

The November/December Meeting

Tuesday, December 11, 2012

The Leigh Place

4:00 p. m. Until . . .

The Christmas Party

Tom and Jane McMillan are our hosts for the Christmas Party at the Leigh Place, pictured to the right. Bring your favorite finger food. Drinks will be furnished.



A Reminder:

January is the time to pay dues.

The Leigh Place: Brewton's First Courthouse

From the article "Escambia County Courthouses," by ECHS member Frank Alan Luttrell, III, we have this summary of the history of the first courthouse in Brewton, now the Leigh Place:

After two fraudulent elections, attempts to steal the county records, and a long court battle, Brewton was finally declared the permanent home of the county government in the spring of 1883. County officials moved from Pollard to

Brewton, and settled into a two-story frame building that had been rented from W. V. Jernigan.

On 29 May 1883, a 200' x 300' lot on the corner of Parker (later Belleville) Avenue and Court Street was purchased from Eliza Brewton for \$100. A jail was built and completed by the end of 1883; however, funds for a new courthouse

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The Leigh Place

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The January ECHS Meeting will be at The Poarch Creek Indian Cultural Museum in Atmore January 22, 2013.

Dr. Deidra Dees, Archivist, will give us a tour of the Museum, which recently opened. The program at the Museum starts at 3:00 p. m.

Meet at the Thomas E. McMillan Museum in Brewton at 2:00 p. m. to car pool. Buffet meal afterwards, Dutch Treat, \$15.95 each, plus drinks.

The Leigh Place *(continued)*

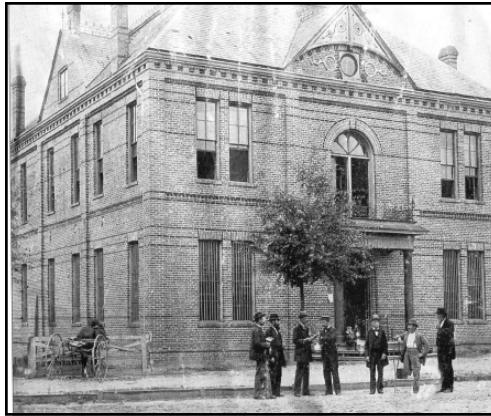
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were not available.

The Alabama Legislature passed a law in late 1884 allowing the County to sell bonds to finance the construction of a courthouse. Rudolph Bunday, architect, was employed to design the building and supervise construction. On 14 March 1885, Charles Schneider of Mobile was awarded a \$7,740 contract to build the courthouse.

The two-story brick building with wooden floors and plastered walls was received by the commissioner's court on 10 September 1885. County offices were located on the first floor and a large courtroom with jury and witness rooms occupied the second floor. Local residents were dismayed when they found out that a carload of lumber from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, was used in the interior of the building instead of the "superior" wood products so plentiful in the area.

County authorities failed to anticipate Escambia County's growth, and by 1900 it became evident that a larger courthouse would have to be built. Structural defects had also been discovered and in April, 1901, a visiting circuit judge refused to hold



**Leigh Place as it appeared in 1885.
Escambia County's Courthouse
from 1885-1902.**

court in the building. Shortly thereafter, the county issued bonds, with the proceeds to go toward the construction of a new courthouse. . . . Brewton's second courthouse was completed and received by the court on 9 June 1902 (The Heritage of Escambia County, Alabama, Heritage Publication Consultants, Inc., Clanton, Alabama, 2002, pp. 5-6).

From Annie Waters, we have this history of Leigh house after it was replaced by the second courthouse in 1902:

The first courthouse was advertised for sale but there were no buyers so it became the home of the Brewton Rifles (State Guard) for a period of time. In 1909 it was purchased by E. M. Lovelace and used as a tobacco warehouse. A year later C. H. Conoley, a native of North Carolina and naval stores operator, purchased the building and converted it into a dwelling. In 1919 Mrs. John (Mabel) Leigh bought the residence. In 1969 it was purchased by Thomas E. McMillan and converted into an office building. (The History of Escambia County Alabama, The reprint Company, Publishers, Spartanburg, South Carolina, 2000, p. 300). €

Workshop for ECHS Members on Introduction to Facebook

Two members of the Society attended a "Social Media Day" presented by Dr. Carol Bates of JDCC. Ann Biggs-Williams and Jerry Simmons (pictured at the right while at the workshop), participated in the 90-minute segment featuring the creation of a specialty page on Facebook. Other sessions involved Blogs, Twitter, and Google. Dr. Carol Bates was the instructor, assisted by Dr. Lyn Gill.

If society members are interested, we can have a special workshop for Facebook, too, just for us. There's no requirement that you know about Facebook; all you need is an interest in finding out about it. Let Jerry Simmons or Ann Biggs-Williams know

as soon as you can in order for a session to be scheduled shortly after the first of the year!

