

## The April Meeting Tuesday, April 26, 2016 3:00 p. m. The McMillan Museum



**Larry  
Massey**

### The Program: A Presentation by Larry Massey, author of the book The Life and Crimes of Railroad Bill: Legendary African American Desperado.

Massey will focus on the contribution of Railroad Bill to the history of Alabama and Florida. Morris Slater who is better known as Railroad Bill was the most famous 19th century Afro-American outlaw.

Our speaker will also discuss why and how he conducted six years of research to document the life, folklore, and song associated with the story of the outlaw.

#### About the Book:

"A compelling and highly readable account of the life of a notorious figure in Florida and Alabama history and how he became the subject of legends and a folk ballad that is still sung today."--John Burrison, editor of *Storytellers: Folktales and Legends from the South*

"Fascinating. Massey brings to life the stories and mysteries surrounding this legendary figure of the nineteenth-century Southeast and shows how the outlaw has influenced our cultural heritage."—Susan Reynolds, associate editor, *Alabama Heritage*

"Gives us a glimpse of how the early railroads—the heart of everyday life at the turn of twentieth century—set the stage for the dramatic exploits of desperate criminals such as Railroad Bill."—Thomas E. McMillan, Jr., Escambia County Historical Society.

*Massey is an independent writer and researcher living in Mobile, Alabama, and DeLand, Florida.*

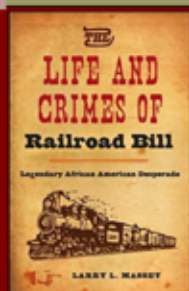
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### May ECHS Meeting Tuesday, May 24, 2016, 3:00 in The McMillan Museum

Program: Charles M. Simon, Covington County Extension Agent will present a program on Pineywoods Cattle, the free-ranging, native cattle of the longleaf pine forests.

#### Ox- Mobile Freighter Andalu- sia, Alabama



Cover of Larry Massey's Book about Railroad Bill

Volume 43 Number 4

April 2016

## An Interview with Our Speaker, Larry Massey

### How did you first become interested in Railroad Bill?

I began researching my great, great grandfather, whose history is intertwined with that of Railroad Bill, and the more I unraveled the stories of the two men, the more interested I became in the history of the outlaw.

### What makes Railroad Bill such a unique outlaw?

Unique should have been Railroad Bill's nickname. Nearly every incident in his criminal career was unique—each was as profound to law enforcement and the public in the 1890s as they should be to readers today.

Moreover, he was initially a hardworking turpentine worker who was inoffensive and well liked until a failed attempt to arrest him for carrying a repeating rifle that resulted in a gunfight.

He then turned into an outlaw as bold and cunning as one could imagine. He repeatedly demonstrated skill in outmaneuvering the best efforts of railroad detectives, Pinkerton detectives, sheriff's posses, and private bounty hunters.

### What are some of the more common misperceptions about Railroad Bill?

I believe many performers and admirers of the popular folk song "Railroad Bill" probably believe it is based on a mythical person. But Railroad Bill was real, and he demonstrated a criminal persona equal with stories told of popular western outlaws of the nineteenth century.

### There must be so many rumors and stories to choose from. How did you decide which to include in the book?

I sought actual facts for the book, taken from newspaper articles from the 1890s and reports by individuals involved in Railroad Bill's story.

My objective was to tell the entire story as revealed in those sources. The original materials, however, varied considerably.

Thus, I addressed that by collecting everything



**Larry Massey at the grave of Morris Slater, Railroad Bill in St. Johns Cemetery. Photo from the St. Johns newsletter for Summer, 2012.**

available for a particular event and arranging the information as a mosaic with overlapping pieces of information. With that in view, I was able to see each event more clearly and select the apparent facts that I used to write the book.

### What is your favorite tale about Railroad Bill?

My favorite story about Railroad Bill is true. It is his gunfight with trainmen at Hurricane Bayou in which he singlehandedly fought nearly a dozen armed men.

Alternatively, the inability of authorities to capture the outlaw produced a wave of tongue-in-cheek stories in Escambia County, Alabama, in the 1890s. Those had a single theme: the outlaw could purportedly conjure into an animal or inanimate object to confound his pursuers. I like

those stories equally well.

### Was there a specific story about Railroad Bill that sparked your interest but that wasn't included in the book?

Yes. After the book was proof set, I found an 1895 newspaper article with valuable information. The article states that my great-great-grandfather Larry Massey has commented on this monument which he has had placed at the grave of Railroad Bill:

"On the nose of the locomotive is 74. According to a deputy who hunted Railroad Bilk he often liked to catch Freight Train No 74 as it approached Bay Minette, Alabama."

grandfather brought Railroad Bill to Alabama from North Carolina. From family tradition, I suspected that to be the case, but I did not have direct evidence.

