If you'll have me."

From there, he slung his guitar around in one fluid motion and broke into his opening song, "Lost Prairie." It's a haunting melody that brings to mind the rough and tumble western towns of countless movies and dime store novels. Over the years several country artists have covered "Lost Prairie" but none of matched the lonesome, morose mood Dawson achieved when he drawled the lines, "Endless is the sky above, endless is the dirt. There's nothing all around me, just memories and hurt." The crowd went wild.

As "Lost Prairie" reached its chorus, the lights would go up further, revealing the band, similarly dressed in black. It had the effect of old ghosts of the past being summoned by the power of the singer's melody.

Two hours later, as the final light faded, and Dawson faded back into the gloom, the audience felt as if perhaps they were the lost ghosts, wandering a world that had long moved on. There was always a somber energy to a Dawson Virgil concert, but one that was somehow jubilant as well. In retrospect, it was a cathartic experience that left the audience hollowed, but fulfilled.

Lucas spoke with Austin Collins, who was at the show on the 20th.

LUCAS: Austin Collins was twenty-two in 1956. Now, he's nearly ninety years old. He still remembers the night he saw Virgil Dawson. Austin is a lifelong resident of Lewiston. These days he lives at the Lodges on the Crest assisted living center. He says he doesn't get out much, but his eyes sparkled when he talked about Virgil Dawson.

"There was an energy about him," Austin told me. "He was a cowboy, a gunslinger, a troubador, and the Pied Piper all rolled into one." He said, everyone in the audience couldn't help but be glued to his every word, every action. Austin said Virgil Dawson was the greatest singer he had ever seen. When I asked him about the show, he could still recall vivid details of the night. His smile was large and genuine. When I asked him about that night, however, he grew somber.

"What happened after the show was awful," he told me. "Just terrible."

That night, after his show let out, Dawson and his band went out on the town. At one point, sometime around nine-thirty, they entered Jay's Bluebird Barroom.

Jay's Bluebird Barroom used to be on Lisbon Street in Lewiston. It was opened by Jay Thornton in 1932. His son, Thomas sold it in 1976 and the space was converted into office space, but for a long time Jay's Bluebird Barroom, or the Bluebird, as it came to be known, was a Lewiston staple. Virgil Dawson and his band and their crew set up towards the back of the bar at a couple of tables. They had been to several establishments earlier, but this was where they were determined to end their night. While some of his bandmates caroused with the locals and danced with the women, Dawson spent most of his time sitting with his back to the wall, slowly drinking bottles of beer.

It was the same routine they had done at countless bars and taverns across the country. Had it been any other night, in any other city, it would have been a typical night for Virgil Dawson and his band.

But then Loretta Page walked into the Bluebird and the world of country music was changed forever.

LUCAS: Loretta Page was twenty-three, a young school teacher at Pettingill Elementary School. She was by all

reports, beautiful. She had golden hair, the color of honey, and bright blue eyes. Her friends and family described her as the life of the party, full of an energy that seemed to infect everyone. Everyone laughed a little more around Loretta. They chatted, danced, even flirted more when she was around. Everyone loved her and she was a hit with not only her students, but the women's auxiliary group where she volunteered, and the single men who worked at the mill.

When Loretta Page walked into the Bluebird, her laugh cutting across the room like a song, Virgil Dawson looked up from under the brim of his white cowboy hat and lost his breath.

Al Hinkler, who was Dawson's bass player, remembered the moment Loretta walked in. In an interview in 1981, Hinkler recalled her arrival. I've asked our intern Mark to read a passage from that interview, first published in 1981's *The Last Gunslinger's Last Ride: The 25th Anniversary of the Night the Music Hung Up Its Hat*.

