

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



### The Program:

ECHS Member Charlie Booher, photo at the left, will present a program highlighting historic documents about Escambia County and the surrounding area.

His presentation will highlight relationships between Pensacola/Escambia County, FL and Brewton/Escambia County, AL using examples of people, places, events, objects, documents and paintings.

He describes his presentation as an interactive one between himself and the audience. He will, for example, present an item and the audience, with clues, will be encouraged to guess how the object relates to the two counties/cities.

### More about Our Speaker

Not a native of Pensacola by birth, Charlie is a long time resident of the city by choice. He was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, but his family moved to Pensacola before his first birthday. His mother was from Pensacola and his father was in the navy.

In moving to Pensacola, the family bought the home of T. T. Wentworth, Jr., whose collection of historical items is now displayed in the Wentworth Museum in Pensacola.

The home was north of the L & N Depot and around the corner from the Wentworth bicycle shop, where, beginning in the 1920's, Mr. Wentworth first displayed his collections in the shop's windows.

Charlie believes that period of time and the proximity to Mr. Wentworth is where his own collecting interest began.

Charlie remembers that he began to collect in 1981, starting with the Galvez

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### August ECHS Meeting August 23, 2016 McMillan Museum

**The Program: A Presentation by John W. Hoomes on the early bottling companies in Escambia Co., emphasizing the first one, which was in Flomaton. John is the son of ECHS recording secretary Jacque Stone.**

**Plan to join the ECHS Field Trip to Gee's Bend and Camden for Thursday, August 4, 2016. Information in this issue.**



Postage Stamps Honoring Gee's Ben Quilters, 2006.

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## More about Our Speaker

*(Continued from page 1)*

Celebration Medal commemorating the Centennial Battle of Pensacola, in which the Spanish General defeated the British forces. Charlie's brother designed the Galvez Medal for the Pensacola Historical Society and that work started the brothers' interest in finding other Pensacola medals.

Over a period of years, Charlie collected medals commemorating Pensacola historical events/buildings and those honoring famous people, such as Captain Lewis Warrington, founder of the Pensacola Navy Yard, and Civil War Lt. Adam J. Slemmer, the Union officer who refused to surrender Fort Pickens, successfully retaining it for the Federal Forces. He also started a collection of Mardi Gras medals.

Other areas of his collection include exonomia (items that resemble money but are not intended to circulate as money), such as bus tokens, trade tokens, wooden nickels, food-stamp-change tokens. He also became interested in ephemera (things that are used



**Charlie, on the right, is shown visiting with Jeff Ross at the October 2015 ECHS meeting. Charlie and Jeff have always brought interesting items to display at the society's "Show and Tell" programs.**

or enjoyed for only a short time). His collection includes photos, business receipts, bottles, signs, books, pamphlets, brochures, art work, furniture (signed), postcards, ledger books, and currency.

Although much of his collection is related to Pensacola history, he has branched out to include items about other Northwest Florida towns as well as South Alabama counties and towns.

The collection now includes thousands of items, which, since he has retired from teaching, he plans to catalog and inventory. He says that after twenty-eight years as a collector he

now has the time to organize it, a job he remarks will take years.

Charlie has presented programs and displayed items for many groups including the Pensacola Historical Society, the Alger-Sullivan Historical Society in Century, and the Santa Rosa County Historical Society.

He presented a program for ECHS in 2009. Photographs of his collection have appeared as illustrations in several books.

## ECHS Field Trip to Gee's Bend and Camden

### The Tour

ECHS is planning a trip to Gee's Bend and Camden for Thursday, August, 4. As a car pool, we will leave from the McMillan Museum in Brewton at 8:30 a.m. and plan to be in Camden for a quick facilities stop around 10:15 and then take the 11:00 ferry across to Gee's Bend.

It is 77 miles to Camden. The ferry landing is 3 miles from Camden. We will take our cars across the river on the ferry.

We will have lunch at Gee's Bend, everyone brown bagging it. The Society will provide bottled-water and soft drinks. We should have time to tour the community, see the quilters, and then take the 2:00 p.m. ferry back to Camden.

Back in Camden, we will drive by the many historical churches, homes, and public buildings, followed by an early dinner at the historical Gaines Ridge Dinner Club with reservations for 5:00 p.m.

