

MURDER IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA: *Community, Culture, & Craft in 1930s
Middle Tennessee*

By

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother, Melinda Bryson Simmons, who went back to school and obtained her bachelor's degree as a working mother with me on her lap. Mrs. Simmons also holds a Master of Education from Middle Tennessee State University (where she minored in History) and her lifelong dedication to public education is foremost among the reasons I am still pursuing mine.

Also, to my grandmother, Mallie Elkins Bryson, also known as Judy (1918-2018), not only the matriarch of my family, but a transformational figure in so many ways. Like many young women born in the early twentieth century, my late grandmother's influential spirit was forged in very tough early years. As I type these sentences, the watchful green eyes that I imagine over my shoulder belong to her. As always, I hope she approves.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I enrolled in the History of Southeastern Indians independent research course with Dr. Riley Sousa at MTSU in late 2019, I was attempting to do two things. First, continue to shore up my history credits with an eye toward one day applying to a graduate program. Second, fulfill a twenty-plus year itch that began when I had to drop that very course as an undergraduate because of a scheduling conflict during my last year at MTSU. Now, as a non-traditional student (as we are referenced) returning to academia after spending most of my adult life in a different field, it was life-re-affirming feeling to discover I still had that history itch. It was beginner's luck on my part that Dr. Riley Sousa happened to be the Indigenous Studies historian at MTSU and happened to be taking over the MA History graduate program at MTSU the following year. I owe Dr. Riley Sousa a tremendous debt for not only being a wonderful teacher and advisor to me, but for being an advocate who believed that I belonged in a graduate program. When I applied in March of 2020, I was still uncertain and weighing career, work, and other obligations vs. returning to graduate school. Like many others, a lot of my options were taken away in the Spring of 2020 with the arrival of the pandemic. Future historians will be better suited to put the past few years in context, but for those of us living through this, adaptation has been essential. I do not know what graduate school would have been like in a non-pandemic setting, as I have nothing as a comparison. However, I do know that all of us that were lucky enough to have Dr. Riley Sousa as our advisor were granted empathy in spades from a professor that truly puts her students first—every single time.

If you are going to enter a graduate History program to study the region and community you were born into—it certainly helps to have a fellow native of your hometown on your thesis committee. Or, put another way, when their people know your people. Dr. Carroll West, like myself, is from Cannon County but moved away, albeit without severing his ties with the community. It can be easier to write about your home with some distance for perspective while remaining a stone's throw away. As a lifelong student of Tennessee History, it was once again beginner's luck that I was able to study under the Tennessee State Historian while in the MTSU graduate program. Dr. West has been an inspirational teacher who also puts his students first every time. Dr. West has forgotten more about United States Southern History than I have had time to learn in these two eventful years of graduate school. However, I am greatly indebted for his guidance and for continually pointing me in the right direction as I try and absorb as much as I can, so that I can tell my story more fully and accurately.

ABSTRACT

My research project is on its face a micro history of a rural murder trial in 1930s' Southern Appalachia. Clarence Allen traveled to Cannon County, Tennessee in the summer of 1934 to buy handcrafted baskets for resale back in Indiana. Allen went missing and three years passed before two boys digging for mayapple root on a hillside uncovered his skull and parts of his skeleton. Two local men well known to law enforcement, Raymond Elkins and Martin Tucker, were arrested and charged with murder—both eventually being cleared. My research is ongoing, but thus far has yielded useful contributions to existing Southern cultural historiographies, though questions remain to be answered. This study adds to the existing body of research that deals with American cultural history, regarding the pulp fiction magazines of the 1920s and 1930s and the role they played in perpetuating stereotypes, in addition to the role true crime played in attempts at social control. This work also adds to the body of research regarding the Southern craft revival and the transition of material culture of Southern Appalachia from a utilitarian product into one for looks and the role selling those crafts for money played into the larger rural Southern society. Lastly, my research seeks to add to the body of work addressing the persistence of violence in the rural South. There are few white European settlers in what is now Cannon County in the 1830s. The level of violence that preceded these settlements during the previous century was long and brutal, especially during the Cherokee American War. The white settlers who removed and replaced the Indigenous Tribes of the region were followed by a generation that fought a bloody (if short) Civil War. Tennessee looms large in scale regarding her massive battlefields and tragic loss of life.