MARK: "It was like time froze," Hinkler said and a sad smile spread across his face. "I still see it like it was yesterday. I was sitting right next to Virgil and in walks this drop dead gorgeous woman. I mean, she was beautiful, but it was more than that. It was like the light came right in with her. When Virg looked up and saw her, I heard him gasp. Now, Virgil mostly kept to himself. I mean, he appreciated a good-looking woman as much as the rest of us, but he didn't dance. He didn't chat them up. Usually Virg just sat there, looking from a distance, you know. But when she walked in, I could see his whole body tense up. It was like someone sent a live current right through him.

Virgil Dawson couldn't keep his eyes off Loretta. She seemed to glide across the bar, ordering a drink from the bartender, then twirling onto the dance floor. Her laugh was light and her eyes twinkled. If she noticed the cowboy and his band sitting in the

corner, she made no gesture of it, instead bouncing between acquaintances, offering a joke or a smile.

According to Hinkler, Dawson watched Loretta Page for thirty minutes. He was on the edge of his seat. A couple of times he made as if to stand, but then sat back down. His bandmates had never seen him like that before. They joked behind his back that he had come down with a bad case of the head over heelsies.

Finally, just after ten pm, Virgil Dawson worked up enough courage. He timed it just right and approached the bar just as Loretta got there to refill her drink. He tipped his hat to her and said in his deep southern drawl, "Howdy-do, ma'am. Might I buy you a drink?"

Loretta took one look at the cowboy and that was all it took. For the rest of the night the two of them, the singer and the teacher were rarely apart. They sat together first at his table, then at hers, then alone at their own, heads close together, talking intimately. For awhile they just talked, then they danced. Al Hinkler said at one point he and Dawson were alone in the men's room. Here's Mark again reading Hinkler's account of the night:

MARK: Virgil was just beaming. He was buzzing. At first I thought he might be on something. A lot of guys back then were taking pills. Virg didn't, but he wasn't his normal self that night, you know? We're in there, slicking our hair back or whatever, and he says to me, out of the blue. "I never met an angel before tonight." Real cheesy stuff, right? I was there though and that's exactly what he said. I'll tell you what, I never really believed in love at first sight until seeing Virgil that night.

By all accounts Virgil Dawson was downright awkward when he wasn't on stage. He stammered over his words, shuffled nervously, and would wring his hands over and over again. Even talking to his friends and bandmates he would grow red in the face after just a few minutes. They often wondered how such an

awkward man could perform the way he did, full of confidence and heart. They would even tease him about it at times.

But Virgil Dawson was anything but awkward that night. He was charming, funny, and open. For whatever reason, Loretta put him at ease, and he was able to relax and be himself for the first time in a very long time. It was clear to his friends that Dawson had fallen in love with Loretta. The Last Gunslinger had gone from one end of the country to the other, and of all places, in Lewiston, Maine had his heart stolen by a girl.

There was just one problem.

Brad Gale worked in the York Company textile mill. He worked second shift, and on Friday evenings would head over to the Bluebird for some late evening drinks. He would also meet his girlfriend, Loretta Page.

Gale and Page had been "going steady" for a few years. Gale would later claim that he intended to marry Loretta as soon as he had saved up enough money for an engagement ring and a home for the couple. Loretta would say that she never considered Brad Gale a serious boyfriend. Still, the facts remained, that Gale would often spend Friday evenings at the Bluebird with Loretta on his arm, and they were often seen about town together.

By the time Gale arrived at the Bluebird, Loretta and Virgil Dawson had been close together for several hours and one of the first sights Gale saw was his "girl" in the arms of the famous country singer.

An argument ensued between Brad Gale, Loretta Page, and Virgil Dawson, with Gale, emboldened from the few beers he had drunk on the walk over to the Bluebird, shouting at Dawson, and at one point, shoving him to the floor. Despite his moniker as the Last Gunslinger, Virgil Dawson was a pacifist and reportedly never said anything or showed any outward hostility towards Gale.

In the end, Dawson and his band left the Bluebird. Soon after, quite upset, Loretta Page stormed out. Gale and his co-workers, John Abbott, Michael Clement, and Bill Parker, stayed for one more drink, then they too left.

