

Jerry McKelvy's
SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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WATCH WHAT YOU WEAR

Early newspapers are full of news stories about accidents involving a person's clothes catching on fire resulting in death or serious burns. Women and girls wore long dresses in those days. Homes were usually heated by a fireplace and women had to build a fire outside to heat water in the wash pot to do laundry. These open flames, carelessness, long dresses, and lack of proper supervision of children caused many deaths.

There was not much that could be done in cases of serious burns in the old days. There was no 9-1-1 to call and most rural families didn't have a telephone. There were no ambulances or helicopters to take a victim to a large hospital burn center. Even getting someone to Prescott was difficult due to poor road conditions. Many who survived the initial fire suffered for hours or days before death finally came. Here are some incidents reported in Nevada County newspapers:

Oct., 1890

Mrs. Thomas Greer's dress caught fire as she was looking after the fire around a wash pot. She died the next day. She was the daughter of E. T. McDaniel.

Feb., 1892

The eldest child of Mr. Roe Hirst was burned over half of her body when her clothes caught fire. Death which would be a relief is almost hourly expected.

Jan., 1902 (from J. L. Franklin)

Nancy Jane Greer Henry lived a short distance from the Gum Grove school. She had just gone inside from washing clothes and backed up to the fireplace to get warm. Her long dress caught fire from the fireplace and then her hair caught on fire. She panicked and ran outside which only made things worse. School was in session at the time and the teacher and students heard her screams. They came running to help but it was too late. She was buried at Friendship Cemetery.

March, 1906

The daughter of Eva Ward was burned when her clothing caught fire from a fire the

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children had made in the yard. She was thought to be dangerously burned.

Dec. ,1906

Marion Loren Wren, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Sam Wren, aged 3, was burned to death when her clothing caught fire. She is buried at Harmony Cemetery.

April, 1910

Miss Hannah Eblin was burned to death when her clothing caught fire while burning grass. She was interred at Pickard's Cemetery.

April, 1910

The J. W. Holloway farm near Rosston--A Negro woman was standing near the fireplace with her baby in her arms when she was seized with a fit and fell into the fire where she remained until the spell stopped. She then ran into the yard screaming. Mr. Holloway heard her screams and came to her assistance. She was badly burned and died the next morning and her baby died a few hours later.

Dec. 1916

Lois Estelle Dillard, age 4, was playing in her playhouse. She had made a fire in her stove and her clothing caught fire. She suffered painful burns and died the next day. She was buried at Bluff Springs Cemetery.

April, 1917

Mrs. W. L. Dowd of near Cale was making soap outside her home when her clothing caught fire. She died a short time later.

Jan., 1918

Mrs. Thad Butcher was standing before an open gas heater when her clothing caught fire. Practically all her clothing was burned off her body. Her husband and son were home at the time and managed to get her outside. There was a six-inch snow on the ground and they covered her body with snow. She suffered some painful burns but was expected to recover.

May, 1919

James Machin who worked at the Prescott and Northwestern Railroad machine shop got too close to the furnace and his clothes caught fire. He suffered serious burns to his hands and was off work for several days.

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Jan., 1920

Leonard Pratt, age 12, of near Lackland Springs, was returning from hunting. He leaned his gun against a fence while he crossed the fence. When he leaned over to get the gun, his dog leaped over the fence causing the gun to discharge. The bullet hit one of his hands and also set his clothing on fire. The boy used his other hand to extinguish the flames. He was brought to the Prescott sanitarium where an operation was performed on his hand. He was expected to recover.

March, 1921

Master A. B. Bonds Jr. was able to be out again after recovering from burns three months earlier when his clothing caught fire from a gas stove.

Nov. 1922

Josie Jane Otwell, age 4, daughter of Penny Otwell, died from burns received when her clothing caught fire. She was buried at Mt. Moriah Cem.

Jan. 1928

Edith Georgia Whitten, age 4, was burned when her clothing caught fire while burning trash. She died at the Prescott hospital and was buried at Bluff City Cemetery.

April, 1947

Sonya Gloria Dillard, age 5, died from burns she received when her clothing caught fire. She was buried at Bluff Springs Cem.

