

THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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“OLD MIKE” PUT TO REST AFTER 64 YEARS

Some information in this article is from articles in *Nevada County Picayune* dated May 15, 1975 and *Arkansas Democrat* dated June 24, 1970.

Most everyone who grew up in and around Prescott in the mid-1900s has heard of “Old Mike”. He was found dead in the city park in a sitting position against a large oak tree on August 21, 1911. Nobody could identify him and it was assumed he was a hobo who traveled about the country, possibly making a little money by selling pencils and combs.

“Old Mike” was embalmed by Dr. J. D. Cornish of Prescott and attempts were made to find out his identity. After about two weeks, Dr. Cornish reviewed his condition and decided to wait a little longer in hopes someone might identify him. Weeks turned into months and months into years. People came from all over the country looking for their missing loved one, but nobody claimed him. He was given the name “Mike” by the funeral home staff. Some assumed him to be an alien from Europe, since the high quality gold work on his teeth was of a quality known by many as the work of European goldsmiths and silversmiths.

Originally, Mike was embalmed with his mouth and eyes closed, but dehydration caused the skin to tighten, pulling apart the lips and eyelids. The dry eyes cracked, so eye-caps were inserted to cover the eyeballs. The caps were tinted a shade of blue. Every few years, Mike was removed from the cabinet, stripped of his clothes, and bathed. The old clothes were burned and a new set of out-dated clothes were put on him. Then he was placed back in the cabinet. He was left in a standing position in the cabinet, which appeared to be a closet. I am told he was kept in the old post office in the 1940s, but at the time I saw him, he was in the Cornish Mortuary on West Elm St. across from Guthrie’s Drug Store. It took lots of courage for young folks to make the trip into the mortuary and ask to see “Old Mike”. Many times this was done after being dared to do so by their friends who had already seen him. At one time, the story of “Old Mike” was even mentioned on the Johnny Carson show on television.

Soon after my wife and I married, I told her the story of Old Mike and she thought I was just making up the story. After a little coaxing on my part, I persuaded her to visit the Cornish Mortuary and see for herself. We asked the man up front if we could see Old Mike and he led us back to where he was kept. Needless to say, it was an experience my wife won’t forget.

In the newspaper article printed in 1970, S. L. “Blue” Avery, an employee of the funeral home stated that there were no plans to bury “Old Mike”. “We won’t bury him as long as he holds up. I believe he’ll hold up indefinitely” Avery said.

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But by 1975, it was decided to go ahead and bury "Old Mike" mainly due to some state laws that required it. Over the years, the funeral home had refused offers from traveling carnival shows to purchase "Old Mike". There was a state law which prohibits the display of human beings in museums for public view.

In May of 1975, the funeral home purchased a lot in De Ann Cemetery for "Old Mike". It is not a pauper's lot, but is in a section of the cemetery designated for single lots. Mike's coffin was covered with a wreath of red carnations. Rev. Jerry Westmoreland officiated at the graveside service held on May 12, 1975. His tombstone simply reads- Old Mike...Died August 21, 1911.

THE ACTUAL NEWS STORY FROM 1911

Aug. 21, 1911- This morning about 8 o'clock a white man about 40 years of age was found dead in the city park on the east side of the shed. The man had apparently been dead about two hours when discovered.

The remains were brought to the undertaking parlors of the Prescott Hardware Co. and Dr. W. W. Rice, the coroner, was notified and a jury was selected to hold the inquest. Several witnesses were examined and it was learned the deceased had been seen at Little Rock, Arkadelphia, and Gurdon during the last ten days. One witness testified that he saw the man in the police court at Little Rock ten days ago where he was charged with being drunk. He was later seen at Arkadelphia and Gurdon and it was not learned when he arrived in Prescott. He was seen in different parts of the city yesterday and was also seen by people attending church at the Park last night.

The deceased was a cripple and used two crutches, and evidently made his living by selling lead pencils, as there were a dozen or more in his pocket.

After examining the witnesses, the jury verdict was, "We, the jury, find that the deceased came to his death by unknown means".