Loretta Page made her way home almost immediately after leaving the bar. Heather Clement, the young wife of one of Gale's co-workers, attested that he arrived home sometime after two AM. The band members made their way back to the hotel where they were staying.

Virgil Dawson never arrived.

LUCAS: Dawson told his bandmates that he needed some air to clear his head. When Brad Gale had started shouting, both groups of men had nearly come to blows, and tempers were still hot. Dawson told his friends he was going for a walk and that the cool air would do him some good. The band protested, but he promised he would be fine.

He was found the next morning, dead, face down on the shore of the Androscoggin River.

Dawson was stabbed four times in the chest, his skull had been cracked from a blow to the back of the head, and his throat had been slit. Then, his body had been thrown into the Androscoggin River where it had washed down a little way before coming to rest, stuck among some rocks along the shore.

An investigation was launched while the Chief of Police, Brian Henderson, tried to keep the story from leaking. Virgil Dawson was a well known entertainer and the most likely the most famous person in Lewiston. Try as he might, there was no way Henderson could contain the story. It quickly spread like wildfire: the Last Gunslinger was dead, killed in some sort of scuffle.

It didn't take long to identify a prime suspect. Brad Gale had been seen arguing with the country singer the night before his body was fished out of the river. The police quickly detained

Gale, but they had little evidence to hold against him. He had an alibi - after seeing his girl dancing with the famous singer, Gale had spent the night with his friend, Bill Parker, drinking first at the Bluebird, and then in Parker's own home. His co-workers corroborated the story, and eventually, the police had no choice but to let Gale go.

To this day the murder of Virgil Dawson has remained unsolved. Dawson's band never recovered from the loss of their leader. Several of them became session musicians for other acts, but most of them simply faded back into obscurity. Loretta Page moved away soon after. She settled outside of Boston where she taught third grade for awhile longer, before marrying and occasionally doing interviews. As far as we could determine, she never spoke to Brad Gale again. Gale and his friends maintained their innocence until the day they died.

Which, is where we come in, because as it turns out Gale and his accomplices, one by one, were found dead in the months after Dawson's demise.

Lucas's investigation took him to the son of one of the police officers that was involved with the Dawson slaying. That man requested that we not mention him or his father, who passed away in the late Nineties, by name, but had shared with us the interesting stories he heard from his father.

Six days after Dawson was killed John Abbott was found dead in his apartment. There were ligature marks consistent with a rope or whip around his neck and burn marks on his hands and arms. Six days later, Michael Clement, another of the men who had accompanied Brad Gale to the bar the night he accosted Dawson, was found beaten to death in an alley not far from the Bluebird. Investigators discovered burn marks on his face and upper body. And lastly, six days after Clement's death, Bill Parker, the third of Gale's accomplices, was found dead inside his burned down garage. No suspects were ever named in any of their deaths.

It was no coincidence to the people of Lewiston. Everyone knew the men had been involved in the incident at the bar with the singer, and everyone suspected the truth, even if the law hadn't been able to prove it. It didn't take long for the whispers to start, and the story that spread was one straight out of a Virgil Dawson ballad.

Here's Lucas to explain.

LUCAS: I heard this story from quite a few of the old timers, including the son of the anonymous police officer. It's what they whispered behind closed doors about the death of those men. It goes something like this: Brad Gale and his friends drank for another hour after Virgil Dawson left, but as they continued to drink Gale grew more and more mad. Who did Dawson think he was, he was said to have muttered, breezing into town and stealing an honest man's girl? Eventually, the bartenders at the Bluebird cut them off, and the group of men stumbled out into the night.

It was here that, depending on who told the story, either a tremendous piece of bad luck, or perhaps more nefarious planning befell Virgil Dawson. In some versions, Gale and his buddies happened to stumble upon Dawson out on his night walk. In other versions, they waited outside his hotel for him to return. Either way, the men came across Dawson and attacked him. Gale bashes him across the back of the head with a whiskey bottle. Then each of Gale's friends stab the singer, like rabid dogs in a frenzy, and Gale finishes him off by slitting his throat. Then together, the four men carried the body to the river and tossed it in.

