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HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

September 2018

COMING EVENTS AT LOBRANO HOUSE

The monthly luncheon meeting will be held on Thursday, September 20, 2018, at noon at the Kate Lobrano House. The guest speakers will be Jim Keating who will speak on farming in Hancock County in the nineteenth century. **Reservations are required** and may be made by calling 467-4090. **Respectfully we must request that you please call by noon on Wednesday, September 19,** to make your reservation in order to help us plan seating which is limited to forty-eight people and to apprise us of the number of lunches to order. Lunch is \$12.00, payable at the door, and it is catered by Almost Home Catering, Michelle Nichols, chef.

ANNUAL CEMETERY TOUR

It's time to make final plans for the Hancock County Historical Society Cemetery Tour. The 24th Annual Cemetery Tour will be held on **Friday, October 26, 2018, from 5:00pm to 7:30pm** at Cedar Rest Cemetery in Bay Saint Louis. Needed are volunteers to prepare the cemetery, to portray citizens buried there, and to act as guides. To volunteer, please call 228-467-4090. All actors and guides must be members of the Historical Society. **Please note the change of date and time this year.**



The Honorable
Joseph V.
Bontemps,
who served as
Sheriff of
Hancock County
during the 1920s

BONTEMPS, SHERIFF OF HANCOCK COUNTY

By
Eddie Coleman

Joseph V. Bontemps (1878-1944) was born and reared in Bay St. Louis. He was employed by the L&N Railroad, serving as a member of the bridge force and at various times as timber inspector and as a stenog-

rapher. At one time Bontemps operated one of the most popular and well patronized grocery stores in Bay St. Louis. It was located at the corner of Main and Toulme streets.

However, Bontemps served as Sheriff of Hancock County from 1924 through 1927. It was during his time as sheriff that Bontemps showed his mettle as a man of strength and character. In one instance he aided in the arrest of one of the men who was involved in the killing of two federal agents in the Honey Island Swamp (*Reprinted in*

THE

HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Eddie Coleman, Editor
James Keating, PublisherPublished monthly by the
**HANCOCK COUNTY
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Marianne Plum, Webmaster**LOBRANO HOUSE
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“TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION.”

the following article). But the incident which brought him the most acclaim was protecting two prisoners. With the aid of a few local men, they were able to stand off a mob with the intention of lynching the two prisoners.

In the spring of 1927 after visiting friends in the Kiln one Sunday afternoon, Andy Becker and Jack Ladner were driving south on the Kiln road returning home to Bay St. Louis. Torrential rains the previous day had filled the roads in many places with standing water. Unexpectedly a car traveling north and carrying Will Coleman and Steven McCann approached them. It seemed as if the approaching car passed Becker and Ladner with scarcely space between the two cars and splashed the stagnant rainwater against Becker's car and covered him with water and oyster shell silt.

Becker became incensed at the apparent disrespectful manner of treatment and utter disrespect of road ethics. Ladner was driving the car at the time, and Becker instructed him to drive faster and catch up with the other vehicle. This accom-

plished, both cars came to a halt. As reported in the local paper a few days later, “Becker went up to the car and, it is said, grabbed one by the collar and remonstrated with the man at the wheel in a manner of no uncertain tone and words of special emphasis.”

The shooting followed and all seemed to have taken place so quickly and unexpectedly that Ladner, telling his story of the tragedy, cannot remember whether two or three shots were fired. Becker walked with the aid of his companion only a few steps to his car. He was placed inside the car and subsequently died.

It was not known at the time the names of the other two men. However, news of the tragedy was taken to town by a young boy driving a motorcycle. He had passed the escaping car on his way to Bay St. Louis and gave a full description of the two men in the car. Indignant and outraged citizens met with the authorities and at once started out in pursuit. There were many automobiles carrying volunteers to all parts of the west-



The Hancock County Courthouse

Notice the jail on the left. This is the one where the two prisoners were taken when they were arrested on April 17, 1927. This jail served until it was replaced by a WPA project in the mid-1930s.

ern and northern sections of the county. Because the tragedy had occurred on the Kiln road between Bayou Philip and the 14 mile post, the search began here, and the pursuers fanned out in all directions from this starting point.

Following leads and the description of the car given by the young man driving the motorcycle, the searchers arrived at a filling station at the intersection of Logtown and Pearlington roads. Here they were told that the car and drivers had stopped "for a supply of lubrication oil," and the detachment of volunteers traced the car to the Logtown home of Will Coleman at which time he was told he was wanted and asked to accompany the men. The posse found McCann at his home in Pearlington, and the two men were taken to the county jail in Bay St. Louis. Here, Sheriff Joseph Bontemps placed the two men under arrest for the murder of Andy Becker.