Jerry and Ann have already put their training to

work. Ann is creating a page on Facebook for the Library at Lottie, Alabama, and Jerry is creating a page for the Thomas E. McMillan Museum.



News and Announcements

Canebrake Oral History Series: A Window into Our Collective Past—Christmas Memories Shared



Evergreen/Conecuh County Public Library

ECHS member Sherry Johnston, who is with the Evergreen Public Library, has notified us of the following events:

The second in our oral history series will be presented on two separate occasions in the Lucy C. Warren Heritage Department of The Evergreen-Conecuh County Public Library in December. The first presentation will be held at 1 PM on Tuesday, December 11th, 2012. The second presentation will be held at 4 PM on Thursday, December 13th, 2012.

The Library is located at 119 Cemetery Avenue in Evergreen, AL. For more information, please call 251.578.2670 and ask for Ms. Johnston. All ages are welcome to attend

Three Events at Monroeville



**Former
Courthouse in
Monroeville,
Alabama, Now
Heritage Museum**

Nathan Carter, Director of Sites & Operations for the Monroe County Heritage Museum has sent three notifications. First on the workshop:

Monroe County Heritage Museum will host its 12th annual Genealogy Workshop at the Old Courthouse Museum on Saturday, February 2, 2013.

Coffee, sign-in & introductions at 8:30 am, program ends at 3:00 pm. Elizabeth D. Wells, Special Collections Librarian at Samford University, and Margo Stringfield, Research Associate with the Archaeology Institute at the University of West Florida, will speak at the Museum. A box lunch will be served at the Old Masonic Lodge in Perdue Hill. Weather permitting, the day will end with a visit to a nearby archaeological dig led by Dr. Gregory A. Waselkov, Director of the Center for Archaeological Studies at the University of South Alabama. \$30.00 fee includes box lunch. Pre-registration deadline is 4:00 pm on January 30th. Contact Monroe County Heritage Museum at mchm@frontiernet.net or 251-575-7433.

The Second notification, a Christmas Sale at the Gift Shop in the Old Courthouse:

December at the Bird's Nest Gift Shop, located inside the Old Courthouse Museum, brings a 20% discount on all merchandise to Museum members. Still not a member? Call, come by or visit our website and join today to support the Museum. In celebration of the Christmas holidays, the Museum will be closed Dec. 24th – 26th and observe shortened hours from 10 am – 2 pm on Dec. 27th & 28th. The Museum will also be closed Dec. 29th – Jan. 1st for New Year's and will reopen with regular hours 10 am – 4 pm on Jan. 2nd.

The Third Notification is about tryouts for the To Kill a Mockingbird Production for Spring 2013:

Theatrical director Jane Busby will hold auditions for the 2013 season of Monroe County Heritage Museum's annual production of "To Kill a Mockingbird" on Tuesday, December 4th and Thursday, December 6th, 2012 from 4:00 pm to 6:30 pm at the Old Courthouse Museum.

Auditions will be held for male and female principal actors and understudies for roles ranging in age from 8 years old to adult. All interested persons are encouraged to pick up an application and selected script pages for the auditions from the MCHM office during regular business hours. The completed applications should be returned to MCHM (Monroe

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News and Announcements *(continued)*

(Continued from page 3)

County Heritage Museum) by Friday, November 30, 2012 at 4:00 p.m.

Performance dates for the 2013 season are: Apr 18, 19, 20, 21, 25, 26, 27, 28, May 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 17 & 18.

Monroe County Heritage Museum (MCHM) is housed in the Old Courthouse on the square at 31 N. Alabama Avenue, Monroeville AL, 36460. Business hours are 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, Tuesday – Friday and 9:00 am to 12:00 noon on Saturdays. For additional information, please contact MCHM at 251-575-7433 or mchm@frontiernet.net.

Thomas E. McMillan Museum Advisory Committee Meets



In the

Shown in the picture above are members of the Museum Advisory Committee who attended the November Meeting of the Committee.

They are from the left clockwise: JDCC President Dr. Dan Bain, Director of Human Resources Veronica McKinney, JDCC Recruiter Lee Barrentine, JDCC Art Instructor Carrie Johnson, Museum Coordinator Jerry Simmons and, not shown because she was taking the picture, ECHS Trustee Ann Biggs-Williams. ECHS Historian/Curator Carolyn Jennings, ECHS Editor of ECHOES Ranella Merritt, and JDCC History Instructor Lisa Hardy were not present.

discussion at the meeting, Lee Barrentine expressed the need for a new brochure for the college and suggested that the Escambia County Historical Society

(ECHS) might assist with that financially. Jerry Simmons passed out the recently printed revised brochures for the Thomas E. McMillan Museum and the Escambia County Historical Society. Lee Barrentine said he could include the brochure about the museum with the orientation packets for college students at the next orientation.

