



Albert Patterson

Volume 41, Number 6

June 2014

The June Meeting **Tuesday, June 24, 2014, 3:00 p. m.** **The Thomas E. McMillan Museum**

The Program

"When Good People Do Nothing" is the title of the documentary that guest Allen Miller will show at the Meeting. The documentary is an interview that Allen and a classmate did in 2013 with former Governor John Patterson, the son of Albert Patterson --who was killed in the turmoil in Phenix City, Alabama .

Allen is a member of the Honors program and studying Telecommunication & Film and Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. He is the son of Dr. & Mrs. Keith Miller of Brewton and a graduate of T. R. Miller High School.

Allen is shown at the right with Former Governor John Patterson during the filming of the interview. The murder of the Governor's father Albert Patterson, was the catalyst that brought the reforms that removed Phenix City from mob control..



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The July Meeting
Tuesday, June 22, 2014
The Program: Show and Tell
Always One of Our Most Popular
Programs
Plan to Bring an Item That Is
Meaningful to You

ECHS Historic Marker Dedication
Sunday, June 22, 2014
Elim Baptist Church in Roberts
Church Service at 11:00
Events Include Dedication & Dinner on
the Grounds

More about Allen Miller and the Program

(Continued from page 1)

Albert Patterson, at that time a practicing lawyer in Phenix City, had pledged to clean up Phenix City when he ran for state Attorney General and won the Democratic Party primary in May of 1954. Winning the primary meant he was a shoo-in for the office. Robert Clem in his article “Phenix City: the Tyranny of the Mob” writes of the actions and threats against Albert Patterson when he decided to run for state office under the pledge “Man Against Crime”:

The mob did everything they could to defeat him, setting fire to his law office, disrupting rallies, and on election night going all over the state buying and stealing votes. But in May 1954, Albert Patterson won the Democratic nomination as Alabama’s attorney general – tantamount to election in those days – by less than 900 votes.

A tough man who had suffered a grievous leg wound in World War I and walked with a pronounced limp, Patterson believed that Phenix City prosecutor Arch Ferrell and outgoing attorney general Silas Garrett had committed flagrant vote fraud in Birmingham in a failed bid to defeat him. Two weeks after he was elected attorney general, Patterson announced he would testify about vote fraud before the Jefferson County grand jury.

It was a brazen act. Two nights before he was to testify, Patterson was gunned down in a parking lot outside his office. One shot had been to the mouth, gangland vengeance against informers.

Phenix City’s gradual descent into control by the mob began as an answer to the city’s financial problems. In an article in the Encyclopedia of Alabama, author Lauren Wiygul notes that during the Great Depression Phenix City went bankrupt and was 1.1 million dollars in debt. By 1933, the city was operating under a federal receiver. “At the time, local authorities rationalized widespread crime and corruption in Phenix City as being a necessary revenue producer in the absence of other businesses.”

The city authorities took advantage of the illegal activities and issued licenses and fines for gambling activities and using and selling liquor. Wiygul’s article reports that by the mid-forties the city was collecting \$228,000 in fines and had become increasingly under the control of organized crime bosses who “ran gambling, narcotics, and prostitution operations throughout the city. These men rigged local and state elections and held important leadership positions in the chamber of commerce, on school and hospital boards, and in several service organizations” (“Phenix City”).

By the end of World War II, the mob business was a multi-million dollar one. Soldiers from Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia, just across the Chattahoochee River from Phenix City, were a big part of that business. The soldiers had always visited the clubs, gambling halls, and prostitution houses of Phenix City, but during World War II, when the fort would have as many as 100,000 men on the base, it had become “big business.”

Margaret Anne Barnes in her book The Tragedy and Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama states: “They would completely take advantage of these soldiers. They would get them drunk or get them to gamble and take all of a man’s money, and if he objected about being ill-treated, then he was beat up and sometimes killed” (Up From The Ashes: The Rebirth of Phenix City, a documentary by Max Shores).

Robert Clem in his article on Phenix City comments: “Every now and then some higher up at Fort Benning would threaten to close down Phenix City. Unlucky soldiers who couldn’t pay their debts would sometimes end up dead. It was the Secretary of the Army who called Phenix City the ‘wickedest city in the USA.’ When George Patton was the fort’s commanding officer, he threatened to bring his tanks over and flatten the place” (“The Tyranny of the Mob”).

The citizens of Phenix City had tried to clean up their city but were met with violent resistance from the world of gambling. However, eventually a group of concerned citizens, led by a local business man,

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More about Allen Miller and the Program

(Continued from page 2)

Hugh Bentley, organized a group, the Russell Betterment Association (RBA), with the purpose of fighting corruption in the County, mainly in Phenix City.