Smaller, rural, and more mountainous spaces like Cannon County lacked the wide-open terrain and logistical importance that made the Battle of Stones River next door in Rutherford County possible—yet the legacy of Bushwhacker violence in those regions left its mark. The characters in this story are the generation that followed and the continued rural violence of The Great Depression, especially in the Jim Crow South, points to an unbroken chain of violence. My research is mostly a story about class in Southern Appalachia, and these three characters would have no voice in history were it not for the alleged crime. However, the primary sources continue to lead to a more nuanced understanding of communities in the 1930s on the edge of rural Southern Appalachia.

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INTRODUCTION

Does murder run in our blood? I am exploring a 1930's murder trial in rural, middle Tennessee. Clarence Allen, an Indiana resident at the time, who traveled to Woodbury, Tennessee in 1934 in search of homemade baskets and furniture for resale went missing. Allen was last seen with two local men, Raymond Elkins, and Martin Tucker, who had been drinking heavily for several days while riding the roads of Cannon County from Short Mountain to Murfreesboro. Three years later two boys digging on a hillside for mayapple root uncovered a human skull, and the small Southern hamlet of Woodbury was sent into a tailspin—or was it? Local media (*Cannon County Courier*) seemed to imply this type of violence was an outlier in this otherwise orderly, Christian society. However, this was not the only murder story in the newspaper at that time and local chancery court records point to a disordered and often violent society. The search for the skull's identity, the alleged murder, trial, and the whitewashing by the accuseds' families and a small town are the jumping off point to study multiple facets of early twentieth-century rural Tennessee life and culture.

Raymond Elkins and Martin Tucker were the last two witnesses to see Clarence Allen alive. Initially both were charged with first degree murder, but Tucker surprisingly turned state's witness against Elkins the day before the trial. Elkins was quickly charged and convicted of first-degree murder by a jury of his peers, but his conviction was later overturned by the Tennessee State Supreme Court for lack of evidence and the questionable motives of the lone eyewitness. Pulp fiction magazines that ran multiple

versions of the story were aimed at working-class immigrants in cities North of the Mason Dixon Line pulling at interesting threads about class in 1930's America. The two witnesses in Allen's disappearance had very divergent stories of what happened the day Allen went missing in Tennessee in June of 1934. A significant portion of a generation of Cannon Countians choose not to remember, and a town eventually forgot. Elkins' descendants would have likely taken the story to their grave were it not for a seventy-five-year-old pulp fiction magazine that made its way to one of his grandchildren.

The central question I am seeking to answer is how the legacy of three major factors, two of them structural, and one an event, in the Middle Tennessee region affected its culture and impacted the level of violence. It is also important to note that while this is a micro-history of one region, there are broader themes that can be extrapolated to similar areas of Southern Appalachia during the 1930s. However, this is a story about rural Middle Tennessee and many of the findings I can only definitively attribute to this place with the time and resources available to me in this study.

Many of these counties were formed roughly one-hundred years prior to the alleged murder of Allen. Violent crime, some of it against the Cherokee even genocidal in nature, preceded the settlement of all these communities. The great-grandparents of the three men in my story were the generation that lived through that era. I believe the roots to be primarily three-pronged. The thrice-fold impact of settler colonialism against the native population, the institution of race-based chattel slavery that followed, *and* the Civil War fought over that practice, left the region with a legacy of elevated levels of violence. That violence, much of it of the Bushwhacker variety in places like Cannon County, continued through the era of Jim Crow and The Great Depression. Race is the

unavoidable link that binds these three factors together. The grandparents of the three men were of the generation that fought that bloody “civil” war. Some of the Civil War’s deadliest days occurred in Middle Tennessee and few families were spared from being affected.

Nationally, the 1930s are part of the interwar years between the first and second World Wars. Allen, the oldest of the three men, was a veteran of World War I. The first World War was the beginning of reforming a “national identity” for many Americans. Southerners and Northerners, many of whose father’s fired upon one another during the Civil War, were in the trenches of Europe fighting together. Though segregation was still overwhelmingly enforced in the United States armed forces, Southerners were now fighting with (though not necessarily alongside) Black Americans versus a common enemy. Still, Tennessee did not live up to its “volunteer” nickname when it came to the first World War.