It was too late to integrate into the book text, but I added a paragraph in the preface that reveals some of the information.

*(Continued on page 3)*



## An Interview with Our Speaker Larry Massey



On the left: Monument for Morris Slater/Railroad Bill.  
Below: Enlargement of Train on Monument.  
Larry Massey has commented on this monument which he has had placed at the grave of Morris Slater:

“On the nose of the locomotive is 74. According to a deputy who hunted Railroad Bill, he often liked to catch Freight Train No 74 as it approached Bay Minette, Alabama.”

### Lyrics For Singer Frank Hutchinson's “Railroad Bill”

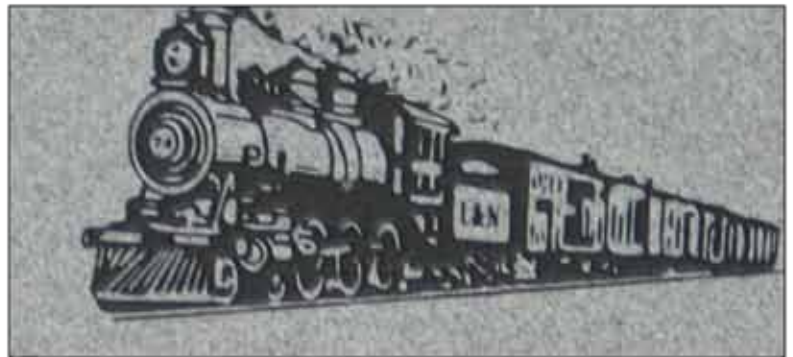
Railroad Bill got so bad  
Stole all the chickens the poor  
farmers had  
Well, it's get back, old Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill went out West  
Shot all the buttons off a brake  
man's vest  
Well, it's get back, Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill got so fine  
Shot ninety-nine holes in a silver  
shine  
Well, it's ride, Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill, standing at the tanks  
Waiting for the train they call  
Hancy Nanks  
Well, it's ride, Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill, standing at the curve  
Gonna rob the mail train but he didn't  
have the nerve  
Well, it's get back, Railroad Bill



Railroad Bill, he lived on the hill  
He never worked or he never will  
Well, it's ride, Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill went out West  
Shot all the buttons off a  
brakeman's vest  
Well, it's get back, Railroad Bill

*(Continued from page 2)*

### Why do you think the folk song “Railroad Bill” has been so popular throughout the years? Which is your favorite version?

I am no musician, but I would say that the rhythm of the song, the simplistic theme relating to a bad man, and the fact that the song from its beginning was part of the folklore have contributed to its success.

Also, numerous versions have been performed successfully by commercial artists since the 1920s, thus helping to keep the song popular for more than a century.

My favorite version is the one sung by Frank Hutchison in 1929. It is similar to the version my mother sang to me when I was young.

### How does the story of Railroad Bill compare with stories of more well-known outlaws of the nineteenth century?

The story of Railroad Bill is as intriguing and dramatic as the great American stories of Jesse James, John Wesley Harden, Billy the Kid, Rube Burrow, etc. It should stand the test of time in the annals of American history.

## Field Trip to Andalusia

### Field Trip to Andalusia Thursday, April 28, 2016

Plans are to visit the Three Notch Museum in Andalusia which is housed in the Old Central of Georgia Depot and on the return trip visit the Solon-Dixon Forestry Education Center.

The society will carpool to Andalusia, meeting at the McMillan Museum in Brewton with plans to leave by 8:30 on Thursday morning, April 28.

Lunch will be at a restaurant in Andalusia.



The Central of Georgia Depot in Andalusia, Alabama, pictured above, is a historic train station that has been converted into the Three Notch Museum.

In the late 1890s, business leaders in Andalusia posted a \$5000 prize for the first rail line to pass through the town.

The Central of Georgia Railway claimed the prize, completing the track in September 1899, and built a depot on land donated by residents.

The town flourished with the new rail connection; population rose from 551 in 1900 to 2,480 in 1910.

The building was re-opened as a history museum in 1987; ironically, its name honors the second rail line to reach Andalusia, the Three Notch Railroad.

Operated by the Covington Historical Society, the museum focuses on County history and area railroad history. Displays include many photographs, a bottle collection, historic cameras and accessories, tools and military artifacts.

Other buildings in the museum include a restored post office with a period schoolroom in back, a pioneer log cabin and a country store. There are also two cabooses and a CSX motor car with a model railway

layout outside the depot building.

The last Norfolk Southern train, successor to the Central of Georgia, departed Andalusia on March 31, 1983.