Albert Patterson worked with the RBA but never joined it. Eventually the RBA decided the best way to fight the corruption was to win the state attorney general's office and use that power to clean up the city and the county. Hugh Bentley paid a price for his leadership when his house was bombed (his family escaped unharmed), and, of course, Albert Patterson was murdered after he won the Democratic primary for state attorney general and promised to testify concerning voter fraud during his primary race.

In her article "Phenix City," Laurel Wiygul notes that as a result of Patterson's murder, the mayor of Phenix City ordered all businesses that sold alcohol to close on Sundays and the Governor of Alabama, Gordon Persons, declared martial law for the city, sending in 75 national guardsmen under the command of General Walter J. Hanna. "The Guardsmen performed around-the-clock raids on nightclubs, warehouses, and gambling institutions, and nearby Fort Benning declared Phenix City off limits to its soldiers. After learning about his father's death, future governor John Patterson ran for the state attorney general position in 1955; while in that office, he prosecuted those who were responsible for his father's murder (though only one man was actually convicted).

Author Alan Grady of Somerville, Alabama in his article "Albert Patterson" includes other details of the actions taken: "Special prosecutors, along with Circuit Court Judge Walter B. Jones of Montgomery, were dispatched to Russell County to replace the local judiciary. In addition, the Alabama Department of Public Safety sent special agents from its Investigative and Identification Division (now the Alabama Bureau of Investigation) to investigate Patterson's murder, again supplanting local authorities.

"Thanks to their efforts, the organized crime syndicate running Phenix City was completely dismantled within six months. A special grand jury brought 734 indictments, including charges against

many law enforcement officers, local business owners connected to organized crime, and elected officials. The local chief deputy, the local circuit solicitor (now called district attorney) and the outgoing state attorney general, Si Garrett, were indicted for Patterson's murder. Albert Fuller, the chief deputy, was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, but Arch Ferrell, the circuit solicitor, was acquitted.

"Si Garrett, the attorney general, was never brought to trial, and spent time convalescing in a mental hospital for much of the first year or so after Patterson's murder. Although he was never removed from office, his term ended in January 1955, seven months after Patterson's murder. Bernard Sykes was appointed acting attorney general from 1954 to 1955 and oversaw both the Patterson murder investigation and the vice and corruption investigations that led to the indictments. John Patterson took office as attorney general in 1955 after running on a platform of fighting organized crime."

Books, documentaries, and films have been made about the story of Phenix City. The clean-up (Max Shores' documentary calls it a rebirth, referring to the mythical bird, the Phoenix, that can regenerate itself from its own ashes), has produced a town that in 1955 Look magazine named an All American City, an award given to cities that have been turned around by citizen involvement. Business Week in 2007 listed it as "the nation's best affordable suburb for raising a family" (Wiygul, "Phenix City").

Sources

Clem, Robert. "Phenix City: The Tragedy of the Mob. LongLeaf Style Magazine, August 1, 2011 <<http://www.longleafstyle.com/news/?newsID=27>>.

Grady, Alan. "Albert Patterson." Encyclopedia of Alabama <<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1250>>.

Shores, Max. Up from the Ashes: the Rebirth of Phenix City <<http://maxshores.com/up-from-the-ashes-the-rebirth-of-phenix-city/>>.

Wiygul, Laurel. "Phenix City." Encyclopedia of Alabama <<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2133>>.

Phenix City and The RBA: Russell Betterment Association

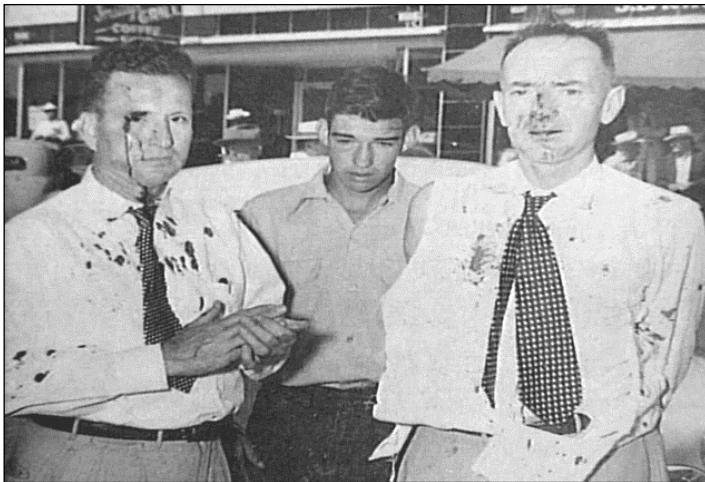
The following text is from Phenix City: The Fight for the Soul of a Small Southern Town at <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall02/bauldree/synopsis.html>.