- **Date: Thursday, August 4**
- **Leave Brewton: 8:30 a. m. from the McMillan Museum**
- **Transportation: Car Pool**
- **Lunch: Bring your own brown bag lunch.**
- **The historical society will supply bottled water and soft drinks.**
- **Dinner: Gaines Ridge in Camden. Reservations for 5:00 p. m.**

After dinner at Gaines Ridge we return to Brewton planning on being back by 8:00 p.m. or so.

## ECHS Field Trip to Gee's Bend and Camden (Continued)

(continued from page 2)

### The Gee's Bend Ferry

The ferry has been essential to the small community of Gee's Bend. It is the ferry which allows residents of Gee's Bend to get to Camden, the nearest town, to shop, work, do business, go to school. Gee's Bend (the official name is Boykin), is directly across the river from Camden.

There is only one road into the community. When the ferry service was suspended in 1962, the community was isolated, for access to Camden by car on primitive roads (over an hour's drive) was not feasible for most residents of Gee's Bend at the time.

The ferry service was suspended for 44 years. It reopened in 2006.



**The Current Gee's Bend Ferry**



**The Ferry Crossing the River**



**Old cable ferry between Camden and Gees Bend, 1939.**

Photo by Marion Post Wolcott.  
Restorer Adam Cuerden.  
From <<https://en.wikipedia.org>>.

### The Quilters of Gee's Bend

Officially known as Boykin, Gee's Bend is a block of land enclosed on three sides by the Alabama River in rural Wilcox County in Alabama's Black Belt. It was named for Joseph Gee, large landowner from Halifax County, North Carolina, who settled here in 1816 and established a cotton plantation.

After the Civil War, the freed slaves became tenant farmers and developed an all-black community that because of the location was nearly isolated from the surrounding world.



**Quilts of Gee's Bend from 2009**

Many of the community members eventually bought part of the land in the 1940's.

The women of Gee's Bend have had a long tradition of creating quilts to support their families, using whatever materials were available.

The Rural West Alabama Website says that the quilters have developed a distinctive style that has been described as bold and sophisticated, "based on traditional American and Afro-American quilting styles but with a geometric

(Continued on page 4)

## ECHS Field Trip to Gee's Bend and Camden (Continued)

(Continued from page 3)

### The Quilters of Gee's Bend (Continued)

simplicity reminiscent of Amish quilts and modern art" (<http://www.ruralswalabama.org/attraction/the-gees-bend-quilt-mural-trail/>).

The Gee's Bend community has become famous for its quilts. Dozens of them have been displayed in some of the most important museums in the U. S., such as the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

The history of the town and the art of the quilters

have been celebrated in the national media.

In 2006, an issue of postage stamps was created dedicated to the Quilters. There are ten stamps in the collection, each containing the image of a Gee's Bend Quilt. During 2007-2008, ten large murals, each containing a painting of one of the quilts from the U. S. Postage Stamp Collection, were created and placed along the route through the Gee's Bend community.



Quilters in 2015



The Quilt Collective Building  
Also Known as  
The Old Community House



The Ladies with their  
Quilts  
Gee's Bend Quilt  
Collective in 2014  
<[https://  
hesewingmachineproject.  
org/2014/11/04/  
gees-bend-2014/](https://hesewingmachineproject.org/2014/11/04/gees-bend-2014/)>.



Annie Mae Young's 1976 work-clothes quilt caught collector William Arnett's eye and led to the Gee's Bend exhibitions.

The quilt is in the Collection of the Tinwood Alliance.  
From <[http://www.  
Smithsonianmag](http://www.smithsonianmag.com)>.



Mural 1. "Medallion with Checkerboard Center" by Patty Ann Williams is the first mural in the Mural Trail. It is Located on the left side of CR29 in front of the Freedom Quilting Bee facility which is at Alberta, in Wilcox County.

"We think of inheriting as land or something, not things that people teach you. . . . We came from cotton fields, we came through hard times, and we look back and see what all these people before us have done. They brought us here, and to say thank you is not enough." . . . Gee's Bend Native Louisiana Pettway Bendolph.