**Post Office**



**Clark Family Log Cabin**



**H. B. Little Country Store**

*Pictures and Text from <<http://alabamapioneers.com/andrew-jackson-made-notches-on-trees-in-andalusia/#sthash.u1v7Sd5q.i9wBnjbT.dpbs>>.*



## Snapshots of the March 2016 ECHS Meeting



**Left to right: President Sally Finlay, Don Sales, and Charlie Ware**



**In the Center, Lee Bain Shown in Front of Part of His Art Exhibit, Eva McInish at Left and Jacque Stone with back to Camera**



**The Refreshment Table**



**Society Members Enjoying Refreshments**



**Carolyn Jennings at the Podium**



**Darryl Searcy During His Program**

## Snapshots of the March 2016 ECHS Meeting *(Continued)*



**Left to Right: Ann Biggs Williams, Don Smith, June Martin and Charlie Ware**



**In Conference, Judy Purnell (Back to Camera), Jacque Stone and Phillip Parker. On Back Row, Evelyn Franklin**



**Al Jokela and His Wife**



**Seated, Left to Right, Eva McInnish and Sammy McGlotheran. Standing, Susan Crawford.**



**Sally Finlay Arriving at the Meeting**



**Don Sales and Charlie Ware**



## Snapshots of the March 2016 ECHS Meeting *(Continued)*



**Tom McMillan and Carolyn Jennings at the Podium Ready to Start the Meeting**



**Left to Right in the Foreground, Tom McMillan (at the Podium), Don Sales (Back to Camera), and Darryl Searcy (Seated).**

**In the Doorway, Lee Bain with his daughter Leslie on his left and Phillip Parker on His Right (with Arms Akimbo).**



**Left To Right, Lee Bain's Daughter Leslie (Standing). Darryl Searcy and Ranella Merritt (Both Seated),**



**On Front Row, Eva McInnish and Sammy McGlotheran.**

**On Back Row, Left to Right, Don Smith, Jacque Stone, Evelyn Franklin, and Ann Biggs Williams**



**At Left, Treasurer Susan Crawford Going Over the Treasurer's Report**

## Snapshots of the March 2016 ECHS Meeting *(Continued)*



**June Martin, at left, in Conversation with Judy Purnell. Charlie Ward in the Background.**



**Lee Bain, His Granddaughter and Daughter, Leslie.**



**Al Jokela and Wife in Foreground. Phillip Parker and Barbara Page in Background**



**In Background, Susan Crawford Turning Around. Barbara Page Gesturing with her Hand on Right of Susan. Al Jokela and Wife in Fore-ground**



**In Photograph at Left, Judy Purnell Makes a Point and Jacques Stone Leans Over to Listen In. Al Jokela and His Wife in Foreground.**

**In Photograph at Right, the Refreshment Table.**





## **ECHS Members at E. O. Wilson Book Signing at Brewton Public Library**



**Ann Biggs-Williams and E. O. Wilson as He Signs Her Copy of Half Earth**



**Don Sales and Dr. Wilson Shaking Hands**



**Museum Coordinator Don Sales with Dr. Wilson**



**Barbara Commander and Libby Davis, in the middle, seated, at the Book Signing at the Public Library.**



**Barbara Commander with Dr. Wilson**



**Dr. Wilson Signs a Copy of His Latest Book, Half Earth**

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Edley M. Franklin's Story of Railroad Bill

*This account of the story of Railroad Bill was written by Edley M. Franklin in 1951 and published in the Brewton Standard. It was reprinted by Lydia Grimes, who describes it as the most interesting and readable version of the Railroad Bill story that she has seen. It was reprinted in her column, "Forgotten Trails," in 2007. Lydia comments that Mr. Franklin wrote the story when he was still able to interview some of those who knew the facts firsthand.*

*The story by Mr. Franklin:*

(Author's note: The purpose of this story is not to exploit nor to criticize anyone involved but to acquaint a younger generation and newcomers in this vicinity with the story that was "Headline News" more than 50 years ago—that of "Railroad Bill" the outlaw of this section. To get this story I went through old newspapers, files, letters, clippings and interviewed people involved and others who claimed they knew "Railroad Bill" before he became an outlaw.

It was the night of July 3, 1895. Near the railroad trestle across Pritchett's Mill Creek at Bluff Springs, Fla., a railroad switch light blinked, casting a dim circle of light in the semi-darkness. There was a moon, hidden most of the time by low heavy, floating clouds. A hard rain that afternoon had Pritchett's Mill Creek overflowing.

A group of men came quietly down the railroad, the light from the switch light glinting along the barrels of Winchesters, pistols and shotguns. One of the men carried a large basket.

At the south end of the trestle they left the railroad and headed up the bank of Pritchett's Mill Creek until they found a footing. The footbridge was partially submerged by the rising water of the creek. The men talked in low tones among themselves. Some were in favor of crossing there, even if they had to get wet, while others wanted to go back to the railroad and come up on the other side of the creek. They finally agreed to go by the railroad.