The dead man was about 5 feet and 4 inches high, brown eyes, brown hair, partly bald on top of head, brown mustache, tattoo on right arm between elbow and wrist, design of a woman standing on a pedestal, left leg a little shorter than right, stiff ankle, wore pair of No. 6 shoes made by the Foreman Shoe Co. of Chicago, old scar on top of head, and two gold teeth.

There was nothing at all found in his clothes that would lead to his identity. A small amount of change, less than two dollars, a piece of chewing tobacco, two handkerchiefs, and the lead pencils were all that his pockets contained.

There were no marks at all on the body indicating that he had been foully dealt with and it is the opinion of many that his death was caused by heart failure.

The remains were embalmed by Undertaker Cornish and will be held here for a few days with the hopes that something may be learned of the deceased's identity.

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This is a picture of James E. "Jimmy" Starnes who was one of the early settlers in the Bluff City area. According to those who have researched this family, Jimmy Starnes was born ca.1828 in Georgia. He married Martha "Mattie" Jones who was born ca.1837 in Alabama. The Jimmy Starnes family moved from Alabama to the Bluff City area sometime in the mid-1800s. The children born to this couple were:

1. M. Frances "Ponie" Starnes who married Monroe Edward Harvey
2. Thomas Britton Starnes who married Mollie Ann Ray
3. William R. "Dick" Starnes who married Nancy M. Black
4. Nancy Lucindy Starnes who married Henry Clinton Rodolpheus Morgan
5. George W. Starnes who married Lydia R. Hall
6. Maxie Arena Starnes married (1) James Monroe Pearce & (2) Robert Murphy Henry
7. James Nathaniel "Nate" Starnes who never married
8. Paralee Wistella Starnes who married (1) B. H. Crowell & (2) ??? Doster

Some of the above information is from a booklet entitled "Meador Genealogy and Related Families" by Elloene McBride.

James E. "Jimmy" Starnes and his wife are believed to be buried in unmarked graves at Bluff City Cemetery and all of the children are buried there. The 1880 census shows him to be a widower, age 52, so evidently Mrs. Starnes died shortly after the birth of their last child in 1878. Some of their descendants still live near Bluff City and many members of the Starnes family are buried at Bluff City Cemetery.

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PICTURES AND STORIES NEEDED

If you have an old family picture or family story you would like to share, let me know and we'll try to feature a different person or family each month. I can make a copy of your picture at your home if you are concerned about it getting lost. I would like to get some family information or old pictures of any families who once lived in what is now Nevada County or western Ouachita County. Remember that before 1871, the eastern half of what is now Nevada County was part of Ouachita County. Let's preserve our heritage. Thanks to Mrs. Clara Harvey for providing the picture of James E. "Jimmy" Starnes.

THE NIGHT HISTORY WENT UP IN SMOKE

In 1909, five Prescott men met in the Hamby law office and decided to organize the Nevada County Historical Society. They were Henry B. McKenzie, A. M. Ellsworth, Joe Bailey, Walter P. Murrah, and R. P. Hamby. Mr. McKenzie was selected as president, Mr. Ellsworth as vice-president, Mr. Hamby as secretary, and Mr. Murrah as treasurer.

For the next ten years they traveled into the rural areas of Nevada County interviewing citizens that were over 75 years of age. These were people who were born before the Civil War and had memories of those days. These men traveled over the county by horse and buggy at first to conduct these interviews since the automobile first appeared in Prescott about 1910.

After ten years they had a collection of historical information including names of early settlers, origin of the names of communities, location of early roads, and the first schools of the county, including the famous female academy at Glenville which existed before the Civil War.

Mr. McKenzie had all this information at his home and was editing it for publication. On the night of April 17, 1919, his home on Cale Road southeast of Prescott caught fire and all the material was forever lost. By that time, many of the people they had interviewed had died or moved away.

This was an unfortunate event for all of us who love history. These men should be remembered for their efforts to preserve information about Nevada County. Mr. R. P. Hamby is responsible for preserving much of the early history of Prescott and Nevada County and many of his articles can be found in old newspapers. That's where I found this account of the fire in 1919 when much of the early history of Nevada County went up in smoke. Mr. Hamby also served as mayor of Prescott from 1912 to 1948.

Maybe it's time for another group of concerned citizens to start a Nevada County Historical and Genealogical Society. I get inquiries all the time wanting to know if there is such an organization in Nevada County.