A sign of the times, her 11-year-old granddaughter has taken up quilt making but does her drawings on a computer. From <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com>>

## ECHS Field Trip to Gee's Bend and Camden (Continued)

### Camden: Introduction

Camden was incorporated in 1841. The county seat of Wilcox County, it was named by Dr. John D. Caldwell to honor his hometown of Camden, South Carolina. Alabama Tourism states: "The town developed into an enterprising political, social, and intellectual center with the Wilcox Female Institute (1850), which attracted students from throughout the South" (<http://www.ruralswalabama.org/>).

After a visit, Reporter Kelly Kazek writes of the

town, "The tiny Wilcox County town of Camden, population 2,000, is filled with beautiful antebellum - and Reconstruction-era homes. Although the town square itself features a row of non-descript buildings and some empty storefronts, a drive along nearby streets leads to dozens of pretty white homes and churches, as well as stately red brick buildings" ([http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2015/09/scenes\\_from\\_camden\\_historic\\_bu.html](http://www.al.com/living/index.ssf/2015/09/scenes_from_camden_historic_bu.html)).

### A Driving Tour of Camden



#### The Dunn-Fairley-Bonner-Field House (c. 1825).

Located on Broad Street near downtown Camden, this oldest documented structure in Camden was built for Thomas Dunn, one of the earliest settlers of the area.

Originally a two-story, log-dogtrot, it was constructed around 1825. The two-story frame addition was added to the house around 1835-1840.

Photographs and text on the homes, churches, and buildings in Camden are from the Rural Southwest Alabama website (<http://www.ruralswalabama.org/>).



#### The Beck-Miller Law Office (c. 1840).

Located in downtown Camden on the corner of Planters Street and Water Street, it served as the law office for Colonel Franklin King Beck, who commanded the 23<sup>rd</sup> Alabama Infantry.

Col. Beck is noted for holding General Grant's troops at bay for 12 hours with a single regiment at the Battle of Big Black Ridge (Mississippi).

After the turn of the century, it became the law office of Neely Miller and his younger brother, Benjamin Meek Miller (Governor of Alabama from 1931-1935).

It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) as a contributing property to the Wilcox County Courthouse Historic District.

In 1995, the building was acquired by the Wilcox Historical Society, and restored to completion in 1999.



#### Wilcox County Courthouse (c. 1858).

Built in 1858 in the Greek Revival-style, it was ransacked by Union troops in 1865 during the Civil War.

However, some town officials managed to hide town records before the troops invaded. According to legend, the records were buried in a coffin and later unearthed.

Troops also occupied the historic Masonic Lodge and other buildings in town.

**A Driving Tour of Camden (Continued)**



**The Dale Masonic Lodge  
(c. 1848).**

Located at the intersection of Broad Street and Clifton near downtown Camden, the lodge was organized at Dale Town (later Prairie Bluff) in 1827.

When the town declined in the 1840s, members voted to move the lodge to Camden.

The Dale Masonic Lodge building that's shown was built circa 1848.

Union troops camped in this building while passing through Camden in 1865.

In 1936, the building was photographed and recorded in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

In 1939, it was recorded by the pioneer female photographer, Frances Benjamin Johnston, in the Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South (CSAS).



**Liddell-Burford House  
(c. 1850s).**

It is located in Camden on the west side of Broad Street northwest of courthouse square

Arthur Pendleton Bagby, who served two terms as Governor of Alabama (1837 and 1839) and later as a U. S. Senator, moved to Camden in 1853. He contracted with Henry F. Cook to build a home "befitting a man of position." They agreed to a price of \$3,750 to be paid in three installments.

Unfortunately, Bagby could not make the payments and the property was sold at public auction to Thomas King Beck to satisfy Mr. Cook's lien. (Beck was the nephew of Vice President William Rufus King.)

This two-story house features square box columns, a hallmark of Cook, and has supporting timbers which are secured by mortised joints and wooden pegs. The floors are 6-inch pine.

This house was photographed and recorded in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1936.



**Horn-Jones-Sadler Law Office  
(c. 1846).**

This building is located in downtown Camden across the street from the old Wilcox County Courthouse at the intersection of Court Street and Water Street

The Horn-Jones-Sadler law office was built around 1846. It is a one-story, shotgun structure with a gabled end portico. The building contains Victorian alterations which include Eastlake colonnettes and segmental-arched doors and windows.