To get back to the creek after leaving the railroad, the party would have to go around a large gully. In single file and back lighted by the switch light, the men started up a trail to get around the head of the gully.

"Who goes there?" a voice suddenly called out from the shadow of a large persimmon tree about 40 feet

ahead of the men. The question was instantly followed by the sharp crack of a Winchester.

"Boys, he got me!" the third man in line said, staggering backward and falling to the ground.

The man who fell was E. S. McMillan better known as "Mr. Ed," 37-year-old sheriff of Escambia County, Ala. The man who triggered the Winchester was "Railroad Bill."

Andrew Cunningham, [an Afro-American] who was living in Bluff Springs, but later lived and died in Brewton, was working with Sheriff McMillan in an effort to catch "Railroad Bill." He had notified the sheriff that Bill was hiding in a shack on Ferry Road—that it had only one window which faced North—and for Mr. Ed and his men to cross the foot log on Pritchett's Mill Creek and come up to the shack from behind—warning him not to go any other way.

To have gone the way Andrew advised him to go would have saved the sheriff's life, even though he wouldn't have caught Bill in the shack, who for some reason had left. And the men were so anxious to catch Bill, they hadn't taken time to eat supper but had it packed in a basket with the intention of eating after the capture.

There are several stories of what happened there that night after Sheriff McMillan was shot. One is that some of the party hunted for the nearest thicket. Others dived into a nearby ditch as slugs from Bill's 16-shot Winchester drilled holes in the air over their heads, some hitting the rails on the railroad and ricocheting into space.

Laughing about it afterward, the fellow with the basket of supper said, as he lay in the ditch a big black sow came up and got into the basket, but all he could do was just lay there and listen to her enjoy it.

Another story is that when Bill's magazine ran dry, they all got up and began pouring lead into the persimmon tree, not knowing whether Bill was still behind it or not. The volley shot the bark off the tree 10 feet above the ground.

Yet, some claim that at the crack of "Railroad Bill's" Winchester, they figured Andrew Cunningham had led them into a trap. They started throwing lead into the persimmon tree, not giving Bill a chance to fire a second shot. However they soon realized they

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Edley M. Franklin's Story of Railroad Bill

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were wasting ammunition, as Bill was safe behind the tree.

Doctor O'Bannon and Charles O'Bannon, both of Brewton, decided to fan out in opposite directions and catch Bill in a crossfire. To keep him pinned down until they got into the right position to smoke him out, Dr. O'Bannon fired a charge of buckshot at the man. To their surprise they both claimed they saw Bill fall from behind the tree.

Thinking he had either been killed or wounded badly enough not to get away, everyone gave their attention to Sheriff McMillan. However, later, when they went back to get "Railroad Bill," he wasn't there. As they found out later, the firing hadn't even touched him. Nobody has been able to figure out how a grown man behind a 10-inch tree, even by standing sideways, could keep from being hit—from the way that persimmon tree was drilled and grooved with lead that night.

The railroad ran a special train that night from Flomaton to Brewton to get Mrs. E. S. McMillan, the sheriff's wife, and take her and others to Bluff Springs. Sheriff McMillan died that same night around midnight at the home of a Mr. McDavid.

The whole countryside was alarmed. News of "Railroad Bill's" killing of Sheriff McMillan spread. Crowds gathered. The sudden death of Sheriff McMillan shattered the nerves of the men who were with him that night, as well as others.

In a fever of excitement and not taking the time to think it over they believed Andrew Cunningham had lead them into a trap. There was talk of lynching him.

I'm not sure but when it was all over with, and they had more time to think, they came to realize that if Andrew had intended to lead them into a trap, he would never have advised them to go a certain way while warning them not to go another.

Andrew Cunningham was in a tough spot that night in Bluff Springs when Sheriff McMillan was killed by "Railroad Bill." He knew it too.

"Them folks was shore taking over me" Andrew used to say. "I don't even like to think about it."

Some say a rope was placed around Andrew's neck. Others say the hanging didn't get that far along.

With the exception of Neal McMillan, ex-sheriff of

this county and brother of the slain sheriff, and maybe several others, the rest wanted to see how far Andrew's neck would stretch, as they believed he had led them into a trap.

Neal McMillan said there wasn't going to be a necktie party. I couldn't find out just when or how he got in on it but Sheriff Smith of Escambia County, Fla. backed him up with the "No necktie party" idea.

The men in favor of the hanging and the ones against it had Andrew stretched out on the station platform with one side pulling on him one way and the other side the other.

Sheriff Smith won the argument. As the story goes, Andrew was put on a train and taken to Pensacola where he stood trial on charges of being connected with "Railroad Bill" and leading Sheriff McMillan into a trap. He was cleared of all charges.