On October 25, 1951, Hugh Bentley and 10 others signed papers of incorporation for the RBA. As a corporation, the RBA was able to get more press coverage of Phenix City's vice.

Albert Patterson volunteered his services free of charge, though did not become a member himself. Hugh Bentley later received death threats.

Gambling kingpin Hoyt Shepherd offered Hugh a political office in exchange for easing up on Phenix City's gamblers. Hugh declined the offer, stating that he only wanted a clean town with clean elections.

In the Picture Below, Albert Patterson is second from the left and Hugh Bentley is third from the left. This appears to be a picture of members of the RBA.



In the picture at the left, Hugh Bentley (standing at the left), a fellow Russell Betterment Association (RBA) director (standing on the right), and Hugh's son (standing in the center) are shown after being beaten outside a polling station in 1952.

They had observed the use of already marked ballots being distributed and reported the violation to the police. They were attacked after they returned to the polling station. Two reporters who were covering the scene were also attacked.

Law enforcement officers were present but did nothing to stop the fight.



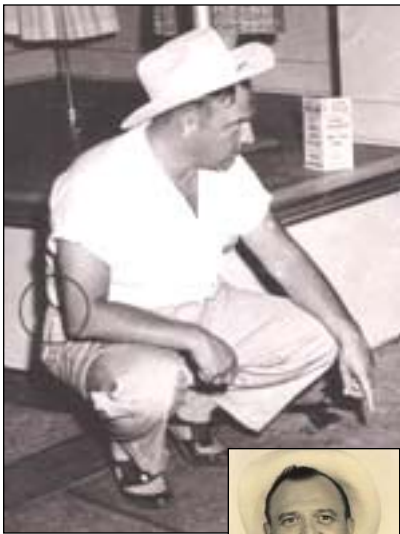
Pictured at the left, Bentley's home was bombed in 1952 as a warning against his work with the Russell Betterment Association. Bentley was not at home but his wife and son, who were asleep in the house, managed to escape from the wreckage unharmed.

Phenix City: Major Players



From the left, Arch Ferrell, Russell County circuit solicitor; Si Garrett, Alabama Attorney General; and Ralph Mathews, Russell County sheriff. The three were initially implicated in the June 1954 murder of Garrett's opponent for attorney general, Albert Patterson. Mathews was convicted on 10 counts of neglect of duty. Ferrell was acquitted of involvement in Patterson's murder, and charges were never brought against Garrett.

Text is from Phenix City: The Fight for the Soul of a Small Southern Town



On the left, both pictures are of Chief Deputy Sherriff Albert Fuller. Creating his own position and title in the sheriff's department, Fuller was allowed free reign over the county by Sherriff Matthews. With its owner, Cliff Entrekink, as partner, he helped run Cliff's Fish House, the most financially successful prostitution business in the county.

According to the documentary Phenix City: The Fight for the Soul of a Small Southern Town, "The prostitution business in Phenix City thrived under Fuller's protection which could be bought for one third of the income. Fuller recruited new prostitutes by arresting young girls looking for work in Phenix City nightclubs. The prostitution house operators would then visit the girl in jail and offer her bond in exchange for work."

Of the three men indicted for the murder of Albert Patterson, the other two were County Solicitor Arch Fuller and outgoing state Attorney General Si Barrett, Fuller was the only one tried. His fingerprint was found on Albert Patterson's car and bullets that matched the caliber of those which killed Patterson were found in his home.

He was convicted, served time, and was paroled. He died from a broken neck suffered from a fall from a ladder.

Source for pictures and information <<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Bauldree/people4.html>>.

Phenix City: Major Players *(Continued)*



Source for photo and information on Arch Ferrell at <<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Bauldree/people3.html>>.

Arch Ferrell (shown at left), who was from a family of well established lawyers in Russell County, was appointed circuit solicitor by Governor Jim Folsom after Ferrell returned from service in World War II. He was known as a brilliant lawyer who, however, had a sharp temper and a drinking problem.

He bragged about his involvement with the Phenix City's rackets and claimed he was in charge. There was a good deal of truth in his assertion since in his position as circuit solicitor he could chose who to prosecute and who to leave alone. He gave advice to Shepherd, Matthews, and others in the gambling business.