During the late 1800s, this was the law office of General Richard C. Jones. In addition to practicing law, Jones served as a brigadier general in the State Militia, a member of the State Senate, President of the University of Alabama (1890-1897), and a member of the 1901 Alabama Constitutional Convention.

In 1937, this building was photographed and documented in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).

**A Driving Tour of Camden (Continued)**



**Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (c. 1849).**

The church is located at 209 Broad street. In front of it is an historical marker which states: "This building was constructed c. 1849 as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

"The Camden Associate Reformed Presbyterian congregation was organized in September 1890 in the parlor of the William Joel Bonner home This building was purchased soon after.

"Benjamin Meek Miller, Governor of Alabama, 1831-1835, was an original trustee and deacon.

"In 1906 the structure was remodeled, with the front portico being enclosed and a new steeple added."



**First Presbyterian Church of Camden (c. 1880s).**

Located at 203 Broad Street, the church congregation was organized in 1845. The original church building was erected in 1856. It burned on September 17, 1869 and the present building was constructed in the mid-1880s.

It features an open shingle covered belfry with "stick-style" trim and bracketed cornice. The interior walls were decorated with trompe l'oeil (simulated Gothic apse behind the pulpit) and painted pilasters and medallions until the restoration in the 1950s.

The sanctuary was again refurbished in August 2003 by removing the carpet and refinishing the original heart pine flooring, refinishing the original wooden shutters, and adding light fixtures and sconces to enhance the natural beauty of the sanctuary.

This church was photographed and recorded in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1936.



**Antioch Baptist Church (c. 1885).**

Located beside Highway 41 just south of downtown Camden.

Antioch Baptist Church, which opened in 1885, is one of the oldest African-American churches in Wilcox County.

It sits on a rise on the outskirts of Camden, in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt region.

The church has served the spiritual needs of the community for many generations. In the 1960s, it became a crossroads of the civil rights movement. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the church in 1965.

But in recent years the church building had fallen into disrepair. Thanks to the efforts of congregants, and help from the community, the church was restored, and recently won an award from the Alabama Historical Commission.

**A Driving Tour of Camden (Continued)**



**Old Wilcox County Jail  
(1889).**

This building is located at downtown Camden behind the old Wilcox County Courthouse. Wilcox County's third county jail, it was constructed in 1889 by L. Y. Tarrant for \$4800.

In 1960, jail operations were moved to a new facility. It is rare to find old jails still standing in Alabama, especially one with the features of this building.

It contains superb brickwork and an ornate wooden porch of Victorian Era architectural design. The more attractive two-story front part of the jail probably was where the sheriff and his family lived.

When this jail was built, state law required that the sheriff live on the premises in case there was a fire and the prisoners needed to be released, plus his presence was added security.



**Liberty Hall (c. 1855).**

This home is located southwest of Camden on Hwy 221 approximately one mile south of the Hwy 221 & Hwy 10 intersection.

Liberty Hall is an historic plantation house near Camden, Alabama. The two-story Greek Revival style main house was built in 1855 for John Robert McDowell by W W Robinson.

The two story front portico features two central Ionic columns flanked by a square column to each side, reminiscent of a distyle-in-antis arrangement, a portico with two (round) columns between (square) pilasters.

The floor plan is centered on a broad hall that separates four large, equally proportioned rooms on both levels. The formal rooms and hall on the lower level have elaborate plasterwork that was designed in partly by Harriet McDowell, wife of John Robert McDowell.

The house is currently owned by the great-granddaughter of the original owner. It was added to the



**Gates-Field Home  
(c. early 1900s).**

Located on Broad Street near the Camden Baptist Church cemetery, this is one of several "Sears, Roebuck & Co." homes that were shipped by railroad to Wilcox County in the early 1900's.

They came as modular sections and local carpenters constructed them from the "kit

**A Driving Tour of Camden (Continued)**



**Matthews-Curry House  
(built early 1840s).**

During the early 1840s, the county seat underwent a name change from Barbourville to Camden.

During this time, local dentist Benjamin Thompson purchased the corner lot on Union and Calhoun (Clifton) Streets and built a simple "I" house with a one story porch.