Tennessee, like much of the reconstructed South, might not have felt the same call of duty for the first major international war in the post-Civil War era. That changed during the second World War, which was right around the corner in the mid-to-late 1930s and began the process of reconnecting much of the rural South back into the fabric of the national identity. The backroads that these three men drunkenly cruised for three days together would be inundated with Army tanks and thousands of soldiers training for fighting in the forests of Germany by the turn of the decade. However, in 1934 rural Middle Tennessee, this was a region very much in transition and still reeling from the devastating effects The Great Depression had on rural Southern communities like Cannon County.

The Memphis to Bristol Highway had been one of the first things reconnecting sparse rural communities like Woodbury in Tennessee together again. This was also reconnecting them to the broader national networks of roads and the expanding number of automobiles for commerce and communication—the broadband internet of the 1930s. The seeds of reconnection were just beginning to sprout in rural Southern communities outside its urban centers and that brought in new elements—some of them criminal. The Memphis to Bristol Highway brought desperately needed economic opportunities, but it also exposed them to an outside world that did not always have their best interest at heart.

There is an extensive historiography that seeks to identify the roots of Southern violence and why it has remained higher than the rest of North America (in addition to portions of the Southwest). Much of the scholarship has focused on the legacy of slavery and its peculiar brutality and the trauma that it has left on Southern society. The vulgar institution of slavery unquestionably brutalized and traumatized Black society and its descendants in both measurable and unmeasurable ways, and I would argue it left a stain on the souls and psyche of its perpetrators as well. Another large body of historiography has been done on the impact of Scots Irish settlers into the region and their tendency toward violence. The culture of honor that comes from Scots Irish heritage and theories that men had increased levels of cortisol in their blood have been rightfully dismissed by other scholars. However, the trope seems to remain in the broader culture.

Elkins' family lineage does contain plenty elements of Scots Irish, but he had much more English ancestry than anything else. Furthermore, Elkins had as much German ancestry as Scots Irish, and the German ancestry in the American Southeast is

another population with a large gap in the scholarship. While the German descendants settling the frontier in the Southwest territory may have had an outsized influence on farming and other overlooked areas of culture (like basketmaking), beginning with the era of World War I, they would begin to assimilate in ways that suppressed or hid their culture. Two World Wars with Germany as an adversary would cement German descendants' full assimilation into the broader white Southern cultural identity.

I would seek to add to the body of work that disproves the “cultural” angle for explanations of violence. I would also seek to add to the body of work that analyzes the impact of slavery and Jim Crow in the Southern Appalachian Diaspora. However, though they still maintained a white supremacist society, slavery was not as fundamental to the development of much of the mountainous regions of middle and eastern Tennessee that belong to the Southern Appalachian region. Settler colonialism, nonetheless, looms large over the settlement of these territories. The hot Cherokee-American Wars in the late 1800s in Middle Tennessee may have an outsized impact on the culture of violence that developed in its wake. Tennessee, along with Kentucky and Ohio, were the first trans-Appalachian states admitted to the Union from the Southwest Territory and in many the poster children for settler colonialism.

The Tennessee State Archives has provided me with approximately 350 pages of original court documents covering the entire trial history of Raymond Elkins. Jim Cummings (who would later become Speaker of the House for Tennessee) successfully argued Elkins' case all the way to the Tennessee State Supreme Court, thus ensuring the case was preserved. The Tennessee State Archives also was able to provide many years

of local chancery court records in Cannon County (some years were unavailable due to a fire that destroyed the Cannon County Courthouse in 1934). The testimony of witnesses has provided me with a wealth of information of the lives of Cannon County residents in the mid 1930s. One of the local chancery court records that the TSLA eventually found was Tucker's trial after Elkins' exoneration.

Tucker, the only witness that was used by the state to charge Elkins, was himself the target of prosecutors after Elkins gained his freedom. Tucker was then charged, tried, and found innocent for many of the same reasons Elkins had been released. The state of Tennessee may have had good reason to believe they had been had by Tucker, but the same lack of evidence convinced local jurors that a conviction would never hold. The rich primary source information available in the court documents are invaluable to this project. Each re-examination of the testimony in this trial drops previously overlooked breadcrumbs that lead down new trails. Many of these bore fruit and opened new windows into the world of 1930s rural Southern Appalachia. I know I have not exhausted them all but hope I have done them justice with the time and resources at my disposal.

The other primary sources that have been invaluable to this project are the abundance of media accounts of the trial. The sensationalism of the missing man, the skull, the hunt for his identity, and then the charges clearly made for an engaging story for readers. The *Cannon Courier* is available on microfilm at Middle Tennessee State University's Phillips Library, and the weekly paper gave me new details and context to how the trial was covered locally. The Associated Press ran multiple stories in statewide

newspapers and even out of state. In Ohio, where Tucker had moved after Allen's disappearance, and in Indiana where Allen had lived prior to his last travels.