In 1954, following the primary election, he was indicted for voting fraud by a Jefferson County grand jury for changing numbers on a recapitulation sheet, but was acquitted.

After the murder of Patterson, he and Chief Deputy Sherriff Albert Fuller were in charge of the investigation. After several weeks when the two had not reported any leads, acting state Attorney General Bernard Sykes removed Ferrell from the investigation.

Although he was indicted for the murder along with Fuller and Garrett, he was acquitted. Only Fuller was tried.

John Patterson, pictured at the right, grew up in Phenix City. His father, Albert, had moved the family there in 1933 when John was in the eight grade. One source relates that when he was sixteen, he got a job at King's Grocery and got to know those operating the rackets in the city because he delivered groceries to all the honky-tonks. Along with his friends, he would play the slot machines in the stores and buy lottery tickets (Phenix City: The Fight for the Soul of a Small Southern Town).

From the same article about Phenix City comes the information that John Patterson said it was understood that he would succeed and go to college, paying his own way. He graduated from high school and joined the army, reaching the rank of Major. He attended the University of Alabama and graduated with a law degree. He was recalled to the army in the Korean Conflict.

In 1953, he returned home and joined his father's law practice. His father was advising the Russell Betterment Association by this time and running for Attorney General so John was in charge of the law firm.

After his father's assassination in 1954, he flew to Washington D. C. and tried to meet with J. Edgar Hoover but was not successful. He flew back to Columbus, Georgia, and told the press waiting at the airport that he believed those in charge of the investigation of his father's murder should be the chief suspects.

In November of 1954, he ran unopposed for Attorney General and used the position to clean up the city. In 1958, he defeated George Wallace to become Governor of Alabama.



Source for photo and information on John Patterson at <<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Bauldree/people7.html>>.

Phenix City: Major Players *(Continued)*



Picture of Hugh Bentley from
<<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall02/bauldree/people2.html>>.

“In 1954, not long before the clean-up, he was asked by a reporter why he continued to live in Phenix City despite danger and threats. Bentley described Phenix City as a ‘dirty, filthy coat’ that he inherited from his father and didn’t want to pass along to his children” (From <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2395>).



Picture from
<<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-2395>>.

Hugh Bentley, shown in the center front row of the picture at the left, is referred to by many as one of the real heroes of the Phenix City story. Described as a serious and “deeply religious” man, his sense of Christian responsibility is said to have come from the influence of his mother.

However, like the other boys who grew up in the town, he knew what went on in the gambling houses and honky-tonks. His father’s grocery store, like others in town, sold lottery tickets.

Hugh operated several sporting goods stores in the area. He became fully aware of the national reputation of Phenix City as the most corrupt city in America when he attended a sporting goods convention in Chicago in the 1940’s and discovered that Phenix City’s reputation was worse than that of Chicago’s.

He returned home and became an activist against the crime syndicate in the town. He organized a Christian Layman’s Association in 1945 which held all-night prayer vigils in churches. However, the organization became divisive and was disbanded in 1947.

In 1948, he organized the Good Government League to try to stop the voter fraud and manipulation which the “machine” that ran the city used to elect the officials they wanted. Since these first two organizations were not successful, in 1951, he consulted with Albert Patterson and organized the Russell Betterment Association. He was the president of the organization.

Pearl Watley Mitchell of the Russell County Historical Commission comments on the goals of the RBA and how much courage it took to belong to the organization: “The RBA monitored polls for voter fraud, campaigned for accountability on the police force and in the court, and worked to drive prostitution and gambling from Phenix City. The RBA first met secretly for fear of their lives and many men resisted joining for fear of their families’ safety.

In spite of death threats, the beating at the polls, the bombing of his house (he donated the insurance money to his organization), he persisted in his efforts to rid his city of corruption. He supported Albert Patterson for attorney general, giving speeches on his behalf.

After the murder of Patterson and the imposition of martial law, he and the RBA retreated into the background but he has since been honored as a hero of the rebirth of Phenix City. He died on April 13, 1984, in Phenix City and was buried in Pine Grove Cemetery.

Phenix City: Major Players *(Continued)*



Hoyt Shepherd came to Phenix City during the Depression. With Jamie Matthews, he formed a business, the S & M Syndicate, to supply gambling equipment. slot machines, roulette wheels, loaded dice, and marked cards.

He and Matthews formed a Lottery called “The Bug.” In 1938 the popularity of “The Bug” led to tragedy. It had become so popular that an overwhelming number of patrons crowded into the Ritz Café, which Matthews and Shepherd owned, to get tickets and see the winning numbers. The crowd exceeded the capacity of the building; the walls were pushed out as well as a steel beam, which made the building collapse. Twenty-four people were killed and many were injured. The police vowed to take action against those responsible but were unable to when they could find no evidence or witnesses.