Unfortunately the arrest did not end the days activities at the jail and courthouse. As night drew on, the prisoners were threatened by a mob numbering twelve hundred men who had collected on the courthouse grounds. Sheriff Bontemps sent in a hurried call for troops. Meantime he and thirty-nine citizens, whom he had deputized, successfully stood off the mob with shotguns and pistols.

Because of the tension in Hancock County, the prisoners were moved to nearby Gulfport in Harrison County for their safety. For the same reason, the trial was held in Gulfport on June 18, 1927. Coleman was tried as the shooter, found guilty, and received a life sentence for murder. McCann was sentenced to seven years for manslaughter. However, because of regional and nationwide attention, the saga of Sheriff Bontemps



This is a photo of the medal awarded to Sheriff Bontemps received.

did not end here. A year later, he was presented a bronze medal of honor for his actions on the night of April 17, 1927. The medal was presented to him by a committee composed of the Governor of Florida, a former Governor of Georgia, a representative woman from Alabama, and two editors, one from New Orleans and the other from Dallas, Texas. This presentation and the reason for it also appeared in newspapers throughout the United States from Portland (Oregon) to Houston to Boston.

SOURCE:

Vertical file, Hancock County Historical Society
 "Sheriff Bontemps Holds Off Lynch Mob," *Sea Coast Echo*. 23 April 1927, p. 1.

Mystery of the Honey Island Swamp-Rat Killings

By
 Eddie Coleman
*(This article is a reprint from
 January 2013.)*

Mystery, intrigue, and legend have enshrouded one area of

the lowest part of the Pearl River basin for centuries—Honey Island Swamp. Located between the East and West Pearl Rivers, it has engendered tales of pirates, ne'er-do-wells, robbers, murderers, and other unsavory characters. While respectable, honest people have lived there through the years, it has also been a hideout for such local outlaws as James Copeland and his gang as well as numerous moonshiners and others. Technically within the boundaries of Louisiana, its location has enticed outlaws running from Mississippi authorities and criminals evading Louisiana lawmen.

One murder in particular in the Honey Island Swamp drew attention from federal as well as state and local authorities. On December 23, 1926, two U. S. Department of Agriculture entomologists ventured into the swamp for a hunting trip. They had been warned of the types of questionable characters who were inhabitants of the area, but they scoffed at the admonitions.

The men, William Mingee and John McLemore, crossed the Pearl River bridge south of Picayune and parked their truck a distance from the roadway on the Louisiana side of the river. Finding an abandoned shack, they began unloading their truck, making several treks between it and their discovered shelter. Suddenly, a shot rang out, dropping McLemore to the soggy ground with a fatal head wound.

Mingee had been assembling his gun at the truck and upon hearing the shotgun blast raced toward his companion. Another shot rang out sending buckshot into the middle of Mingee's chest and propelling his lifeless body to the dank earth. A few minutes later a raggedly dressed, "swarthy

-hued" denizen of the swamp stole the truck and raced away as if Satan himself were in pursuit.

Overdue from their hunting trip, the bodies of the two men were found two days later by a search party led by F. A. Wright, the head of the Federal Agricultural Bureau at Bay St. Louis who was also the supervisor of the murdered men. The scene discovered by the searchers was horrific, the buckshot having wrought a ghastly impression on the two men. In addition Minge's heavy coat had been stolen as well as the high topped boots he was wearing as he left Picayune. Missing from McLemore were an automatic pistol and gold watch.

In addition to the bodies, other evidence included tire tracks which led to the Pearl River bridge and then turned eastward, pointing out the murderer had crossed into Hancock County. Looking further, Wright discovered and isolated the footprints of the culprit which led to a large oak tree behind which he found two spent .12-gauge shotgun shells.

When word of the murders reached Picayune, the townspeople were up in arms and were soon joined by local farmers with whom Minge and McLemore had worked to rid local crops of the sweet potato weevil. Immediately the group suspected a Honey Island inhabitant by the name of Dock Jackson.

"Shooting a man from behind a tree is just like Dock," yelled one excited citizen. "Let's find him and lynch him!"

Dock Jackson was an inhabitant of Honey Island Swamp with a notorious reputation. People of all races gave him a wide berth because his reputation as a heartless scoundrel was well-known. Stories of his seeking revenge on those who crossed him as well as their families were legendary, and locals didn't want to do anything to bring Jack-

son's wrath upon themselves or their families. Stories of his slaughtering livestock, burning homes, torturing family members, and other atrocities were rampant.

Three reports of Jackson's vengeance bear repeating. Once after his visiting a widow named Mrs. Emmaline Pierson, her body was found in her home. Jackson's explanation was that a pistol had fallen from a table sending a .44 caliber bullet through her heart.

Another is that a man named Henry Bennett had been killed mysteriously by a shotgun blast as he drove along a lonely Pearl River road. Supposedly Dock Jackson had been seen in the area of the mysterious death a few minutes earlier.