In 1867, the house was bought by W.F. Spurlin, a local jeweler, who retained it until 1911 when it was sold to B.H. Matthews, owner of Matthews Hardware Company. Mr. Matthews enlarged and remodeled the house, adding a large columned pedimented porch and a suspended balcony.

B.H. Matthews served as Mayor of Camden and President of the Alabama State Hardware Association.

When he built his two-story brick hardware store on Broad and Claiborne Streets (today's Coast to Coast), it had the only elevator within 50 miles.

The house has remained in the Matthews family for four generations and is the home of Will and Sommer Curry. Additions were made in 1987 and 2009.



**Beck-Creswell Home  
(c. 1850/60).**

Located at the intersection of Bridgeport Road and Broad Street at Camden, this house, commonly referred to as "The Beck Place", is a two-story frame building constructed circa 1850-60 in a vernacular interpretation of the Greek Revival style.

The house was a T-shaped structure that contained six rooms, two halls and two single porticoes. The kitchen was separate from the house.

When built, this was one of the finest homes in the community. The kitchen was attached to the house in the early twentieth century.

Robert M. and Grace Creswell purchased this house in 1969. At that time, the building had been scheduled for demolition. The Creswell's undertook a 5-year project to preserve the original structure but also to make it a livable place in which to raise a family.

During this renovation, the back of the house was enlarged. This home is a good example of the Greek Revival style in rural Black Belt Alabama. The Beck-Creswell House is listed on the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.



**Sterrett-McWilliams Home  
(1851).**

This home is located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Clifton Street and Sterrett Street in Camden,

Inspired by the works of architect Samuel Sloan, this outstanding example of antebellum eclecticism was built in 1851 for Judge David W. Sterrett, lawyer, planter, and trustee of the Wilcox Female Institute.

The veranda features four tall trellis-type supports, scroll-cut balustrades, and an unusual parapet. Red glass sidelights surround the front door. Other outstanding features include the spiral cantilevered stairways in the foyer, heavy decorative plasterwork in the symmetrical parlors, original gasoliers, and jib doors.

In 1870, the home was sold to Richard Ervin McWilliams and wife Amelia Lindsay Coate. This home has been in the McWilliams family for seven generations.

This home was photographed and documented in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1936. The house was added to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage (ARLH) on April 14, 1992.

**A Driving Tour of Camden (Continued)**



**Wilcox Female Institute Building (c. 1849).**

The Wilcox Female Institute (1848-1850). This building is located at 301 Broad Street.

The Wilcox Female Institute is a historic Greek Revival-style school building in Camden. The brick structure features twin Doric columns, a second floor balcony, and a two-tiered cupola and pilastered belfry.

This building was built between 1848 and 1850 and chartered as an academy for women in 1850. During the antebellum and post-bellum periods, this school was one of the most successful academies in Alabama.

The school closed in 1910 and the building was then used as part of the county high school for over 50 years. The building was deeded to the Wilcox Historical Society in 1974 and today it serves as the headquarters of this group.

The Wilcox Female Institute was recorded by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in 1937 and it was added to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on April 3, 1975.



**Gaines Ridge (late 1820's)**

Gaines Ridge is located beside Highway 10 approximately two miles east of Camden

It's believed that this dwelling was built in the late 1820's. This house was once the only two-story building between Black's Bluff and Allenton, two early settlements almost 50 miles apart.

The actual builder of this house is not known, but one of the early owners was Reverend Ebenezer Hearn, a Methodist Circuit Rider, whose family gave the home its historical name, "The Hearn Place." Reverend Hearn was a soldier in the War of 1812.

The home was acquired in 1898 by the family of the current owner, Mrs. Betty Gaines Kennedy. The house was a family residence until 1985 when it became Gaines Ridge Dinner Club.

The Gaines Ridge Dinner Club serves great food in a beautiful and historic setting. It is included in "Off the Beaten Path: Alabama" by Gay N. Martin and the state tourism brochure, "100 dishes to eat in Alabama before you die."

Like most old houses, Gaines Ridge has its share of ghost stories. It is included on the Alabama's Ghost Trail video series.