In another incident, Hoyt and his brother were indicted for the murder of a fellow gambler in 1946. Hoyt hired every lawyer in town, including Albert Patterson, and got off. His brother stood trial and was found not guilty. He claimed self defense.

In 1852, when the reform movement by citizens began to have effect, Hoyt reacted to the pressure by announcing he was quitting, getting out of running gambling house. He turned over a warehouse of gambling equipment to authorities, but he and his partner still were in the game as they rented properties and equipment to those who still ran gambling establishments and he was actually still the head of the gambling syndicate.

As a further action for his “Reform,” he invested his money in legitimate ventures and then gave to churches and charities. One source states, “Shepherd's goal was to gain a reputation of good standing in the community for the sake of his children”



At the left is Beachie Howard, known as “Ma” Beachie, who ran one of the most popular clubs in Phenix City. Her club, Beachies’ Swing Club, had strippers, gambling, and liquor.

She was noted for helping soldiers keep track of their money. She would hold it for them while they were in her club. Soldiers also tell the story of their being so drunk the night they were at her club that they would pass out and wake up the next day with a note pinned to their shirt telling them she was holding their money. The note would tell how much money they had

She owned rental property across from her club and she pretended that she didn’t know that prostitutes were using the property after picking up clients at her club.

After the clean-up, she had a cameo role in the movie The Phenix City Story.

Phenix City: Major Players *(Continued)*



Si Garrett was the Attorney General for Alabama in 1954 when Albert Patterson was murdered. He showed that he was a part of the corruption in Phenix City when in 1953 he testified at the impeachment trial of Russell County Sherriff Ralph Matthews. Garrett said that he knew all the sheriffs in Alabama, and he did not know of a better man than Ralph Matthews. Matthews remained sheriff.

Garrett also participated in the voter fraud that occurred in the Democratic Primary when Albert Patterson won the primary against Lee Porter. Garrett had backed Porter with the idea of using him when he won the state office to retain power/ Garrett's term as attorney general would end in 1954.

From the website, Phenix City: the Fight for the Soul of a Small Southern Town: "Garrett and Arch Ferrell changed the numbers on a recapitulation sheet to add votes for Porter. Garrett convinced county democratic party chairman Lamar Reid that Patterson was the gamblers' candidate. Reid provided access to the sheets, with Garrett reassuring him later that 'this vote thing comes up all the time'" (<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall02/Bauldree/people5.html>).

However, a reporter in Birmingham noticed a problem with the vote count and Garrett was called before a grand jury in Jefferson County. Reid, the man who gave the sheets to Garrett, had confessed and had named Garrett and Farrell in his testimony to the grand jury.

Garrett was called to testify before the grand jury concerning the vote fraud on June 18, 1954. The day that Patterson was murdered. After testifying, he returned to the Redmont Hotel in Birmingham and had dinner with friends in the Democratic party. While he was at dinner, Arch Farrell called Garrett's hotel room several times. Farrell used the phone calls to Garrett as his alibi for the time of the murder of Patterson.

Garrett was called to testify again concerning voter fraud and the murder of Patterson. He testified for ten hours and when he finished, he left Alabama, drove to Texas/ and checked himself into a mental hospital.

He was never brought to trial for voter fraud or murder.

Phenix City: Major Players *(Continued)*



The Price Was Too High
The following comment is from
Phenix City: The Fight for the
Soul of a Small Southern Town:

Many have commented that had Patterson not been murdered, Phenix City probably would not have seen reform to the extent that it did.

Considering the impact his father's murder had on his family, John Patterson says, "To us the price was too high" (<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall02/bauldree/people6.html>).

Albert Patterson left home at 16 and worked in the Texas oil fields. He then joined the Texas National Guard and fought on the Mexican border in 1917. He received a serious leg wound during this conflict and always walked with a cane.

He returned to Alabama and went to college where he studied law. He worked as a teacher in several counties and then moved to Alexander City to set up a law practice. Here he was also a school superintendent and was considered a strict disciplinarian by his students.

Because of economic conditions in Alexander City, in 1933, he moved his family and his law practice to Phenix City. With Fort Benning nearby, Phenix City offered a better economic condition for supporting his family.

In 1945, he was elected to the Alabama State Senate with the support of the racketeers in Phenix City. He was one of many lawyers hired by gamblers. However after defending a gambler named Head Revler in 1949 and losing the case, he vowed to never defend again anyone not in a legitimate business.

