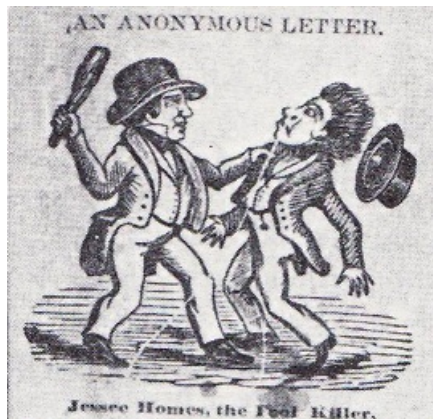


Fool-Killer ^[1]

"Fool-Killer"

by Thomas C. Parramore, 2006; Revised October 2022.



Woodcut of Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer with his club. Image from the North Carolina Folklore Journal.

"Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer," was the name given by journalist Charles Napoleon Bonaparte Evans to a fictional character well known to Piedmont North Carolinians in the mid-nineteenth century. Evans, editor of the *Milton Chronicle* from 1841 to 1883, created the Fool-Killer as an expression of his own style of folksy humor and social views. A *Whig* ^[2] early in his career, Evans shifted to the *Democratic Party* ^[3] in the 1850s. But he remained a *progressive* ^[4] in politics, a booster of rail and plank roads, *agricultural fairs* ^[5], *steamboat lines* ^[6], and other improvements. He opposed *secession* ^[7] until the fact and then became a stalwart advocate of the Confederacy.

The Fool-Killer appeared as the ostensible author of letters to the *Chronicle* discussing the rambles of Jesse Holmes in counties of the northern Piedmont and characters and situations he encountered along the way. Published about once a month, the columns were accompanied by a woodcut of a feisty little character in long-tailed coat and floppy hat carrying a club. The club was for the Fool-Killer's use in bashing various kinds of fools he came across in his journeys. These included overbearing parents, harsh re-enslavers (slave patrolers), hard drinkers, faithless lovers, and a variety of others. Not infrequently, the state legislature and other institutions came in for a share of cudgeling. The flavor of a society in the process of moral decay informed the Fool-Killer's letters.

The *Chronicle* reached only a few hundred subscribers, but Fool-Killer columns were often reprinted in other *newspapers* ^[8] and enjoyed a wide popularity. Their brand of humor was similar to that of Hamilton C. Jones's "Cousin Sally Dilliard" and Johnson Jones Hooper's "Simon Suggs." A quarter century after Evans's death, the Fool-Killer was resurrected in a *story* ^[9] by *William Sydney Porter* ^[10] (O. Henry) and in later fiction such as Helen Eustis's 1954 novel of the same title.

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