As for "Railroad Bill" himself, who he was, his name or where he was originally from—your guess is as good as anyone else's.

Some old newspapers list his name as Morris Slater, others as Bill McCoy. People who claim they knew him before he became an outlaw say he was known as Bill McCoy, which fits the "Railroad Bill" title.

I haven't been able to find any dope on the name Morris Slater. The chances are that neither one was his right name. Some claim he was from South Carolina and came to Georgia and then to this section. Others say he came from Florida.

I have decided nobody knows what his name was or where he came from, but from all indications he had committed some crime somewhere and was afraid of being caught or was just plain cautious.

The first trace I can find of him is at Parker Springs, a little community 20 miles southeast of Brewton. Around 1880, a man about 30 years of age and described as being a "gingerbread" color came to Parker Springs. He got a job with a man by the name of Gibson helping him with his sheep and cattle and doing other odd job about the place.

He was known as Bill McCoy. He was very active and of the acrobatic type. He told of having once traveled with a circus, and could do a number of tricks such as walking on his hands and standing on his head and eating eggs with the shell on and then coughing the up intact.

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Edley M. Franklin's Story of Railroad Bill

*(Continued from page 12)*

Bill McCoy was quiet and good natured but kept mostly to himself and didn't associate much with others. For some reason, he was known to always carry a pistol. When showed a picture of "Railroad Bill," an old resident of Parker Springs identified it as being that of Bill McCoy.

After staying around Parker Springs for 10 to 15 years, Bill McCoy got into a little trouble and had to leave.

But so far as the public knew then or even now the story of "Railroad Bill" begins at Bluff Springs, Fla. in the early 90's.

He was known as Bill and was of average height with a large bulging neck. He was said to be gingerbread color. His age could have been anywhere from 30 to 40.

He was a turpentine worker, easy to get along with and minded his own business. He kept to himself most of the time, and associated very little with other people who were afraid of him. They believed him to be a superhuman because he could do so many tricks. He claimed to have spent seven years in a circus.

He could swallow whole eggs, shell and all and spit them up with the shell still unbroken. He could walk and run on his hands and entertained the kids around Bluff Springs with his tricks and then passed his hat for pennies and nickels.

Besides doing tricks, Bill was an expert marksman. He had a .38 Winchester rifle, which he carried with him all the time. It was very seldom that he was seen without it. Even while working in the woods, he carried it with him from tree to tree. His description matches that of the Bill McCoy of Parker Springs, and no doubt he was the same person,

The state of Florida, at that time had a \$5 fee for a license to carry a repeating rifle or pistol. Bill didn't have one and was warned by Allen Brewton, deputy sheriff of Escambia County, Fla. that he would have to get a license to carry a rifle. Each time it was mentioned to him Bill would say, "I don't think so," or "I believe not."

One day while he was in Bluff Springs, Allen Brewton decided it was a good time to make Bill get a license or quite carrying the Winchester. Hearing what he intended to do and wanting to see just what

would happen, a few of the fellows loafing around the stores tagged along after Brewton. Two of the fellows were named Tom Boutwell and Hal Cowart.

Bill lived alone in a little shack in the turpentine quarters, and just before reaching it, the party saw Bill come out and head in the opposite direction. As usual, he had his Winchester.

Allen Brewton called to Bill—telling him he had come to fix him up with a license for his rifle. Bill started walking a little faster. Brewton called to him to stop. When he didn't, Brewton, who was carrying a Winchester himself, jerked it to his shoulder and cut down on Bill but missed. Bill started running in a zig-zagging fashion, darting in first one direction and then the other.

The fellows with Brewton had guns and they all started throwing lead at Bill. When he got several hundred yards away, Bill suddenly whirled around and began throwing lead back at them. For a little, the lead flew thick and fast with both sides ducking and dodging.

Suddenly Bill made a break for the swamp and got away, but not before one of his bullets clipped the ear of one of the men with Brewton. From that day on Bill was a wanted man. It was the beginning of the most famous manhunt ever to take place in this section.

After the gun battle with Deputy Sheriff Allen Brewton, it was generally thought Bill McCoy would leave the country for good, but he continued to hang out and hide out in and around Bluff Springs, but was careful to keep out of the way of the law. When it got too hot for him, he would skip out to other parts.

Suddenly, along the railroad at points north of Mobile and south of Flomaton to Pensacola, freight cars of merchandise were broken into and parts of it stolen. From the vicinity of these robberies would come reports that someone had seen Bill McCoy or a man of his description around there prior to the robbery.

His name was quickly linked to these robberies. Someone shouted he was the robber. Others got the same idea. Someone gave him the title of "Railroad Bill." The L&N Railroad decided "Railroad Bill" had to be put either in prison or boot hill, and hired a flock of detectives to see that he got there.