When he ran for Attorney General in 1945, it was not clear to voters that he had severed all ties to the gamblers. His opponent, Lee Porter, spread the rumor that Patterson was the candidate of the "machine." Porter ran on the slogan "Beat the Phenix City Machine" even though he had accepted \$25,000 in campaign contributions from known gamblers. Porter was supported by Circuit Solicitor Arch Feller and Attorney General Si Garrett, both of whom had been vocal supporters of Phenix City's corrupt officials.

Patterson's support of the RBA and work with Hugh Bentley, plus his candidacy against Porter showed that he had indeed severed ties with the "machine." When he won the Democratic primary and thus would become Attorney General, that threat that he would have the power to prosecute those involved in the corruption of the city was too much. He was murdered and the clean-up of Phenix City began.

The case of the murder received national attention and has been the subject of books and film. **The Columbus Ledger** won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of events.

Source for material **online** at <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall02/bauldree/people6.html>.

Phenix City: The Clean-Up



Alabama Governor Gordon Persons, left, in Phenix City shortly after the assassination of Albert Patterson. Persons declared limited martial rule following the murder, putting law enforcement in the hands of the Alabama National Guard.



Following the assassination of Albert Patterson in 1954, the Alabama Supreme Court sent circuit court judge Walter Jones to Phenix City to preside over vice cases, replacing the local judiciary.



Crowd gathered near the alley where Albert Patterson was murdered.

Phenix City: The Clean-Up *(Continued)*



National Guard Confiscate Cars of Phenix City Officials and Police.



Alabama National Guardsmen survey damage likely caused during the surge in police action following the assassination of Albert Patterson.



Gathering Evidence

The national guard removed all the equipment from the gambling establishments and shut them down.



Patrolling the Streets

Phenix City was under partial martial law and the national guard were present to give protection and enforce the law.

Tour of McGowin Family Cemetery



Visitors to the McGowin Family Cemetery Tour

Standing from left Peter, Jeff and Cathy McGowin, LaRone (Carroll Blow's wife), Bettie Miller, Tim McGowin, Tom McMillan, Pat McGowin (Tim's mother), Allen and Brian Blow (Carroll's sons), Jacqueline Stone, Linda Blow Christy, Carroll Blow and kneeling, Walter Fowler, Valerie Hart, Gale Blow Dunlap. Gale and Linda (twins) are Carroll's sisters.

Keville Larson and Carroll Blow initiated a cemetery tour for relatives of the McGowin family in northeastern Escambia County, Alabama. The tour began Monday, May 12, 2014 at the McGowin Cemetery located off Highway 29 near the Conecuh River.

Relatives and friends met for picnic under a shady oak tree and then crossed the Conecuh River to visit gravesites in the woods in the Marietta and Mason communities.

Those other cemeteries included: Foshee Cemetery, McIntyre Cemetery, and Sam L. McGowin Cemetery. The tour then proceeded to Brewton where later McGowins

lived and to Union Cemetery where they were buried.

Represented in the picture are descendants of two of the three children of Peter McGowin and Nancy Floyd. (Tim and Walter, The third line is cousins in California and North Carolina).

Also represented are descendants of two of the six children of Alexander McGowin and Nancy Floyd (Peter, Jeff, Bettie and not pictured, me, Keville Larson who took the photographs).

Valerie is from Sarah Jane McGowin Hart (sister of Peter and Alexander). The Blows are from Ann



View of McGowin Cemetery

(Continued on page 14)

Tour of McGowin Family Cemetery

(Continued from page 13)

Elizabeth McGowin Blow (sister of Peter and Alexander).

Tom McMillan descends from Mary Lewis and Thomas Floyd.

Jacqueline Stone represents the Escambia County Historical Society.



Family and Visitors at the McGowin Cemetery

Covington County Historical Society Program: “Andalusia’s Wonderful Architecture”

Dr. William (Bill) Hansford, formerly of Andalusia, will present an informative program at the Thursday, June 26 meeting of The Covington Historical Society. “Andalusia’s Wonderful Architecture” will be the topic of this Power Point presentation where he will discuss the architecture found in Andalusia including styles such as Queen Anne, Edwardian, Bungalow, Colonial/Classic, Arts and Crafts, Federal, Cotswold, Art Deco, Sears and Roebuck Mail-Order, Regency, Depression era, and the Post World War II era.

Hansford, reared in Andalusia, is a graduate of Andalusia High School and the UAB Medical School. Following open heart surgery, after practicing medicine in Opp for a number of years, he served as Medical Director of Regular Business for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama in Birmingham where he now resides.

