

The Devil's Tramping Ground

There's a piece of land 10 miles east of Siler City, in western Chatham County, that's as creepy as they come. It's a perfect circle, 40 feet across, lying just off the highway. Nothing grows inside the circle. Dogs and wildlife won't step inside it, and birds won't land in it. There aren't even any rocks or sticks within this unnatural ring. It's called the Devil's Tramping Ground.



Early settlers in Chatham County first saw the circle in the 1770s. Since that time some people have planted grass and vegetable seeds in its soil, but nothing has ever come up. Others have put objects inside the circle only to find them gone the next morning. A few brave folks have tried to spend the night in the circle, but something—a noise, a moving object, or a ghostly shape—has scared them away.

What caused this eerie ring on the ground? Over the years stories and legends have grown up about it. An American Indian legend says that generations of Indians danced in the circle at celebrations. The Great Spirit now protects the spot to honor members of the tribe who were driven from their lands by European settlers. Another Indian legend says that Chief Croatan, a great tribal leader, was killed in the circle during a battle and is buried there. The Great Spirit keeps the circle empty to honor him.

One story about the circle is really out of this world. It says that visitors from outer space landed there in a UFO! Another story says that magic treasure is buried deep in the ground. But the best-known legend also explains the name of the circle.

According to this legend, every night the devil walks around in circles thinking up evil plans. At the first light of day, he turns into a bat and flies off to carry out his plans. His tramping throughout the night leaves the ground bare and grim. Some people think that a farmer who owned the land where the circle lies made up this story to keep hunters off his property. Even if this is true, it doesn't explain the mystery.

There are also believable explanations. One explanation says that the circle is on the site of a molasses mill that used horses or mules to pull the mill wheel. It was their hooves that damaged the ground. Yet other mills at that time didn't leave such circles.

Scientists finally stepped in to solve the mystery. They found that the soil in the circle has a high level of salt. And they know that the spot was an ancient salt lick for bison and deer. This explains why nothing will grow there, but it doesn't explain why the area is a perfect circle or why it has lasted so long.

No one has figured out what caused this strange circle near Siler City. Can you explain the Devil's Tramping Ground?