*(Continued on page 15)*

# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Edley M. Franklin's Story of Railroad Bill

(Continued from page 15)

At this point, Mr. Franklin switches to the last scene for Bill, the scene in the general merchandize store of Tidwell and Ward in Atmore. The Pine Belt News reported on March 9, 1897, "Died with His Boots on. Railroad Bill the Noted Desperado Bandit and Assassin After a Bloody Career of Many Years Meets a Tragic Ending." According to the newspaper account, Deputy Constable Leonard McGowin and others in a posse assembled in the general merchandise store before disbanding for the night. To their surprise, Bill walked into the store.

From the Encyclopedia of Alabama: "Accounts of the final episode in Railroad Bill's bloody career widely differ. Some say that authorities surprised and killed the man as he sat on an oak barrel eating cheese and crackers. Other accounts say that he engaged the lawmen in a shoot-out in front of the store, and still others contend that he walked into a trap at Tidmore and Ward's."

"Railroad Bill" realized at this last moment he had been trapped. True to a gunman's nature and instinct, his hand had automatically reached for the gun at his belt—was trying desperately to pull it from the holster. He died falling from the barrel. Johns (*seemingly another member of the posse*) rushed for the side room and cut loose with the scatter gun. He had plenty of nerve now seeing bill was harmless.

The load from Johns' gun mangled Bill's right hand and shattered the handle grips on his gun. As Bill's body hit the floor, Johns cut loose again blowing off the right side of Bill's face.

News of the killing spread. It wasn't long until about half of the people in Atmore were at the scene. Many just couldn't believe it until they saw the body. Many superstitious people said it wasn't "Railroad Bill" but some other man.

An argument arose between McGowin and Johns as to who would get the \$1,250 reward and the lifetime pass on the railroad. The money was later divided between the two, with McGowin getting the lifetime pass. He died not long after he killed "Railroad Bill."

When "Railroad Bill" was killed, he had his .38 Winchester rifle down inside of his pants leg. Cut on the side of the rifle receiver were the letters "R. B." He was wearing a cartridge belt and only one gun,

where he sometimes wore two.

The L&N Railroad ran a special train from Flomaton to Brewton to get Sheriff James McMillan and other officials and take them to Atmore. The body of "Railroad Bill" was brought to Brewton early the following Sunday morning and unloaded under a packing shed that stood beside the railroad in front of Robbins and McGowin Company.

Crowds gathered to view the body. There was much rejoicing over the fact that "Railroad Bill" was dead. It was hard to believe; yet, there he was.

Leonard McGowin was looked upon as a great man, a hero.

People shook his hand and congratulated him while others cut buttons, bits of cloth, took cartridges and anything else they could get their hands on from the body of the dead outlaw to keep as souvenirs.

Later the body was moved to the back of what is now the liquor store. The Chicago Photo Company of Brewton made pictures of McGowin standing beside the body. These pictures were sold for the benefit of the dead sheriff's widow, Mrs. E. S. McMillan, and two small boys, Ed Leigh and Malcolm McMillan. But they didn't receive any of the money. It was just a scheme to sell more pictures.

The body of "Railroad Bill" was embalmed and placed in a metallic casket and shipped to Montgomery and put on exhibition to raise money for the sheriff's widow, but like the pictures, she didn't receive any part of it. From Montgomery, the body was carried to Pensacola, exhibited there, to bring to a close the life and career of the famous "Railroad Bill."



# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Edley M. Franklin's Story of Railroad Bill

*(Continued from page 13)*

Up until the freight car robberies, only the state of Alabama wanted any part of a hunt for "Railroad Bill." With the railroad involved, both sides made it hot for Bill but he always managed to stay three jumps ahead of them and their bloodhounds, which they used to trail him.

As far as it is known, the first man "Railroad Bill" ever killed was a man by the name of John A. Stewart, a posse man from Bay Minette. It seems Stewart and some others cornered Bill in a barn but he shot his way out, killing Stewart and getting away.

When he heard Sheriff E. S. McMillan was on his trail to get him dead or alive, Railroad Bill, so the story goes, sent the sheriff a message: "You are a fine, brave man, Mr. Ed, and I love you, but I am going to have to kill you if you don't give up."

As I have been told, Sheriff McMillan was not the kind of man to give up what he started out to do nor the kind to be bluffed. "Railroad Bill" knew it too.

And so, that night in Bluff Springs, silhouetted against the dim blinking light from a lone switch light, "Railroad Bill" pressed the trigger of his Winchester, fulfilling his promise to the most popular sheriff Escambia County ever had.

Up until the killing of Sheriff McMillan, the search for "Railroad Bill" had been wide spread, but now it turned into a manhunt that was to last for many months to come—the most famous this section of Alabama and Florida has ever witnessed.