## Snapshots from the ECHS June 28, 2016 Meeting



**Before the meeting, in the front row, left to right, Al and Carol Jokela, Margaret and Neal Collier. Across the aisle, Jacque Stone, Barbara Page, June Martin, and Ann Biggs-Williams. Don Sales is standing in front. James Gulley is turned to talk with someone in the second row.**



**Sally Finlay Presiding at the Business Meeting**



**The Refreshment Table**



**In the McMillan Museum, Left to Right, Brian Rucker, and Margaret and Neil Collier**

**A Peanut Butter Tin. Part of the Bottle Collection shown by Marie Heaton at the "Show and Tell" program for the meeting.**



# Snapshots from the ECHS June 28, 2016 Meeting *(Continued)*



**Barbara Page and June Martin  
Enjoying a Chat.**



**Barbara McCoy and James Gulley  
Visit.**



**Barbara McCoy and David Allen discussing  
something about the Alabama Room.**



**Charles Ware and Don Sales in front of  
the table displaying items from "Show  
and Tell."**



**Michael Cullen chats with  
Brian Rucker**



**Al and Carol Jokela in the Elvira  
Parlor enjoying the refreshments.**

# Snapshots from the ECHS June 28, 2016 Meeting *(Continued)*



**Barbara Page displays a framed quilt square made from silk neck-ties worn by family members. Barbara also brought pictures of those family members wearing the ties, 19th to early 20th century period**



**Close up of the quilt square from silk neck-ties.**



**Ceramic Lid for large Mason Jar shown being examined by David Allen at the left and also shown at the bottom left in the collection of Marie Heaton.**



**Marie Heaton, in front, is showing parts of her bottle collection to Ranella Merritt and David Allen. David is examining a large Mason Jar. Bottles in the collection are shown below.**



**Part of the Bottle Collection of Marie Heaton**



**Sally Finlay shows picture of football team for Brewton High School from 1924-1925, the only year there was a Brewton High School. The school then became T. R. Miller High School.**

**Photos from the ECHS June 28, 2016 Meeting (Continued)**



**Brian Rucker shows tap root of a Yellow Pine.**



**Don Sales shows a Hame, wooden yoke for hitching horses.**



**Brian Rucker shows arrow point he found in oyster shell covered parking lot of his grandfather's Ft. Walton Beach hardware store**



**More tools brought for "Show and Tell" by Don Sales. These are tools for oxen to haul logs.**



**Close up of tap root of Yellow Pine brought by Brian Rucker.**

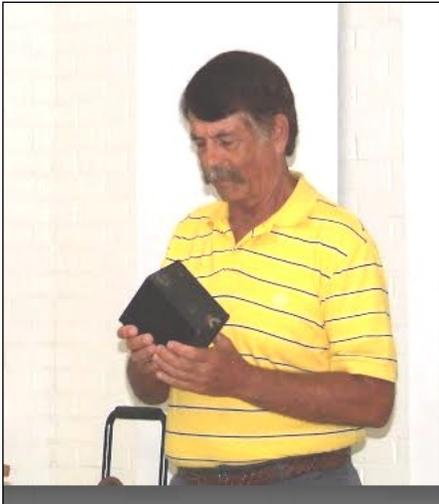


**Above, Brian Rucker shows wooden handle used by his grandfather to move railcars. His grandfather worked for T. R. Miller.**



**In the photo to the left, Brian shows chains used to bind logs. A close up of the chains is shown at the far left.**

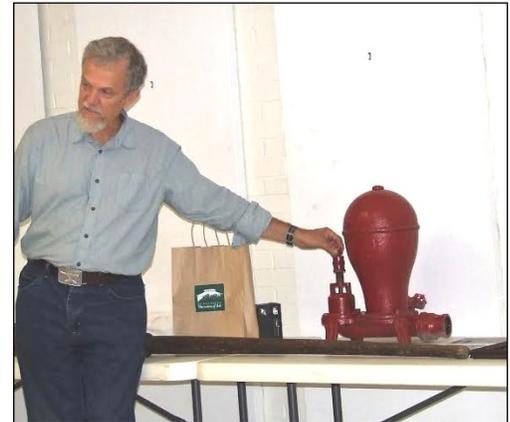
# Snapshots from the ECHS June 28, 2016 Meeting *(Continued)*



**Charles Ware shows camera which belonged to his grandmother. The camera, made by the AFGA company in Berlin, had film inside it from the 1950's. He passed around a scrapbook of pictures taken with this camera.**