Some family trees have beautiful leaves, but some have a bunch of nuts. It's the nuts that make the tree worth shaking.

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OLD LOCAL NEWS ITEMS

Rosston -Mrs. Pearl Hilton, our worthy postmistress made a flying trip to Prescott Wednesday. (*April 23, 1914*)

Willisville- Herbet Herring says his father will let him have his buggy now, but he can't get a girl to ride with him (*April 23, 1914*)

Glenville- Glenville farmers have completed planting their second crop of cotton. Come to the South where you can plant two crops of cotton every year. (May 28, 1914)

Glenville- C. B. Hesterly has planted onions with his potatoes. Upon inquiry, we were informed the onions cause the eyes of the potatoes to water, thereby insuring plenty of moisture during dry weather. (*May 28, 1914*)

Delta- There have been some cases of smallpox and mumps near Delta. (*Sep. 21, 1909*)

Bluff City- Oscar Johnson of Zama was in the city today selling cotton. (*Feb. 18, 1909*)

AN "EASTERNER'S" LETTER TO HER SON (published in the 1977 Old Farmer's Almanac) condensed from the Union County Advocate-Morganfield, Kentucky

Dear Stanley,

I write to let you know I am still alive. I am writing slowly as I know you don't read fast. You won't know the house when you come home—we moved. We had trouble moving, especially the bed—the man wouldn't let us take it in the taxi and we were afraid we might wake up your father.

Your father has a nice new job and very responsible. He has about 500 people under him—he cuts the grass at the cemetery.

Our neighbors, the Browns, started keeping pigs—we got wind of it yesterday.

I got my appendix out and a dishwasher put in. There is a washing machine in the new house here, but it don't work too good. Last week I put four shirts in the washer and pulled that chain. They whirled around real good but then disappeared. I think something is wrong with the machine.

Your uncle Dick drowned last week in a whiskey vat at the distillery. Four of his work mates dived in to save him, but he fought them off bravely. We cremated his body the next day and just got the fire out this morning.

I went to the doctor with your father last week. The doctor put a small glass tube in my mouth and told me not to open it for ten minutes. Your father wanted to buy it from him.

It rained only twice last week—once for three days and once for four days. Monday was so windy that our chicken laid the same egg four times.

I got a letter from the undertaker this morning. He said if we don't make up the installments on your grandmother's grave—up she comes.

Your loving mother, Stella

P.S. I was going to send you \$10 but I had already sealed the envelope.

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AUNT JANE'S CASSEROLE

(I found this poem on the Internet. It was written by Bob Tucker)

At all our family parties
In the spring and in the fall.
We'd have a potluck dinner.
There was food for all.

At the center of the table
Sat a celebrated bowl.
Just one of our traditions,
It was Aunt Jane's casserole.

No clue to what was in it.
Twas her secret recipe.
Folks asked us when they ate it,
"What on earth can this stuff be?"

My dad said it was possum,
Uncle Billy tasted coal.
They both took time to warn me,
"Don't eat Aunt Jane's casserole."

My mother claimed it was fishy,
As she hid a bite in foil.
When I finally tried it,
I remembered castor oil.

The preacher came one springtime.
Said a prayer condemning sin.
Then had a heaping helping
And did not come back again.

Aunt Jane would stand there asking,
"Have you tried it on a roll?"
As the family all avoided
Aunt Jane's casserole.

Aunt Jane is no longer with us.
Bless her heart and rest her soul.
Her hallowed spot's remembered,
There we place an empty bowl.

The recipe went with her.
Soon again to take it's toll.
It will be the talk of Heaven:
Aunt Jane's casserole.

(Another recipe from the 1944 Hempstead Co. Home Demonstration Club Cookbook)

ARKANSAS FAVORITE COOKIES

4 tablespoons shortening
1 cup sugar
¼ cup milk
1 egg

2 cups flour
3 tablespoons baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt

Cream shortening and sugar together. Add milk and beaten egg. Sift one cup flour with baking powder and salt. Add more flour to handle easily. Roll out ¼ inch thick on floured board. Cut with cookie cutter and bake in hot oven. (For a large amount of cookies double this recipe).

Mrs. Luther Westfall
Doyle H. D. Club