Dr. Bain had distributed museum brochures at the Lions' Club Meeting and the Coalition for a Healthier Escambia County. Jerry Simmons also distributed some, and Ann Biggs-Williams took museum and historical society brochures to the newly opened museum at the Poarch Creek Indian Reservation *(Anyone wishing to distribute brochures, see Jerry Simmons).*

Lee Barrentine reported that 8th grade students in the county have visited the museum for the past 7 years when they are brought to the campus for tours.

A discussion followed on how to use the gallery room of the Thomas E. McMillan Museum which currently has no displays. Carrie Johnson and Jerry Simmons will work together to explore future displays including a student art show and a traveling exhibit from the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

Jerry Simmons reported that he plans to work on the Thomas E. McMillan's presence on Facebook. It was suggested that the Escambia County Historical Society might recruit volunteers to be fact gatherers to provide information for the Facebook site that could be a "bullet point" about the county's history that could be read in no more than two minutes. A Facebook page would require constant attention for updating.

The idea of a possible fall festival with a Williamsburg-style atmosphere had been mentioned to Dr. Bain by a community member. If that festival idea was held on campus, the historical society could prove invaluable in assisting with such an event.

Increasing visibility of the Poarch Creek Indians was discussed. The college is trying to schedule Robert Thrower to speak. Mr. Thrower had previously presented a program to the ECHS in the past and Dr. Dees from the Poarch museum had visited the JD museum to do research on the tribe.

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News and Announcements *(continued)*

(Continued from page 4)



Architreat Program at ADAH for December

Thursday, December 20, Noon, Architreats: Food for Thought Presents "Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of Alabama in the Civil War." Presented by Ben H. Severance. For more information, call (334) 353-4726



Pictured are ECHS Scholarship Recipient Jenna Carter and ECHS President Tom McMillan

Snapshots from Robbins and McGowin Historic Marker Dedication



ECHS Historic Marker Dedication for Robbins & McGowin Department Store

By Lydia Grimes

Lydia's article appeared originally in the Brewton Standard for November 12, 2012.

The history of the store by John David Finlay, Jr., referred to in Lydia's article, appears in the journal section of this newsletter

The dedication of a historical marker at the old Robbins and McGowin building on Friday became something of a living memorial as family members and former employees told stories about the building and its former occupants.

The structure was the first brick building built in Brewton around 1878, made of bricks shipped from Montgomery.

The marker is the third erected in Escambia County. "This is a project we think is very important," Escambia County Historical Society Vice President Sally Finlay said of the markers.

The Curtis Finlay Foundation has financed the new markers, including one at Pollard United Methodist Church and the original Escambia County High School.

Sally Finlay said the Robbins and McGowin building was an important local business. "Not only was it a local business," she said, "it reached out to the panhandle of Florida and as far as east Mississippi."

The business was first located in three small one-story buildings and was organized in 1897 with the consolidation of J.I. Robbins and J.G. McGowin, the millinery business of Miss L.A. Cunningham, Blacksher-Miller Lumber Company Commissary and J.E. Finlay Company. The five departments were labeled Ladies' Wear Department, Men's Wear Department, Millinery and Piece Goods Department, Tailoring Department and Grocery and Hardware Department.

In celebrating the marker placement, Historical Society members and those connected to the building shared memories of the store.

Sally Finlay recalled that the second floor was a favorite spot for children as Christmas approached. "That's where you went to play with all the new electronic toys and dolls," she said.

John David Finlay, who had managed the depart-

ment store, remembered when an explosion rocked downtown, including the store.

"We had a lot of challenges," he said. "We had an explosion one time. I called our insurance adjuster and said, 'You'd better get downtown; most of it just blew up.'"

Though he wasn't around in 1928 [or 1929], Finlay also recalled that the major flood that year saw water 9 feet deep in the store. "One young man swam the length of the store," he said.

According to John David Finlay, who is the grandson of J.E. Finlay, things that may seem primitive today, were actually modern and up to date at the store.

"Light was furnished by gas, and telephone service was installed, making the store very unique, even though the streets were not paved at this time," Finlay said.

Business was so good that soon the business moved to a larger building, which was the original home of Foshee Mercantile Company.

The two story part of the building is one of the oldest in the downtown area of Brewton, having been built in 1883, and said to have been the first brick building in Escambia County.

As business increased, it became necessary to build a three-story addition and in 1909, the firm moved into its new home.

From the beginning, the owners of the business wanted it to cater to a wide range of people. They sent buyers to New York to see what the trends were and bring back the latest merchandise to their customers. They also realized a large number of their customers were farmers and they carried a wide range of farm equipment. They even sold wild horses.