A third report concerns a black man with whom Jackson had had "words" who was found shortly thereafter with a lethal shotgun wound to the head.

For these and other atrocities, Jackson was wanted by the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff. However, once Jackson made it to Honey Island Swamp, he faded into the surroundings as did the alligators, snakes, and his fellow denizens of the marsh.

Because the murderer fled into Hancock County, its sheriff, Joe Bontemps, formed a posse to search the swamp for Jackson and clues. His hunt ranged from the northern reaches of the swamp southward to Lake Borgne and the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, he had little success. In conjunction with Bontemps' search, the FBI sent Agents E. L. Osborn and E. P. Amis to aid local authorities because McLemore and Minge were federal employees.

With this additional help the search became more widespread in an attempt to find the truck in the hope that the culprit's fingerprints might be located. Word came that the truck had been found along the

roadside near Hattiesburg, MS about seventy miles or so north of Picayune by Officer J. E. Wassengale.

The two federal agents, Osborn and Amis, went to Hattiesburg to retrieve the pick up, dust it for fingerprints, and question Officer Wassengale, who had been stopped by the driver of the truck earlier to ask for directions. Later the officer found the vehicle abandoned along the road. When questioned by the federal agents, he described the driver as "[having] long black hair and [wearing] a mackinaw and knee-high boots." In addition to this description the agents also learned that a pistol had been found hidden in a burlap bag in the bed of the pickup. It proved to be the one stolen from McLemore.

Driving the truck southward from Hattiesburg to Picayune, Osborn and Amis questioned people along the roadway with the goal of finding someone who had seen the long-haired driver. They were not successful until they reached McNeil, a small community north of Picayune. Here they questioned the proprietor of a gas station who remembered seeing such a man driving a truck. His description matched that of Dock Jackson. When news of this discovery reached Picayune, citizens talked of having a "necktie party" with Jackson as the main attraction.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Bontemps had continued his investigation and learned from E. R. Roberts, proprietor of the Southern Hotel in Picayune, that he had found several .12-gauge shotgun shells left by a guest in one of his rooms. Mr. Roberts turned this evidence over to the sheriff and the federal agents.

Learning that a man named Jesse Favre had signed the register, Sheriff Bontemps ordered Deputy Albert Smith to organize a posse to search Honey Island Swamp. The search proved fruitful. Local resi-

dents were quite helpful in giving authorities directions to Favre's cabin, nestled in the deep recesses of the swamp. Caught unawares, Favre was quickly handcuffed, and a search of the cabin uncovered a gold Elgin watch, a gold fob, and a fountain pen hidden in a pot on the stove. The watch had the name "William M. Mingee" engraved on the back, and the fob and pen were also identified as having belonged to Mingee.

Deputy Smith snarled, "Well, Favre, looks like we've got you dead to rights. But why did you have to kill them?"

Growling like a caged animal, Favre snapped, "I didn't kill 'em—see! Dock Jackson gave me this stuff." Upon further questioning, the authorities learned that Jackson had given Favre the stolen goods to hide the truck as he subsequently did by driving and abandoning it in the Hattiesburg area.

The question arises, "Did the description of the driver with 'long black hair' fit both Jackson and Favre?" Apparently it fit closely enough to rouse the citizens of Picayune to want to lynch either or both men.

Knowing the attitude of the citizenry, Deputy Smith wanted to get his prisoner in lock up as soon as possible, so he and the other members of the posse loaded him into a waiting police car. Before they could return to the Hancock County jail, Smith received a message from the sheriff that a mob of about one hundred Picayune citizens were on their way to lynch Favre.

Fortunately a New Orleans bound train sounded its whistle, and the quick thinking Smith flagged it down. He boarded with Favre manacled to his wrist, and within an hour Favre was safely ensconced behind bars at New Orleans Police Headquarters.

Thus, Favre was indicted and brought to trial in February 1927. Found guilty of the murder of McLemore, he was given a life sentence. He was not tried for the murder of Mingee.

Nonetheless the saga does not end here. After his conviction Favre admitted that he had committed the murders in conjunction with Jackson. Hence Jackson was arrested at Nicholson and taken to the Pearl River County jail in Poplarville. When word reached Picayune of Jackson's capture and confinement, a mob of about one hundred men, infuriated at Favre's not being lynched, stormed the jail. Using acetylene torches to burn through the bars, they took Jackson prisoner.

A caravan of about twenty-five cars drove southward toward Honey Island Swamp and Pearl River with the taunting intent to lynch Jackson at the bridge where the murders had taken place.

However, the mob was to be disappointed. Along the way the riotous caravan was stopped at the

Bogue Chitto Creek bridge by a local farmer who informed them that authorities were in close pursuit. Not to be dissuaded from their mission, one of the mobsters yelled, "Let's do it here. Right from the Bogue Chitto Creek Bridge."