Here, the storyteller would lower their voice and lean in, as if telling me a secret. It happened nearly every time I heard the story, like they were bringing me into the conspiracy. The story goes that on his way to heaven, Virgil Dawson's soul took a turn and visited the devil. Dawson offered Satan his soul in return for his opportunity for revenge on the men who had killed him. The Devil agreed

and in six days sent the Last Gunslinger back to Earth to seek vengeance.

They told me of a skeletal cowboy with hellfire in his eyes, who stalked the shadows and one by one sought out the men who had killed them. The old wives would tell of a gunslinger, dressed all in black, his white hate pulled low to hide his ghastly features. Where he went he left behind fiery footprints and the smell of brimstone. Back from the dead, Dawson and lost all of his former awkwardness and pacifism. With the loss of his life, he had lost the soul he had often infused into his music. Now consumed by rage and hate, he hunted the men who murdered him.

It's an interesting story, and one that has a certain poetry to it. Deals with the Devil have a long history in music. Howard Johnson, the blues musician and songwriter, supposedly met the Devil at the crossroads and sold his soul for his musical prowess. Jimmy Page, Mick Jagger, and David Bowie have all supposedly sold their souls to Satan in return for their fame. And of course, no one can forget the classic Charlie Daniels' song, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia." The idea of musicians trading their souls with Satan is an old story, so it would make sense that Dawson's tragic death combined with the mysterious deaths of the men who were the prime suspects would lend itself to just such a rumor.

The question remains, is there any proof to the idea that Virgil Dawson returned from the grave as an agent of vengeance?

On the surface this seems like a fairly difficult case to prove. After all, it happened over sixty years ago. That being said, the manner of death for all three men seems suspicious. All three involved fire of some kind. Fist shaped burn marks were found on two of the victims, with the third burned beyond recognition.

Secondly, the rope marks around John Abbott's neck are consistent with marks from a whip or perhaps a lasso, a typical

tool used by a cowboy. Virgil Dawson was raised on a ranch in Oklahoma and was known to be quite familiar with a lasso, a trick he would sometimes show off to friends and people in the record industry.

There were a few reports of a man in a white hat seen around the area where all three victims were discovered. He was said to be a quiet man, with the brim of his hat pulled low, with a black guitar slung over his back. It should be noted that this could be imagination of the witnesses or a desire to flesh out the story of the ghost cowboy of vengeance.

And of course, one can't discount the numerological symbolism. Dawson was said to have killed his first victim six days after his death, his second six days after that, and his third, six days after that. Six six six. The number of the Devil.

These aren't hard facts, however, and very little of this gave us any sort of conclusive beliefs about this strange tale.

Which brings us to Brad Gale.

Gale was the fourth man informally accused of killing Virgil Dawson, the ring-leader of the group, and the one at the center of all of this. When his friends began turning up dead, Brad Gale ditched town. He didn't show up to work at the mill one day, and a search of his apartment revealed the place had been hastily packed up. For a time people assumed Gale was the fourth and final victim of the Ghostly Gunslinger, and everyone went on with their lives.

But almost two years to the day that Virgil Dawson was killed, Brad Gale turned up one last time.

Here's Lucas:

LUCAS: A little after midnight on February 16, 1958, authorities were alerted to a fire in a remote section of the woods around the north shore of Moosehead Lake. A small

cabin was fully engulfed in flames. Not far from the cabin, police found the body of Brad Gale, suspended from a pair of trees by long lengths of chains. His body had been badly burned, but the coroner determined that Gale had been struck from behind with a heavy object, he had been stabbed in the torso three times, and his throat had been slit before the body had been burned. Resting beneath a nearby tree was a white cowboy hat.