In addition to the vast amount of media on the event, I am using Ancestry.com to search US Census Bureau, draft registration, marriage licenses, births, and other records to piece together the background of these three men linked forever in this story. I have also connected with Allen's great-granddaughter there, who knew some of the story. However, Allen's last wife, his widow Hazel Allen remains a mystery regarding this story.

Lastly, the initial source of information that began this quest, were the pulp fictionalized accounts of the murder and trial in *American Detective* and *Startling Detective* in the 1930s. While these stories initially threw me off the path with their incorrect names and details of the incident (some on purpose), they have proved to be very helpful in revealing attitudes in the urban societies that purchased these magazines. True Crime seemed to be used as an element of social control in the 1930s, and it is worth exploring if that is still true. True Crime television remains popular with a certain demographic, but the rise of true crime "who done it" podcast that is popular with a new generation shows the genre's lasting power.

My research has been primarily focused on United States Southeastern studies and my thesis project falls into that category as well. This project focuses mainly on the rural Tennessee Southern Appalachian community of Cannon County and the legal goings-on in its county seat in Woodbury. I am considering this community as one that

could reveal broader trends that could be applied to other similar societies. However, I am also exploring the larger Southern Appalachian Diaspora region. Elkins and Tucker were fifth generation Cannon Countians with ancestral roots in Virginia and North Carolina. Allen was born in Arkansas, but his mother and grandparents were from North Carolina. He, too, was a child of the same Southern Appalachian Diaspora region. Allen's records in the US Census indicate he was somewhat of a drifter, and he also served in World War I. Tucker, had moved to Akron, Ohio for work (as did many Southerners) after Allen's disappearance.

Elkins, meanwhile, had rarely left his native Cannon County. He appears for the first time on a US Census as a toddler in Texas, where his family had moved briefly to try farming, before returning to Tennessee. Fittingly, Elkins also flees to Texas when charged with assault with intent to murder a police officer in 1936. This detail comes out in the trial when the prosecution cross-examines Elkins, suggesting a family connection there. Otherwise, Elkins only vacates Woodbury for the Nashville State Penitentiary for the assault and murder charges—both in 1936 and 1938. Unlike Allen, who seemed to drift, or Tucker, who resettled with other Southerners in the industrialized Midwest, Elkins displayed a rootedness that was interrupted but never severed. Elkins was either fleeing the law or being punished by it when he was removed from his home. This Southerner never left the region of his own volition.

ONE

THE MYSTERY OF THE TALKING SKULL: The State of Tennessee***VS. Raymond Elkins***

On the summer morning of June 22, 1934, in the rural hamlet of Woodbury, Tennessee, the locals in town would have been going about the business of getting their day started. They might have been a maid cleaning a room and preparing for new visitors at the Gribble Hotel, or a young man in the Yellow Jacket Saloon, sweeping out the dust and empty Gerst bottles from last night's revelers. Whatever their morning goings-on, those waiting for news of the day would have been unfolding their copy of the weekly *Cannon Courier* newspaper. Among the articles on the front page that day were local death notices, visiting preachers, show listings for the Dixie Theater in the neighboring town of McMinnville, as well as praise for their recent Minstrel parade, farm debt refinancing reports, boys 4-H camp, and the local baseball team losing (another one). There was another brief note that morning on the front page:

CLARENCE ALLEN MISSING 2 WEEKS – Strange Disappearance of Man Causes Officers to Investigate – It was reported that Mr. Allen was last seen June 7 by Raymond Elkins and Martin Tucker on the Short Mountain road... It is reported that Allen was drinking when last seen.¹

Most of the news that week in Woodbury gave the appearance of a very orderly society. Farm news, a touch of politics, baseball scores, and picnic announcements paint a very stable portrait of this rural Middle Tennessee town. That which is out of the ordinary is

¹ *Cannon Courier*, June 22, 1934.

reported to also involve drinking according to the one ominous note at the end of the article that June morning. Was it indeed “strange” for there to have been foul play in this scenic small Southern town surrounded by rolling hills? Prohibition had ended a few years before, so was the mention of Allen’s drinking significant to the people who lived in this community thick with Scots Irish heritage? Is it a suggestion of disorder that something other than water flowed freely out of these hills where the Stones River begins?