Losing all dignity, Jackson had to be dragged and thrust upon the banister of the bridge. With the rope secured around his neck and taunts of "Jump!" ringing in his ears, the hysterical prisoner was pushed from the railing.

Too late Sheriff Bontemps and his deputies arrived upon the scene to find only the body of Jackson hanging from an improvised gallows with none of the hangmen in sight. Such was the inglorious end of the infamous Dock Jackson of Honey Island Swamp. In effect, "the devil [got] his due."

SOURCE:

Mefford, Arthur. "Mystery of the Honey Island Swamp-Rat Killings." *Sunday Mirror*, 24 Jan. 1943.



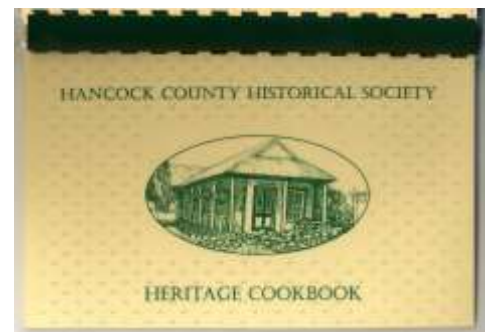
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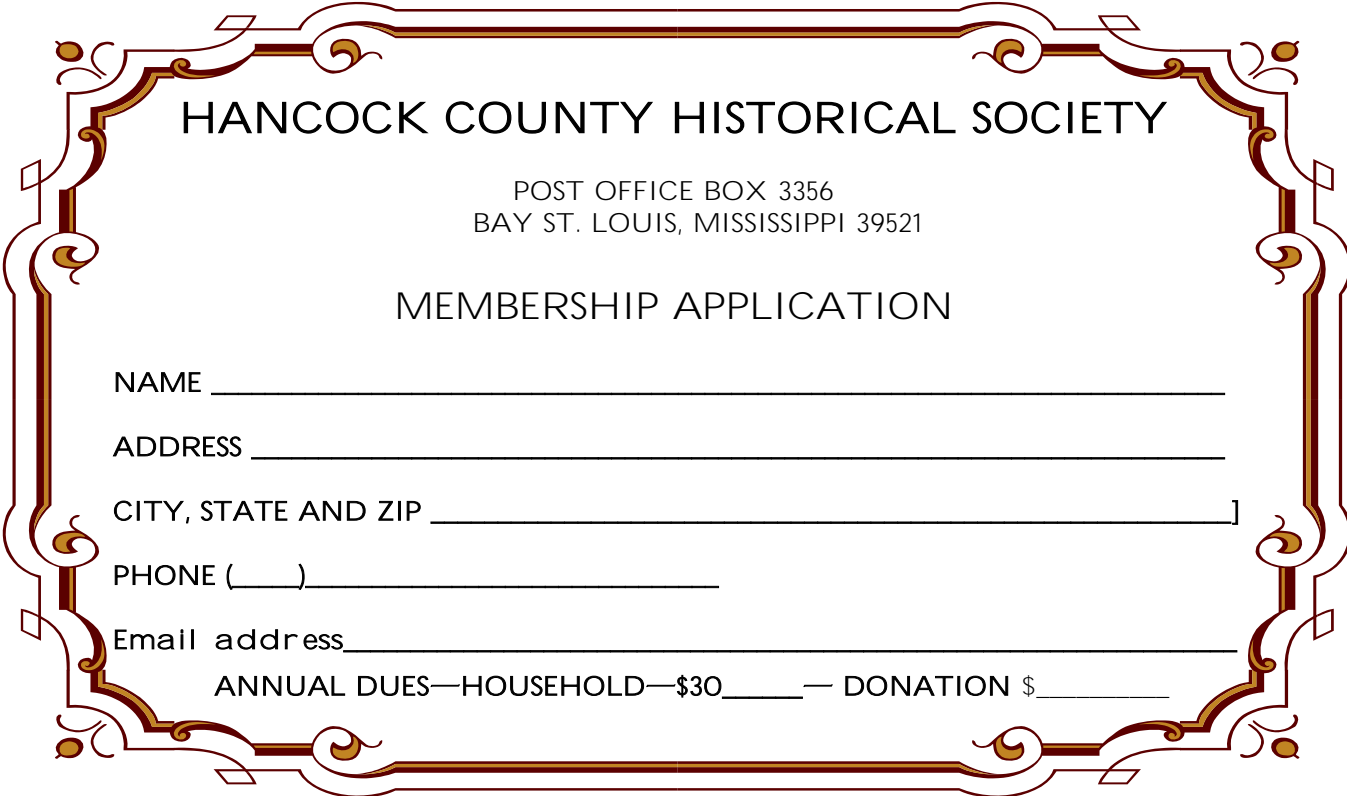
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