"J.E. Finlay began a dry goods store in Brewton in February 1892 and bought the controlling interest in 1906," John David Finlay Jr. said. "The name of Robbins and McGowin was an established one so the store retained the name until just a few years ago.

From the beginning, the business had plenty of

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ECHS Historic Marker Dedication for Robbins & McGowin Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 6)

space to display its goods, but as time passed, business grew until it was necessary to expand into the second story.

“The third floor was eventually made into office space and Ed Leigh McMillan and his law partner had offices on the third floor,” Finlay added. “The McMillan Trust was also on the third floor.”

Robbins and McGowin flourished until the depression hit and even were among the first to publish a catalog of merchandise. Buyers were sent to market several times a year to make sure the store was offering the very latest in trends and styles. They were even able to purchase custom-built clothing for customers.

In 1919, the store opened a mail order business. People were able to order what they wanted from the catalogs sent out around the area.

“Catalogs were published twice a year,” Finlay said. “Some of them had as many as 60 pages in them and 10,000 copies were mailed out to all the southern states. Catalogs were discontinued in 1929 because the customers could be reached more effectively through a paper published once a month. Thus, the next publication was The Brewton Trade Record, which was mailed to customers in a large area around Escambia County. It was published 10 times a year.”

According to John David Finlay Jr., J.E. “Ned” Finlay was even contacted by people of J.C. Penney at one time who told him they would like to see a copy of the catalog. They thought it might be a good idea to have a catalog for their customers.

The landmark building which has stood for more than 100 years, Robbins and McGowin, has seen good times and bad. The business thrived during the time of World War I, and suffered during the depression. World War II was rough on the store and there were so many shortages of materials, but somehow they struggled on. Perhaps one of the most devastating events in the building’s history was the flood of 1929. The flood, along with the stock market crash

that same year, caused a great deal of loss for the company.

According to an account written by John David Finlay Sr., he witnessed first-hand the devastation of the flood that year. Just a year before, Brewton had been flooded by rising waters, but the worst was still yet to come,

“It had been raining for almost a month, when on March 14, 1929, several cloudbursts added insult to injury when Murder Creek and Burnt Corn Creek overflowed their banks and rushed into downtown Brewton,” Finlay said. “Employees tried to put merchandise up far enough it would escape the flood waters, but the water rose so fast, it was impossible to save it all.”

John David Finlay Sr. related his experience of watching a boy dive into the water inside the store and swim the length of the store.

“Electric lights were out, but the lightning flashed so frequently, we could see how to move about,” he said.

“One man kept a record of the rain and at times it was raining an inch an hour. The main street was a regular river carrying trees, bridges and even houses away in the flood waters. Every now and then, we could hear the railroad signal bell, and it made a very creepy feeling go over us to hear the bell ringing out in the midst of the flood waters.”

Extensive repairs were made to the building after the flood with reinforced steel and concrete. A modern elevator was installed for the convenience of the customers, but also to move merchandise quickly in the event of another flood.

According to John David Finlay Jr., after the store closed, it was used for offices for some time and stood empty for a number of years. But about six years ago, a former resident of Brewton, Donna Wendling and her husband Greg Wendling, bought the building and turned it into a restaurant. Today the three-story part of the building is the home of Orleans Po Boys. Changing Seasons, a gift shop, is in the two-story part of the building. €

Snapshots from the ECHS October Meeting



Snapshots from the ECHS October Meeting *(continued)*



Snapshots from the ECHS October Meeting *(continued)*



Our Business Members

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store

By John David Finlay, Jr.

The following article on Robbins & McGowin was written by John David Finlay, Jr. as a paper for a class at Emory University in 1950. The verb tenses have not been changed so that the paper reads as if the events were current but they are written from the perspective of 1950.

The notes are from the paper.

John David notes that the 1950 Census gives the population of Brewton and East Brewton as 7, 304. All notes come from the paper.

The corporation of Robbins & McGowin Co. was organized in Brewton, Alabama, March, 1897, by the consolidation of the businesses of J. I. Robbins and J. G. McGowin, the millinery business of Miss L. A. Cunningham, Blacksher-Miller Lumber Co. Commissary, and J. E. Finlay Co. The five departments of the new store - Ladies' Wear Department, Men's Wear Department, Millinery and Piece Goods Department, Tailoring Department, and Grocery and Hardware Department--were housed in three small one-story buildings.

(*Note: Mr. Finlay, who had begun his dry goods store in Brewton in February, 1892, bought controlling interest in Robbins & McGowin Co. in 1906 and was president of the firm until his death in July, 1946. Thus, the age of Robbins & McGowin Co. is dated from 1892 although it was not actually incorporated until 1897)

These buildings were lighted by gas lamps, because it was the latter part of 1897 before the first electric lights and telephones were installed in Brewton. None of the streets in the town were paved at this time, and there were only a few brick sidewalks. Due to the small size of the town, about 2,200 people, the largest percent of the store's business was with people living in the rural areas. Every effort was made to meet the needs of these customers. In fact, the store even sold wild horses-- Mustangs-- which it purchased by the train-car load.