**Close up of Pump**



**Neil Collier shows hydraulic ram pump used to pump water without electricity.**



**James Gulley shows his grandfather's Vetterli rifle. These rifles were a series of Swiss army service rifles in use from 1869 to around 1890.**



**Ann Biggs-Williams brought the doctor's log of Andrew Jackson Robinson of Brooklyn, Alabama. The log covers the years 1859-1865.**



**Close-up of shotgun of Judy Purnell's great-grandfather.**



**Judy Purnell brought the shotgun of her great-grandfather which was given to her when her son Duke was born. The gun, shown at the left, is from the 1890's-1900's. She also brought the ring of her great-grandmother which once had the inscription "W" for Williamson, but the inscription has worn off.**

## Our Business Members

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our Business Members**

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## Red Crocus: Miz Friedman's Montbretia

By Darryl Searcy

Guess what! The Red Crocus are blooming and these beauties will continue to bloom throughout the summer if you treat them with respect - they don't need TLC, just a place to set their faces to the sun for a brief time each day and then you stand back and watch the refreshing sunshine show itself in the brilliant colors of a plant that came to us from the far-away place called South Africa.

Let's call it by its American name; Montbretia. Or at least that's what the good folks in Florida call them. Our friends and neighbors in Mississippi like to call them by their true name, Crocosmia, but I, on the other hand, like to call them Red Crocus or Red Iris. Whatever, the botanical name is Crocosmia pottsii, named for the British born New Zealander naturalist who had the foresight to harvest a few bulbs and drop them in European laps to further beautify the English speaking peoples garden. Mind you, they can be moderately invasive, so it is necessary to thin them out from time to time, which makes them ideal for sharing with your neighbors.

I knew a lady over in Jackson, Mississippi who eagerly shared a few precious bulbs with me. She dug them from a little park that sits in the middle of her street. I let them thrive in a long bed that runs across the front of my house in Conecuh county, and I also see them standing tall at a few houses on Belleville Avenue in Brewton. In my golden years I digress, so let me get back to Miz Friedman over in Jackson and tell you a little about the good woman and her love for cottage gardening. I happen to like things to be thick and rambly, surrounded with deep mulch. She prefers individual plants to be well ordered and tended, with clean soil hoed smooth all around them.

Each of our gardens has suffered its share of behind-the-back criticism; mine, because I killed most of the former lawn and planted wildflowers; hers, because it's "old fashioned" on a street where invading, first-home yuppies enjoy converting cottage gardens into boring renditions of sleepy suburbia.



The new comers are interested in block parties and contemporary fad plants. She, on the other hand, is an experienced great-grandmother of a gardener, whose eyes and heart long ago settled onto truly satisfying flowers.

Miz Friedman shared with me a spadeful of one such plant, Crocosmia. Its tangled roots

reminded me of nutsedge; little knots of corms connected by wiry rhizomes hinted at its tendency to run. After dividing my loot with the horticulturist at a local public garden in Monroeville, I settled the rest into a sunny spot at my house, beside a hardy Cherokee Rose (courtesy of Ann Biggs-Williams). Alongside the Cherokee Rose, I planted a couple of Royal Fern and the tiny bulbs of Crocosmia. Now I have about a million of them that flourish alongside Red Buckeye, Obedient Flowers, and a smitch of Kwonzo Daylilies.

While I understand Montbretia is no longer a valid botanical name (although it's still commonly used), this Southern pass-along was harvested in South Africa by Thomas Potts (1824-1888) in the early 1800s. Its fiery blossoms, borne on stiff, branched, zigzag stems, are excellent for cutting. The color nearly disappears in late June and July, making the plants more effective in front of an evergreen background than out in the open. Continued hybridizing has produced several improved cultivars, featuring red, orange, or yellow flowers. Since the plants sometimes "gets away" from my flower beds, I am quick to use the spade for rooting out bundles of stolons and nutty corms, which I pass along to friends and neighbors. If there are no takers at the time, I simply toss them in the edge of woods that surround a seepage pond, where they find easy habit among the ferns and pitcher plants, where they flourish among a myriad of wildflowers.

**ECHOES**  
**THE NEWSLETTER FOR**  
**THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY**  
**HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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