The L&N Railroad was offering a lifetime pass on the railroad and \$1,250 reward for Railroad Bill. They hired more detectives with orders to get "Railroad Bill." They gave everyone a pass on the railroad as long as they were looking for "Railroad Bill." Many of them were looking for him all right, but enjoying the free rides better and hoping to hell they never came face to face with Bill.

The lawmen kept Bill on the move from place to place. He was seen or reported seen at one place today. Tomorrow he was seen miles away in some other vicinity. Bloodhounds were used to try to trail him, but he had a habit of getting away from them by wading up or down creeks and swimming the river. He always went heavily armed, sometimes wearing two six-shooters on a cartridge belt and carrying his

Winchester.

Bill had friends who fed him and kept him posted on the whereabouts of the law. He was smart, cautious and cunning. Many people claimed he bore a charmed life.

To scare them and keep them from betraying him, he had people believing he could turn into a sheep, dog or some other kind of an animal and get away from a sheriff's posse.

He had them even believing he could only be killed with a silver bullet. To prove this, he would hand his gun to some scared man and have the man get off a short distance and shoot at him. At the report of the gun, Bill would reach out and catch the bullet. The trick was that Bill had removed that bullet from the cartridge and used a packing of some kind to hold the powder in and form a pressure to make a natural report. The bullet had been concealed in his hand at the time he pretended to catch it.

Stories of Railroad Bill were written, told and retold until he was a man to be feared and dreaded by everyone.

Mothers quieted their crying children by telling them "Railroad Bill" would get them. In places where he was seen, or even reported seen, doors were bolted tight and people were afraid to go to sleep at night for fear Bill would break in and kill them.

However, there is no record or story that I have heard of where "Railroad Bill" ever harmed anyone who was not out to harm him. Neither have I ever heard of his being caught in the act of robbing a freight car. There are people who really believe he never pulled those robberies, but someone else did, and he got all the blame. Others claim he could not possibly have pulled off all the robberies by himself—that there were other parties involved in some of them.

For some reason, it seemed, "Railroad Bill" was a little proud of his "Railroad Bill" title. When he approached or was approached by some person in an out-of-the-way place, the first thing he asked them was—if they had seen anyone else around. He would then ask the person if they knew who he was. If they did not, he would tell them he was "Railroad Bill," and then warn them not to tell anybody they had seen him.

*(Continued on page 14)*

# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Excerpt From The Life and Crimes of Railroad Bill: Legendary African American Desperado

A Chapter from Larry Massey's book The Life and Crimes of Railroad Bill: Legendary African American Desperado at <http://upf.com/book.asp?id=MASSE001>.

### The Death of Mark Stinson

The L&N hired informants to provide information on the whereabouts and plans of Railroad Bill. Detective John Harlan discussed their strategy when writing about the desperado in an article in the L&N Employees' Magazine: *Several Negro detectives were employed to "get in" or to associate with him, but they were never able to gain "Railroad Bill's" confidence. While he would treat them kindly, he always acted in a way that would satisfy them that he was more or less suspicious and they were never able to accomplish the ends for which they had been employed.*

Mark M. Stinson would become the exception. After Stinson was observed with the outlaw on several occasions, railroad detectives attempted to recruit him as an informant. But according to the Montgomery Daily Advertiser, "it was an impossibility to catch him," since he was as wary as Railroad Bill. A woman named Susan Austin would recruit Stinson. She lived near Pollard, Alabama, and sometimes she cooked for the James McMillan family. James was Sheriff Edward McMillan's older brother and had served as sheriff before Edward. Austin told him she wanted to help in capturing Railroad Bill, and James arranged for her to meet with railroad officials. They assigned her the task of recruiting Stinson. It took her about a month (apparently late September 1894), then she sent a telegram to L&N officials stating that she and Stinson would endeavor to capture the outlaw. The station agent at Bay Minette, J. F. Cooper, became Stinson's contact within the company. Stinson, however, distrusted L&N officials and only sent letters to Cooper. In one he stated that he was attempting to persuade Railroad Bill to surrender. In another he asked Cooper to send a letter to Perdido that he could collect the next day. It probably contained his pay.

The L&N had not been taking threats from Railroad

Bill lightly:

*"This man Salters [Railroad Bill] is really a dangerous character as you will readily believe," said a railroad official. "The operations of his gang of freight car robbers have extended over a period of a year or more, and they have stolen lots of goods. The leader is absolutely fearless and desperately bold, and now that he has it in for the trainmen for having wounded him, killed one of his partners [Andrew Jackson] and jailed another [Louis Ferguson], he is intent upon evening up scores" Montgomery Daily Advertiser, March 12, 1895).*

Not only had Railroad Bill threatened the crewmen he fought at Hurricane Bayou, but he had threatened to kill Superintendent McKinney. That threat apparently encouraged McKinney to negotiate a deal with Stinson to betray and capture the outlaw. McKinney traveled 142 miles from his office in Montgomery to intercept Stinson when he appeared for his letter in Perdido. Stinson, however, did not call for the letter, so McKinney traveled to Mobile to spend the night. The next morning he returned on a fast freight train but arrived too late. Stinson had retrieved the letter and disappeared about half an hour earlier.