These horses, which were shipped from Texas, were so wild that they had to be tied between two tame horses to be broken in.

It was during the first year of the new corporation that the Yellow Fever Panic occurred. There was only one case in Brewton, but that one case - it was not known at the time that the mosquito was the carrier of the dread disease - created enough fear to completely upset the entire county. Most of the stores closed, but Robbins & McGowin

remained open with only Mr. Finlay and two clerks on duty; the other clerks left town. Trains cancelled all stops in Brewton, and country people came in to get only the barest necessities. After several weeks, the panic subsided, and life resumed its normal pace.

As the volume of business increased, it became evident that the firm would have to find more space in which to house its crowded departments. Hence, the stock and the two story brick building of the



Robbins & McGowin in 1910

Picture Courtesy of ADAH (Alabama Department of Archives and History) digital photographs collection.

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 12)

Foshee Mercantile Co. were purchased. A three story brick building was erected on the vacant lot adjoining the Foshee building, and in January, 1909, the firm moved into its new home. These buildings have been used since that date by the store.

*(*Note: the Foshee building, constructed in 1883 of handmade bricks shipped from Montgomery, Alabama, was the first brick building erected in Escambia County.)*

The Goods purchased for the store during its early years of business were obtained for the most part through traveling salesmen and catalog wholesalers. Hardware Items were purchased, as is the practice at the present, from wholesalers in Mobile, Montgomery, and other large cities near Brewton. About the turn of the century, however, because of the volume of business which the young firm had built up, it was decided that a buyer could profitably be sent to the New York market.

At first, only one buyer - usually Mr. Finlay - was sent each year to buy for all departments of the store. As the firm grew, it was soon necessary to send two buyers in January of each year to buy for the spring and summer seasons and two buyers in July to buy for the fall and winter seasons. At times, a third buyer was sent to purchase for the jewelry and china department.

At the close of the First World War, it became evident that Robbins & McGowin Co. must maintain a close contact with the New York Market throughout the year if it were to keep ahead of the other stores



Interior of Robbins & McGowin in 1910
Picture Courtesy of ADAH digital photograph collection.

in Brewton and keep pace with the many new products and styles being brought in at this period. As this was impossible by merely sending buyers to "The City" twice a year, the store became affiliated in 1920 with the American Dry Goods Co., a New York buying firm headed by a Mr. Leroy Jay. This firm rendered good service but evidently did not prosper as it was reorganized in a few years under the name of Jay &

Company.

At this same time Robbins & McGowin Co. was also served by an excellent independent buyer, a Mr. Jones who purchased only men's and boy's clothing. In 1929 Jay & Company was consolidated with Kirby Block & Company which has served the store efficiently since that year. This buying organization serves so many stores that it knows the current best sellers in all parts of the nation and is constantly mailing bulletins to its clients about new items and current business trends. On filling special orders, Kirby Block & Company renders an invaluable service. This buying office also serves as headquarters for the store's buyers while they are in New York City. Each morning before going out into the market, the buyers stop by Kirby Block & Company for advice on where to purchase certain goods and to get tips on "hot" items.

These trips to market were discontinued in the mid-thirties because of the depression and were not resumed until 1946. During this time the store would have been at a great disadvantage if it had not had

(Continued on page 14)

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 13)

membership in a good buying office. At the present it is a store policy to send two buyers in July to buy for the fall and winter seasons and it is hoped that business conditions will soon be such that buyers may again be sent twice each year.

Many new and unusual goods, which would never have been introduced by traveling salesmen, have been found in the New Market, and most of those which have been stocked have proven to have a rapid rate of turnover. Items for Dollar Day Sales, etc. are also purchased on these trips. A few of these sales specials prove to be so popular that they are stocked throughout the year. Since the entire town participates in the Dollar Days, and Robbins & McGowin is the only store which sends buyers to New York, it enjoys a definite advantage in these sales in regard to the variety and quality of goods offered.

Particular effort is made on these trips to fill special orders. Many of the women customers want coats or suits in the latest fashion, and the ladies-ready-to-wear buyer spends a large part of her time trying to fill these special requests. This service has created much good will for the store, and for weeks after each trip--it is announced in the local papers that buyers are in New York--people come into the store and ask to see the latest styles from "The City."

Since its incorporation in 1897, Robbins & McGowin has advertised its merchandise in many different ways. One of its most far-reaching methods of advertising was begun in 1919 when the store opened a mail order department and started issuing a catalog. Two catalogs were published each year: one in February which advertised spring and summer goods, and one in July which advertised fall and winter goods.