Accompanying his mother, Grace Hansford, a nurse with the health department, to many homes during his formative years, Hansford began a lifetime of interest in the architectural beauty of the many styles of residences in Andalusia. His desire is to make Andalusians aware of the valuable architecture the town has.

The Society meets in the Three Notch Museum, the former Post Office, on Three Notch Street.



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The ECHS *Journal* Section

The Night the Sky Was Falling

By Charles Ware

This article originally appeared in the Atmore Magazine and is reprinted with permission of the author.

I recently read back issues of Atmore Magazine, issues that I had missed while I was working overseas, and came to Nancy Kerrick's excellent article in the

September 2007 edition about the old Atmore airport called Ewing Field. This article rekindled an interest in this airport that I have that goes back to when I was a kid in the early 1950's. My dad worked in the forests of Escambia County, and he always had a bunch of detailed 1:50,000 scale maps in his truck. I had a fascination with maps and would often sit in his truck for hours and study every detail. I was surprised when I found a depiction of an airport and navigation light which was located only three miles from where I lived on Jack Spring Road. This was probably about 1953 and the airport was closed by this time, but my dad said he remembered when airplanes would fly over our house going to and coming from the airport.

In the course of trying to find information on the airport, I did hours of internet searches for reports of accidents that had occurred at Atmore. Accident reports are usually kept forever, but finding them can be quite difficult since some bit of information is necessary, such as the airplane number or the pilot's name. I found records of three accidents that occurred in Atmore before the start of World War II. There are records of nine Army Air Corps accidents between 1941 and the end of 1943. All but one of these airplanes were AT-6 or BT-13 trainer planes which were based at Craig Field in Selma or at Maxwell and Gunter Fields in Montgomery. This indicates that the Atmore airport was being heavily used as a training site by the Army Air Corps during this time. After 1943 the Atmore airport became a



Charles Ware

Navy training site, and I've found records of six accidents that occurred there after 1943.

In her article, Nancy referred to the night of "the great plane crashes" when there were planes falling out of the sky all around Atmore. I had found a date, May 21, 1942, when there were a num-

ber of airplane crashes reported in the Atmore area, and this is

probably the date that Nancy was talking about. I was also able to find the name of several of the pilots who were killed that night.

There is an organization called Aviation Archaeological Investigation and Research (AAIR) that investigates old airport accidents and crash sites. They have access to microfilm copies of many old airplane accident reports and copies of these reports can be ordered from them for a nominal cost. I selected the name of one of the pilots who had been killed, that of Cadet Ronald E. Randall, and sent a request to AAIR for any information that they might have on the accident that resulted in his death. Within a few days, I received a copy of the 34 page accident report that was submitted by the accident investigation board in 1042. This report answers many of the questions about what happened the night the sky was falling.

The pilots involved was from the 86th Training Squadron based at Gunter Field. At that time, Gunter was a training base for allied students, most of whom were from Canada, France, or Great Britain. All of the plots of the 86th Squadron were British.

On May 20, 1942, a day/night cross country training flight was scheduled for 35 BT-13 airplanes, all flown by student pilots. There were instructor pilots in nine of the airplanes. The students were to fly

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during the day from Gunter to Crestview and after dark fly from Crestview over Mobile and return to Gunter.

At the time the flights were to depart Gunter, there was a line of thunderstorms moving over southwest Alabama, so the departures were delayed until it could be determined that the route to Crestview was clear. Back then, radar wasn't available to detect the location of weather systems. The only way that weather forecasters could determine where bad weather may be encountered was from reports from ground stations. Finally, at about three thirty in the afternoon, all 35 of the airplanes took off from Gunter and landed safely at Crestview.

The flights were scheduled to take off from Crestview at eight o'clock that night, but weather reports indicated that the area of widespread thunderstorms was again active along the route back to Gunter. At around eleven o'clock, the flight leader was satisfied that the weather was then adequate to safely make the flight back to Gunter along the planned route. Since most of the students had had very little training in flying in bad weather, the flight leader decided to have the students fly in formations of four airplanes with an instructor heading each formation. In formation flying, a pilot flies solely by maintaining a close position to the airplane beside him, doing exactly the same thing that plane does and keeping that plane in sight at all times. This is a difficult task at night and almost impossible in bad weather. At eleven-thirty, the first flight of four airplanes departed Crestview.