McKinney boarded a slow freight train back to Montgomery. But when he was about two miles northeast of Perdido, near Sullivan's Switch and Wilson Station, he saw Stinson standing in the doorway of a cabin. It was the residence of Henry and Mary Caldwell. Detective Harlan described Henry as "a partner who traveled with [Railroad Bill] as a kind of assistant." McKinney jumped off the train, returned through the woods to Perdido, and directed station agent R. L. Stewart—who had probably given Stinson the letter—to go to the cabin and ask the undercover informant for a meeting. Stewart did as directed, but Mary said Stinson had left.

McKinney did not believe Mary and sent Stewart back to the cabin to watch for Stinson. Eventually he appeared, and Stewart approached him with McKinney's request. Stinson "seemed afraid" when Stewart stated that McKinney wanted to talk with him. But when Stewart assured him that the superintendent did not wish to arrest him, Stinson agreed to meet

*(Continued on page 17)*



# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Excerpt From The Life and Crimes of Railroad Bill: Legendary African American Desperado

(Continued from page 16)

McKinney the next morning.

The conference took place in a swamp near Wilson Station:

[Stinson] was standing with his hand on a murderous looking knife sticking in unpleasant suggestiveness in his belt, while his other hand was back on his hip pocket. The Superintendent walked up to him as unconcerned as possible under the circumstances, and assured him that he had no idea of trying to arrest him—that as Railroad had spread it broadcast that he intended to kill him on sight, he thought it his duty to get him if possible (*Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, March 8, 1896).

A few nights later, Stinson met with Cooper at the Bay Minette Station and agreed to meet with McKinney the next night. The superintendent traveled to Bay Minette but was delayed and arrived too late. Stinson, nevertheless, had promised to return a few nights later. For that meeting McKinney went to the dispatcher's office in Montgomery so that he could communicate by telegraph with Stinson and Cooper at Bay Minette. In that conference, Stinson and McKinney agreed to meet again face-to-face a few nights later. But as Cooper watched Stinson leave the station after the telegraphic conference, he observed that Stinson gave "a low whistle and was joined by another Negro who was waiting behind a pile of cross ties about 100 yards down the track."

McKinney interpreted that as "foul play" and arranged for security before the next meeting. He stationed Detective Watts, Robert Wilkins, and J. F. Goodson around the meeting site to make sure Stinson came by himself. Indeed, Stinson arrived alone and assured McKinney that he "would do what he had promised."

What could Stinson have promised that was important enough for McKinney, a railroad executive, to travel from Montgomery on multiple occasions to negotiate? The *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* stated that McKinney offered the undercover agent all the reward money if he would capture Railroad Bill. But that was not a novel offer. It already existed for anyone willing to bring Railroad Bill to justice or to the undertaker's office. Based on events that would tran-

spire at Mount Vernon in April 1895, a village twenty-nine miles north of Mobile, it would seem that McKinney offered Stinson a negotiated amount for setting up Railroad Bill so that L&N detectives could capture the notorious outlaw. Understandably, Stinson may not have wanted to personally apprehend the man who had befriended him. But such an offer by McKinney would allow the undercover agent to receive a handsome sum without having to make the capture.

Stinson's opportunity apparently did not mature until early April 1895, when Henry Caldwell was arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Escambia County, Alabama, for robbing the contents of freight cars. Stinson then replaced Caldwell as Railroad Bill's lieutenant, and Stinson seems to have lost little time in attempting to fulfill his promise to McKinney. Evidently, that promise was to lure Railroad Bill to a predetermined destination so that railroad detectives could make their capture. The scheme, however, would cost Stinson his life.<sup>7</sup> Stinson would mysteriously disappear in mid-April 1895, and his fate was unknown until 1898 when fishermen accidentally raised his remains in their net from a lagoon. His body had been weighted and dumped into a waterway. It is unclear which lagoon held Stinson's remains, but it was probably near the outskirts of Mount Vernon, the last known location of the informant. "The general supposition," according to Detective Harlan, "is that 'Railroad Bill' killed him and did away with the body." But why would the outlaw, who was already wanted for murder, take the time and effort to transport, weight, and sink the body of an informant so that it could not be found?

**ECHOES**  
THE NEWSLETTER FOR  
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HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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