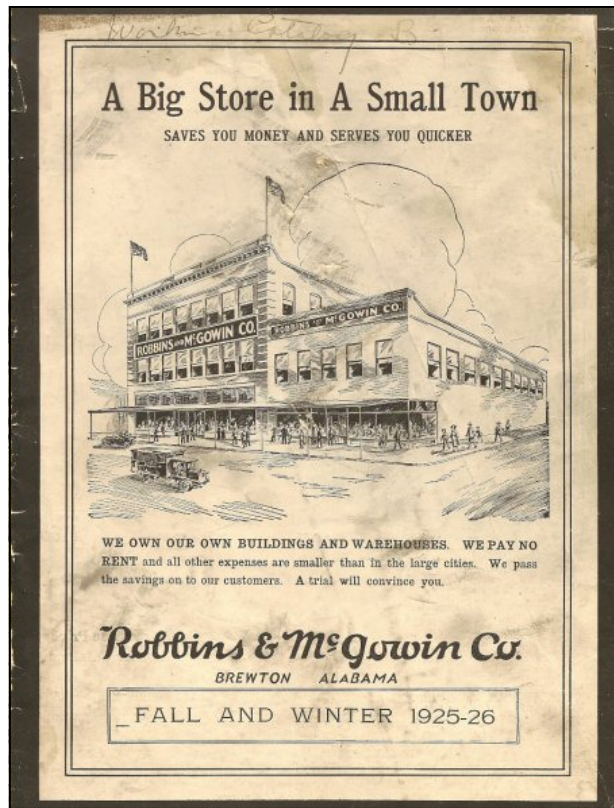
The spring and Summer issue was usually about fifty-two pages in length, and the Fall and Winter issue—larger because it described toys and other Christmas items—contained around sixty-four pages. Ten thousand copies of each were published and mailed out in Southern Alabama, West Florida, and Eastern Mississippi. Certain places in Mississippi were exceptionally good. Two slogans

were printed at the top of each page: "Order Today and Receive Tomorrow" and "Delivered Free if Order is for \$3.00 or more."

The prices in these catalogs were as low as or lower than prices quoted on similar items advertised in the catalogs of the large mail-order houses. But Robbins & McGowin Co. was at a disadvantage in regard to the cheaper type of illustrations it was forced to use to keep down printing costs.

Most merchandise shown had to be photographed locally as manufacturers at that time supplied very few advertising mats. Items such as hats and dresses were modeled by clerks or other local people. The cost per issue of the catalog, including postage,

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Front Page of Catalog

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store (continued)

(Continued from page 14)

amounted to about \$1,500. Though the volume of mail orders never paid for the catalog directly, it was a splendid medium of advertising. Even today, twenty-one years after the last catalog was issued, customers occasionally remark about the Robins & McGowin catalogs they used to receive.

Publication of the catalog was stopped in 1929 because Mr. Ned, as Mr. J. E. Finlay was called by his friends, decided that the public could be reached more effectively through a paper published once a month, excluding January and August. Thus, the first issue of The Brewton Trade Record was published on September 2, 1929, and copies were mailed to the rural customers and sent out by delivery boys in the small towns and near Brewton. Since most of the copies were received by people living in the rural districts, most of the articles written for the paper were intended to inform and help the farmer.

No social news was included, and court proceedings were carried only when property rights were involved. Each advertisement in the Trade Record contained a complete written description of the merchandise shown and also the item's stock number, so that the reader could easily place mail orders as he had done through the catalog.

At first the paper consisted of sixteen pages twelve inches by seventeen inches in size, but after several years the number of firms advertising through the publication had decreased so greatly that it was cut to eight pages. In February, 1944, the paper was discontinued altogether because of a bad fire in Rob-

bins & McGowin Co. and also because of the acute paper shortage caused by the war.

Today it is believed that the store's most effective advertising medium is through displays in the front show windows. Efforts are made to make the displays as colorful and attractive as possible and many of the window scenes bring much favorable comment from customers. The store also advertises through the local weekly paper, the local radio station, and through pamphlets mailed to customers at the beginning of each season. From time to time Fashion Shows are held at the movie theater with town girls as models. The show held in September of this year was presented by fifty-five models that showed some sixty odd outfits.

Like most firms which have been in business for many years,

Robbins & McGowin Co. has made several attempts to establish branch stores. One was opened in Opp, Alabama in 1926 under the name of Finlay & Company. Another was opened the following year under the same name in Andalusia, Alabama. Merchandise for these two stores was purchased by the buyers sent to New York each year from the Brewton store.