That wasn't the only unexplained phenomenon that police discovered at the scene. They discovered several small oblong patches of a glass-like substance leading up to the cabin, and then leading away from the home to where the body was discovered. These patches were about a foot wide and about six inches wide. It was later determined to be vitrified sand - or sand that has been heated to high enough temperatures to melt and form crude glass. The detectives believed these patches followed the rough shape and pattern of footsteps.

When we spoke to the man whose father had been one of the police officers who investigated Virgil Dawson's death, he claimed his father told him something the investigating officers told him. We couldn't corroborate this as all of the officers involved in Brad Gale's death have since passed away.

The man said his father told him that the forest ranger who had been first on the scene told him this in confidence. The ranger had seemed hesitant to say it, but in the end had blurted it out in a rush.

As the ranger was following the glassy footsteps, several of them still smoldering despite the six inches of snow that covered the ground, he said he heard whistling echoing through the woods. He called out, but no one answered. After a moment, it seemed to drift away on the wind.

The ranger swore the tune was "Ridin's Done" by Virgil Dawson.

No suspect was ever named in the deaths of John Abbott, Michael Clement, Bill Parker, and Brad Gale. There were no fingerprints, no scraps of clothing, or witnesses. Police determined that Brad Gale had been hiding out in the cabin on Moosehead Lake for several months. He broke into the camp, apparently chosen because it was far from civilization. The cabin's owner did not know Brad Gale or any of his colleagues.

It was obvious that Brad Gale had been killed in the same manner as Virgil Dawson. To the people who believed Gale had been responsible for the Last Gunslinger's death, this was no coincidence.

The white cowboy hat found at the scene was the same size and style that Virgil Dawson commonly wore. It is possible that Gale had the hat himself, though it did not technically fit his head. Perhaps, after his encounter with Dawson, he became obsessed with the singing cowboy. Or maybe the hat was some unrelated winter debris that simply blew up against that tree.

But that's not what the old timers think.

If Virgil Dawson did come back from the dead to get revenge on the men who killed him, his spirit seems to have gone back to whatever netherrealm it came from. After Brad Gale's death, six hundred and sixty-six days after Dawson's, there were no further incidents involving the so-called Ghostly Gunslinger. If Dawson traded his soul for vengeance, then he has gone back to the eternal damnation waiting for him.

Still, the whispers haven't gone entirely away in the Lewiston area. The stories claim that sometimes, in the dark of night, you may hear lonesome whistling or smell the odor of burning brimstone. If you look into the shadows, you may see a dark figure in a white cowboy hat, hellfire in his eyes and a guitar slung over his back.

If you do, you had best lock your doors, pull the blankets up high, and pray that it is someone else the gunslinger is looking for.

One last note before we go. In 1968, twelve years after Virgil Dawson's death, his bass player, Al Hinkler, found a recording of a previously unheard Virgil Dawson song in a strange box he found in storage. Hinkler claims he has no knowledge of when and where this recording was made. If the band was there, he says, none of them remember the recording. In short, Hinkler has no idea where this tape came from or how it came into his possession.

The tape begins with some strange hissings and pops. There's something that sounds like a large group whispering something with harsh tones. Then Dawson introduces the name of the song, "Wraith," and begins singing. We couldn't get access to the original recording, so I've asked our intern Mark to read the lyrics.

MARK:

*There's death in his eyes and Fire in his chest
Filling the empty hole, His soul depressed.
He rides with fury and he rides with the thunder
He rides like the whole world has been torn asunder.*

*The wraith he feels nothing but the fiery burn
And he comes for them all, each one in turn.
The liars and killers and the cruel and the untrue
The wraith rides to bring them the Devil's due.*

Could this be a song cut on the recording floor... or could it be one final message from the Last Gunslinger?

Stay safe out there, Maine.

Malevolent Maine is Lucas Knight, Lucas Wilson, and myself,
Chris Estes.

If you'd like to read more about our investigations check out
our website at malevolentmaine.blogspot.com/

While there, don't forget to check our merch store. And, if
you're so inclined, support us on Patreon at
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Thank you for listening to Malevolent Maine.

And as always, stay safe out there, Maine.