By thirty minutes after midnight, all the flights had made the turn over Mobile and were proceeding towards Gunter. In the vicinity of Atmore, the flights began to encounter the area of bad weather. The pilots were flying in solid clouds with rain falling and lightning flashing. The instructors tried to climb their formations above the clouds but could not get above them, so they then attempted to descend and fly under

the clouds. In the process of this maneuvering, the students began to lose sight of the other planes and suddenly found themselves on their own, disoriented in the dark clouds. Some of the students soon lost control of their airplanes and dove into the ground. Others were scrambling around trying to find the nearest airport, which was Atmore, and getting their planes on the ground. The only way to find the airport was to continue descending and to try and get under the clouds and hopefully spot the airport identification beacon. The weather at Atmore was reported as clouds 300 feet above the ground with rain. Only one pilot was able to find the airport and land there. Seven pilots crashed in the vicinity of the airport and were killed. Two other pilots parachuted to safety and their planes crashed nearby.

Back in 1942, airplane accidents were common and were to be expected. It wasn't unusual for a large training field, such as Gunter, to experience a dozen or more accidents in a week. These accidents often resulted in pilot deaths and the destruction of a large number of airplanes. It is a wonder that there were any pilots and airplanes left to send to combat.

As a pilot, I often look back at the progress that has been made in aviation over the years. In the early days, pilots navigated by reading their maps and flying low enough to be able to pick out landmarks along the route. At night they were aided by airway beacon lights that were spaced 15 to 20 miles apart. Each beacon flashed a Morse code identifier that was unique to that location so that pilots would know which one they were seeing. For daytime navigation, there were roof markers. These were signs painted on the roof of large buildings, usually a barn or a warehouse, which identified the community where it was located. The sign also had an arrow pointing to the nearest airport and a number indicating the distance to the airport. At one time there were over 13,000 of these roof markers throughout the United States. Some are still in existence. I can remember when there was one on a big barn located near the State Farm. Back then pilots literally flew from town to town by reading rooftops. Even as late as the 1980's,

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when flying over the ocean, I was still using a sextant to measure the angle of the sun and stars to determine the airplane position. This was the same type of instrument that was used on the Mayflower to navigate to the new world.

Today, modern jets fly at six to eight miles above the ground and use GPS computers for navigational. These GPS units use satellite signals to determine position and are accurate to within a few feet. They depict the airplane's position on a moving map and contain data bases which have maps, terrain information and all aviation data for the entire world. With

push of a button, a pilot can instantly locate any airport, get all the information about the airport, directions to the airport, and the procedures to fly to safely descend through clouds to land. Even most light airplanes, including tiny home-built models, now use GPS for navigation.

There has been much progress in aviation in the years since Ronald Randall died while trying to find the Atmore airport on that dark, stormy night. Aviation history as always been fascinating to me, and I would like to think that Atmore's first airport may have played a little part in that history.



Memorials, Monuments and Graves of RAF Pilots at Oakmont Cemetery Annex in Montgomery



Montgomery, AL – At Oakwood Cemetery Annex in Montgomery, this is a plaque that signifies the burials of 78 officers and men of the Royal Air Force and a cross has been erected as a memorial to these brave soldiers. Some were only eighteen, but all of them died in flight training at Gunter Field in Montgomery during World War II.

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The Night the Sky Was Falling *(Continued)*

Plane Flown by the Cadets



The Instrument Panel in a BT-13



**Vultee Valiant
BT-13**

Six of the Seven Pilots Who Were Killed at the Atmore Airport in 1942 and Who Are Buried in Montgomery

Victor William Lear
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
1313749, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 19
Son of Albert George and Katherine Eliza Lear, of Radstock,
Somerset, England.

Arthur Vernon Lowe
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
1425914, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 22
Son of John Henry and Beatrice Maude Lowe, of Millhouses,
Sheffield, Yorkshire, England.

James Edward Maddick
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
1346325, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 21
Son of James Maxwell and Marian Maddick, of Dundee,
Angus, Scotland.

Patrick Geoffrey Marshall Overton
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
1388720, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 22
Son of Sydney and Mabel Overton, of Porthcawl, Glamorgan,
Wales.

Michael Ernest Peachell
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
986914, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 22
Son of George Ernest and E. A. Dorothy Peachell, of
Broadway, Dorsetshire, England.

David Stanley Peattie
Remembered with Honour
Leading Aircraftman
1097360, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve who died on 21
May 1942 Age 19
Son of David and Wilhelmina Peattie, of Knock, Belfast,
Northern Ireland.

ECHOES
THE NEWSLETTER FOR
THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 276
Brewton, AL 36427
Phone: 251-809-1528

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