Through this method of purchasing for all three stores at the same time, larger orders could be placed and goods could be obtained more cheaply. . . The Finlay & Company stores were operated on a strictly cash and carry basis. The objective was to sell good merchandise as cheaply as possible. Robbins & McGowin Co. however, has always been a full-service institution.

The first manager of the Opp store was thought to be dishonest and was replaced by Mr. George Geist, a brother -in-law of Mr. Ned's. Mr. Geist had almost

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7Y108-YOUNG MEN'S POWDER

PACKAGE SUITS \$18.50

Single Breasted, single row, with wide notches, deep lapels, and a wide peak. The most complete line of suits ever offered. The most complete line of suits ever offered. The most complete line of suits ever offered.

Page from Robbins and McGowin Catalog from 1925

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 15)

succeeded in putting the store on a profitable footing when he died of pneumonia in 1934. After his death the management of the Opp store shifted from one hand to another, and it was finally closed around 1938.

The Andalusia store also suffered from poor management and was soon moved to Greenville, Alabama. It did not prosper in Greenville either and was closed about the same time that the Opp branch was discontinued.

The story of the firm's branch in Talladega, Alabama is quite different, however. In 1923 Mr. Finlay and others bought a half interest in a firm that had been thrown unto bankruptcy—J.H. Samuel Company. The store was reopened under the name of Samuel & Finlay, and its sales on the first day of business amounted to \$7,000. In fact, the store sold over \$20,000 worth of merchandise for cash its first three days of business. These amounts are hardly short of phenomenal when one considers the small size of Talladega at that time.

To insure close control over this store, Mr. Ned had his son, John David Finlay, spend half his time with the Talladega firm and the other half with Robbins & McGowin Co. This branch store continued to net a good profit, but Mr. Ned sold his interest to Mr. Samuel in 1927 because their ideas of doing business did not agree. It may have been a wise move because Mr. Samuel soon went broke again.

(*Note: These branch stores were not owned by Robbins & McGowin Co. itself, but by Mr. Finlay and several of the employees of the store.)

Page from Robbins & McGowin Catalog from 1925

The year 1929 would have been a bad one for Robbins & McGowin Co. even if the stock market had not crashed and the depression set in. On March 14 of that year, after nearly a month of continuous rain (several cloudbursts fell), the two creeks between which the city is located overflowed, and the merchants realized that the business district would be overflowed. Merchandise was hurriedly transferred to higher shelves; but to no avail. The water kept rising. By 7:00 that night it was evident that the merchandise would have to be moved to the second floor.

The water continued to rise at such a fast rate, however, that it was impossible to save all the goods. Many of the ten-foot-high wall shelf-counters were

capsized by the flood water and spilled thousands of dollars worth of merchandise which had been piled upon them. The following account of the flood scene that night is taken from an article written by J. B. Finlay in the September 1929 issue of the Brewton Trade Record.

By midnight the water was over one's head in the store. One boy dived off into the water and swam the entire length of the store—about one hundred feet. Then we worked from the tops of shelving passing goods to others who carried them to the second floor. The electric lights had been out but lightening flashed continuously so we could see how to get about; all the time rain was falling in a very cloudburst. One man kept a record and said that it was falling at the rate of an inch in hour that night.

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The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 16)

Occasionally we would slip from our work for a few minutes and go to the second floor windows and look out. It was a sight well worth seeing. The main street was a regular river with a very swift current. Trees, bridges, and even houses swept down the street.

Every now and then something would strike the railroad signal bell, and it made a very creepy feeling go over us to hear the bell ringing out in the midst of the flood waters.

After the flood, extensive improvements were made on the store building so it would be able to stand up against flood waters should they ever rise as high in the future. The building was reinforced throughout, with steel and concrete. A modern passenger elevator was installed, not only for the convenience of second and third floor customers, but also to insure that goods could be moved to higher levels quickly.

The flood completely destroyed a fertilizer plant which Robbins & McGowin had been operating for a number of years. One thousand tons of material was washed away. Although large amounts of fertilizer had been sold each year, the plant had never earned a large profit. Most of the farmers of this region are of the opinion that if they make a crop they should pay the merchant. If their crop fails, they



Page from Robbins & McGowin Catalog from 1925

think that the merchant should lose what he (the farmer) was advanced

Mr. John D. Finlay collected many of the accounts by writing many letters and riding over the entire trading section. He learned that persistence is the first rule of collection. In fact, he went to one country house so often the dog would not even bark at his approach.

It has been a policy to put the money collected from accounts which have been written off the books into a special account for store improvements. One thousand dollars of this account was used to open a line of silverware and jewelry in 1928. These lines have proved very successful. There was five thousand dollars in this account when the depression of

the thirties came, and it was of great help in pulling the firm through those lean years. The first of this year about twelve hundred dollars from this account was used in laying a concrete floor in the Grocery and Hardware Department. At the present, this account is being built up so that the firm can have its front display windows modernized.