Families were larger in those days. Women had many chores to do and could not always watch the children closely. Accidents happen, but I think the fact that women and girls wore long dresses was a big factor in so many of these burn accidents. Fireplaces and the need to have outside fires for doing laundry also contributed. Dresses were made of very flammable material such as cotton. Work dresses worn by farm women and the fancy dresses rich women wore were designed to have much material in the bottom part of the dress which could easily catch fire and burn quickly. This usually caused the person to panic and take off running which only made things worse.

Our ancestors, especially rural farm people, had many dangerous things to deal with as they went about their daily lives. When an accident happened, they more or less had to deal with the situation themselves with the help of their neighbors. The local doctor might be called, but he could do very little in dealing with a major emergency.

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THE POLL TAX

Poll taxes were a part of our history going back to colonial days. The word poll means “head” so it was really a per person tax. The poll tax was written into the state constitutions of most of the Southern states. Payment of a poll tax began to be used as a qualification for voting. The idea was that everyone should pay some tax even if the person owned no property or didn’t make enough money to be subject to payment of property or income taxes. The effect of the poll tax was that it disqualified many black residents and poor white residents from voting because they worked as sharecroppers, owned no property, and had little income.

The poll tax was a very small amount. In Arkansas, it was one dollar per year. The money collected went to help support the public schools. In some states, the tax was cumulative. In other words, if you failed to pay your poll tax one year, the tax was added on to the tax due for the next year. The result was that many people just quit voting. If the tax was paid before June 15, the person was entitled to vote (if otherwise qualified) in any election before June 15th of the next year.

The 19th amendment to the U. S. Constitution in 1920 gave women the right to vote. Women in Arkansas were told to be sure and not forget to pay their poll tax or they wouldn’t be able to vote.

An attempt was made in Arkansas in 1938 to do away with the poll tax. The Poll Tax Elimination amendment was put up for a vote and was defeated with a vote of 66% against and 34% for.

In 1964, the 24th amendment to the United States constitution prohibited the poll tax as a qualification for voting in federal elections. At that time, only five states still had a poll tax—Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia. Arkansas repealed its poll tax in November, 1964 and the other four states had repealed theirs by 1966.

I had to pay a poll tax in 1962 even before I was old enough to vote. I worked for the Arkansas Forestry Commission during the summer while I was going to college. They had a rule that all state employees must pay a poll tax of one dollar. The minimum age for voting then was 21 and I was only 19 but I had to pay the poll tax anyway.

I have a booklet containing the official list of voters in Nevada County in 1964 who had paid their poll taxes for the year 1964.

RAINFALL RECORD FOR 2021

I received 67.5 inches of rain at my house in 2021. Normal annual rainfall in 52 inches. The wettest three months were May (10.6), March (10.3), and February (7.0). The driest three months were September (2.3), November (3.3), and August (3.6). We also received about 15 inches of snow in February, the largest snowfall I can remember. This is the fourth wet year in a row—2018 (80.5 inches, 2019 (74.3 inches), 2020 (75.6 inches), and 2021 (67.5 inches).

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THE WORST MARITIME DISASTER IN AMERICAN HISTORY

We have all heard the stories or seen the movie about the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 after it hit an iceberg while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. It was a major disaster with many lives lost and was reported in all the major newspapers. Another disaster involving a ship happened in 1865 which is considered to be the worst maritime disaster in American history, but many have never heard of it.

It happened on the Mississippi River just north of Memphis on April 27, 1865. The Civil War has just ended and prisoners held by both sides were being sent home. About 400,000 prisoners had been captured during the war and many of the Union prisoners had been held at Andersonville prison in Georgia and Cahaba prison in Alabama. Conditions in the prison camps was very poor during the war. About 13,000 prisoners at Andersonville died while being held captive there due to the deplorable conditions.

The U. S. government engaged private steamboat operators to transport the prisoners back home when the war ended. Owners of these ships were paid \$5 per enlisted man and \$10 per officer to transport the prisoners back home after the war ended. The steamboat S. S. Sultana was considered to be a safe, reliable ship and had been used for various missions during the war operating between St. Louis and New Orleans.

