

## **Fool-Killer** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **"Fool-Killer"**

by Thomas C. Parramore, 2006



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 <sup>[2]</sup> early in his career, Evans shifted to the Democratic Party <sup>[3]</sup> in the 1850s. But he remained a progressive <sup>[4]</sup> in politics, a booster of rail and plank roads, agricultural fairs <sup>[5]</sup>, steamboat lines <sup>[6]</sup>, and other improvements. He opposed secession <sup>[7]</sup> until the fact and then, like many other North Carolinians of his generation, 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, bullying slave patrollers, 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 <sup>[8]</sup> 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 <sup>[9]</sup> by William Sydney Porter <sup>[10]</sup> (O. Henry) and in later fiction such as Helen Eustis's 1954 novel of the same title.

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1 January 2006 | Parramore, Thomas C.

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