During the Second World War, the store's volume of business increased greatly over what it had been during the thirties, but for some reason the firm was netting only a small profit. In the summer of 1943, Mr. Ed Leigh McMillan, lawyer for the firm, called Mr. J. D. Finlay to his office. He told him how he

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

(Continued from page 17)

had heard from the cashier of a local bank that one of the Robbins & McGowin bookkeepers had been “kiking” checks. Mr. Finlay had been suspecting the bookkeepers for some time also, and after his conversation with Mr. McMillan he began to watch them very closely.

*(*Note: Up until this time it had not been thought necessary to have the books audited, as the bookkeepers had been with the store for many years and had been trusted implicitly. The only checks, thus, had been those by Mr. Ned, who had once kept books.)*

It was decided that Mr. Ned, who was in bad health, would not be told until some definite evidence could be obtained. On December 31, 1943, Mr. J. D. Finlay got that evidence. Just as one of the bookkeepers was leaving for dinner, Mr. Finlay saw him cram a sheet of paper from one of the three Accounts Receivable Books into his coat pocket. After the bookkeeper was gone, Mr. Finlay examined the books, even though the other bookkeeper was watching, and found that the Control Sheet in Book Three was missing. He then realized how they had been covering their shortages.

He talked with Mr. McMillan and they decided that Mr. Ned would have to be told. Mr. Ned said that he had been suspecting embezzlement for some time and said that he would have the books audited as soon as possible. He made a tragic mistake, however, when he told the bookkeepers that the auditors were coming. They began to take old records out of storage and go over them frantically.

On the night of February 20, 1944,—the auditors were coming the next day—the store suffered a costly fire. It was clearly a case of arson, committed by the bookkeepers in a desperate attempt to cover the shortages. All of the books were not burned, however, and a charge of embezzlement was brought against the bookkeepers.

A local friend of theirs kept a bill for arson from being brought before the Grand Jury. Before the

trial, both of the bookkeepers came to Mr. Finlay and tried to make a settlement. He told them that he would ask the judge to give them a suspended sentence if they would plead guilty to the charge. They finally accepted, and the case was closed.

The goods damaged by the fire were sold at very low prices in a fire sale and auction which was held several days after the fire. Although the insurance payments on the merchandise and building covered only a small percent of the total loss, the firm was fortunately able to replace ruined counters, light fixtures, etc. with the most modern units available. The greatest loss, however, was not in merchandise and fixtures but was in sales missed during the time that the building was being repaired. Many of the store's customers shopped at other places during this time and have not yet started buying again at Robbins & McGowin Co.

(Note: One of the bookkeepers was at the fire department that night, entertaining the firemen so that they would not discover the fire. When the alarm did come through, he lay in front of the fire truck and the firemen were forced to drag him away before they could move the truck.)*

Today, Robbins & McGowin Co. is the oldest store in Brewton. It is also the largest and most complete department store in this section of the state. Its long and successful life is due, I think, to its fair and square methods of doing business, the fine quality of goods handled, and the foresight and high moral character of its leaders. Although it has suffered many setbacks, it has continued to thrive through the years, and I firmly believe that it will continue to do so in the future. €

The ECHS *Journal* Section

The History of a Small Town Department Store *(continued)*

An Institution

Twice Thirty

Reaching the age of 60, Edward W. Bok, distinguished editor of the The Ladies Home Journal wrote a book with the above title.

February 1, 1952 this firm, counting from the day J. E. Finlay started in the mercantile business at Brewton, reaches the ripe age of Sixty Years.

Since February 1, 1892, Brewton has grown from a small sawmill town until today it enters upon the magic promise of oil.

During the past 60 years this business has survived three wars, several depressions, five floods, a yellow fever epidemic, a disastrous fire and many periods of good and bad business. In spite of all this, we are here today!

“The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained,” says Portia in The Merchant of Venice. Our Quality of Merchandise and Standards of Doing Business are not Strained. We hold to Quality Goods in good and bad times and we are known far and wide as a store that sells the very best for the money.

We like to think of that passage in the Bible (Matthew 13:45) which says, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a Merchant Man, seeking goodly pearls.”

We do continually see merchandise that is good and today our stock of goods is the best and most desirable in our long history.

We promise the people of Brewton and this wonderful section that we will continue to serve you and try to merit your confidence in the amazing future ahead.

Nearly twenty-four years have passed since the above was written. During that time vast deposits of oil have been found near Brewton and we had another flood this year.

A Friend said, “This store is more than just a business—it is an institution.”

We are honored to have you visit us today;

October 4, 1975 €

ECHOES
THE NEWSLETTER FOR
THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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