The Sultana was a large boat—about 250 feet long. That's almost the length of a football field and it had four boilers. It was rated to carry 376 passengers and crew. On this occasion, greed took over and about 2300 men were allowed on the ship—about six times the boat's limit. One survivor reported that people were crammed into every available nook of space with not even enough room to lie down.

About 2 A. M. on the night of April 27, 1865, the ship was seven miles north of Memphis when the leaky boilers exploded and the ship burst into flames. There was nothing for those on board to do except abandon ship. They jumped into the water and many drowned because of their weakened condition from being in the prison camp and some didn't even know how to swim. There was little time to react because of the ship being engulfed in flames. It only took about twenty minutes for it to burn. Many were killed in the initial explosion and many were scalded by the fire. You can imagine how it would be

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to be awakened in the middle of the night and having to make the decision to jump overboard into the Mississippi River. Another steamboat was two miles away when the explosion occurred and turned around to help rescue people. Some managed to find a piece of driftwood or something to hold onto and floated with the current downstream toward Memphis. Many of these were found the next morning washed up on the river bank at Memphis—some still alive.

The dead soldiers that were recovered were buried in a mass grave at Ft. Pickering near Memphis and later when the Memphis National Cemetery was developed, the bodies were moved to that cemetery.

Nobody knows for sure just how many died in this disaster. The reports ranged from 1100 to 1800 who perished making it the worst maritime disaster in American history.

Why is this event not mentioned much in our history books and why was it not even reported in many newspapers of that day? One of the explanations given is that the Civil War had just ended after four long years of fighting in which 620,000 men lost their lives. That was two percent of the population at that time. Also, President Lincoln had just been assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. Those stories dominated the news reporting in April, 1865.

Nobody was punished for the ship being overloaded that day and that was probably one of the main reasons why the ship exploded. There was not much way to investigate the causes since the ship was a total loss. The captain of the ship did not survive the explosion. The families of those prisoners who perished later requested that a memorial be erected in memory of those who died, but this request was denied by the U. S. government. These men had fought during the war and had spent many months in a prison camp under very poor conditions only to perish on their trip back home. This is just one of those almost forgotten stories from American history.

If you are ever near Marion, Arkansas, you might like to visit the Sultana Disaster Museum. They are planning to move into a larger facility soon, but there you will find much more information about this disaster including stories from those few who survived.

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Dan Westmoreland shares some thoughts about the Sandyland--

Jerry you are the only documentarian of the Sandyland of SW Arkansas that I know of. I have some old thoughts you may share.

I know that my family came from Georgia after the War Between the States. I understand they gathered on the banks of the Mississippi River from about 1864 until around 1869. Around 1870 they moved a large family and odds and ends into lands purchased in SW Arkansas Nevada County Caney Community (this little area has been called many different names as you know). The 1200 acres my folks bought supported over a hundred folks as it was cleared and planted. School, church, cemetery and the sandy loam was as rich for crops as anyone had ever seen. But it was not easy.

The point here is the hardships and benefits of the sand:

I am "only" 78 and will point out some of my memories and things I heard talked.

1. The land had to be cleared for homes and farming. All kinds of hardwood, pines, brush had to be sawed, chopped and burned, The roots and stumps had to be removed. Backbreaking work for men and mules. Many stumps were just plowed around even up to my childhood. Way before my time how hard it must have been to put down timbers in the sand to hold houses. I think after about 4-6 ft they got into red clay--you know a lot more than I do. My Great Grandpaw's log house lasted for well over 120 years. I know a great Uncle's house down by the family cemetery was actually moved a couple 100 yards toward Cale Road back in the day --how I can't imagine. Lots of men, mules, horses, and logs to roll it a foot at two at a time.
2. The old rough hardwood floors in the houses could only last a few years until sanded nearly to holes in traffic patterns. A lot of traffic since each family had 5-13 kids. Later linoleum "rugs" were put down and they were sanded to nothing in about a year.
3. Probably if babies could remember they would recall the bump--bump of the rocking chairs that had been sanded flat on the bottom rockers by shoving them around on the floors making them flat on the bottom.
4. Barefoot kids jumped from shade to shade. No one's feet could ever get tough enough to tolerate the heat from that white sand in the summer.
5. All beds were sandy. Last good night words from mamas were "Y'all brush them feet off fore y'all get in bed". My dad never stopped saying and doing that even when we moved to the black lands of Texas.
6. When water pumps were later invented and put in use--they couldn't handle the sand and would last only a short time in those 35-foot hand dug wells. Papaw said just draw water by hand-- its less trouble. No water ever tasted better than that water though

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7. Watermelons and cantaloupes were incomparable in taste and quality. Folks would come from all over to his melons for the seed and come back later and say--just not as good. Papaw would say well you just don't have my land.

8. My papaw plowed his 40 acres with small mules. The sandy loam was so soft and plow able (pliable). I asked why not get a tractor? He always said "too many stumps" Of course the real answer was no money. Or no desire to change.

9. Bull nettles loved the sand and kids' feet and legs. The first remedy for boys was pee on it. Hard to convince the girls.

10. Snakes had to find shade in summer-- the hot sand wasn't for them-- folks had to watch carefully. Big timber rattlers under bushes. When I was about 10 my dad, and a cousin who was about 14, were going fishing in Little Caney Creek (since about sanded in now, I imagine). While they were digging in the sand near the creek I glanced over and saw a big rattler. I hollered, jumped, and ran. Dad told my cousin to kill that thing with a little short handle grubbing hoe he was using. Cousin was having no part of that. Dad took over and started a fight with the snake. Snake struck at him 3-4 times. Finally, Dad got him-and whacked his head off. Turned out the rattler was longer than the hoe handle. The snake had just ingested something--maybe a small rabbit- and was too full to make a full strike

11. It was easy to dig a grave compared to black land. Apparently, many children died in the 1918 Spanish Flu

12. If you were out hunting or just running about and became thirsty, one could dig in the sand in places and wait for the water to bubble up. Papaw had cups hanging on bushes for that in known places. A lasting memory was when he would dig a spring hole out and dip his hat brim as a dipper for us kids It tasted of his sweat, tobacco. the sweet water, and his love. We didn't know of germs and such, I guess.

13. Most of the water coming in from springs, branches and small creeks has long gone since removal of hardwood and replacement with thirsty yellow pine.

14. The crops were so good (if it rained) of purple hull peas (something I never got enough of). and all manner of truck crops. Wild berries and plums were and maybe still are so abundant and sweet.

COMING APRIL 2, 2022

If you were around in 1950 and were counted in the census that year, you will be able to look at that census data on April 2 this year. According to "The 72 Year Rule", census information is not released to the public until 72 years have passed since the data was collected. I'm looking forward to seeing my name in a census.

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Celebrating Black History Month -- by Don Mathis

As far back as ancient Africa, the griot (gree-oh) would 'sing' the stories of the tribe. These rhyming histories would praise the king or memorialize the accomplishments of the empire.

According to Paul Oliver in his book *Savannah Syncopators*, "Though [the griot] has to know many traditional songs without error, he must also have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene. His wit can be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable."

Griots may be remembered as oral historians but they may also use their verbal intellect for trivia, comedy, or political commentary. In short, these bards are poets in any sense of the word.

Such a history of oral story-telling continues into African-American culture.

A young slave girl, Phyllis Wheatley (stolen at age seven from Senegal or Gambia) learned to read and write better than many 18th century slave owners. At twelve she began studying Latin and English literature, especially the poetry of Alexander Pope. Her legacy is remembered today in many of her poems, in names of buildings at schools across the nation and other memorials.

African American poetry goes beyond the legacy of slavery. Langston Hughes writes of ancient rivers in his first published poem – the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, the Mississippi. He was an important member of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, offering philosophical guidance to cultural pride and creating hundreds of poems, plays, and stories.

Modern poets, such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou speak of today's African American experience. Other poets paint with words a broader picture of the human experience. All are to be realized as part of the American experience. And we celebrate them all during February, Black History Month.



Acrostic Birthday Charlie -- by Don Mathis

Cheers to Charlie on his 29th birthday!
Here's to happiness to come your way,
And hopes for health to always stay,
Radiance of friendship on each ray,
Layers of sweet dreams when down you lay.
Inside each endeavor, I want to relay
Everything that's good begins today!