Geology informs us that millions of years ago underneath the Earth’s surface a great subterranean pressure pushed up massive flinty limestone deposits in the center of Middle Tennessee. Over time, the massive mountain of soft limestone, or the Nashville Dome, formed from billions of sea fossils, eroded away until it made a vast crater known as the Great Basin. On the outskirts of this crater, where gigantic chunks of soft limestone chert were ripped apart as the center of the basin collapsed inward toward its center in present day Murfreesboro, lies a circular highland region known as the Dividing Ridge.² This fractured landscape created a vast network of caves, hollows, and jagged rocky outcroppings littered with tick-infested cedars that cling to tiny patches of shallow soil. Here it is the rattlesnake and the catamount who feel most at home.

The entire boundary of Cannon County lies within the southeastern edge of this circle, save for a small portion of the edge of the Cumberland Plateau on the county’s eastern side and the river bottom that begins the Great Basin on the county’s opposite western side. There are hollows in this county where the sun does not rise till late in the morning when it is high overhead, yet soon sinks early in the evening in the shadows of

² Robert L. Mason, *History of Cannon County, Tennessee* (Murfreesboro: Lancer Printing, 1984), 4.

these steep hills. Maybe these shadows are why secrets are so easy to keep here. There is a tension assigned to this place. Not so much give and take, but a push and pull. Ripped apart inside, clinging to the edge of the plateau, least one tumble down into these tangled sharp and steep predator-infested hollows.

A society arose here in this county tilted and leaning fearfully into the abyss, clinging to their spirituality as their ancestors had. A great mixing of saltwater immigrants' descendants managed to survive amid war, revolution, hunger, and disease and the eventual trek over mountains and up rivers into the interior of contested Indigenous Tribal Territory.³ Colonial settlers did not take these lands peacefully, and thus they were not awarded peace of mind upon their settling here. Maybe that that is why many are born wanting to leave yet die wanting to return. Maybe that is why so many are still frozen in the superstitions their ancestors found upon their arrival in these hills, where the streams only flow out of this county.

The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. So now you *are* cursed from the earth, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.⁴

The American South was, and is, more violent than the rest of the United States.⁵ A considerable amount of ink has been put to paper for the express purpose of explaining the

³ I use the term "saltwater immigrants" to describe those of European descent who traversed the Atlantic Ocean to immigrate to North America.

⁴ Genesis, 4: 8-11.

⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "2017 Crime in the United States," <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/tables/table-4/table-4.xls#overview> : Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Homicide Mortality by State," https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/homicide_mortality/homicide.htm

South's historical penchant for violence.⁶ As previously mentioned, foremost among them were the towering trio of factors: the legacies settler colonialism, racial-based chattel slavery, and the Civil War. In a region so steeped in violence and the culture of storytelling, it reasons that a particular brand of folk tale might also arise from the peculiar brew that is the American South. It is true there was, and remains, a morbid curiosity about murder that exists in the broader American culture as well. However, for some, twentieth-century literature and Hollywood-manufactured movies might have etched in stone a view of the South that is frozen in mint juleps and "moonlight and magnolias." Still, later generations have absorbed cultural representations spanning decades of hillbillies among the Hills of Beverly, *Dukes of Hazzard* County, and a long list of similar character archetypes and tropes that are more difficult to get into than an orange Dodge charger with welded doors whilst the sheriff is in hot pursuit. Tennessee is well known as a state with three distinct regions all under one jurisdiction. Elements of all these tropes can be found in Tennessee, from communities targeted as hillbillies to large crumbling mansions of former enslavers. Tennessee's culture was just as varied as the state's flora, from old hickory to magnolia.

There is another South that has existed in the collective consciousness, one as elusive as foxtail ghosts: The Southern Gothic. This version of the South is evoked in the goosebump-lyrics and aching minor chords of a Hank Williams Sr. song or the glaring figures in a Wes Freed painting. "Southern Gothic" is a literary class all its own when it comes to the genre of ghastly storytelling. This is a South with an inverted poetry. No, this is

⁶ Jeffrey S. Adler, "Murder, North and South: Violence in Early-Twentieth-Century Chicago and New Orleans." *The Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 2 (2008): 297-324. Accessed April 29, 2021. doi:10.2307/27650144.

not the South of moonlight and magnolias, but the South of whippoorwills and willows. Was this a mythologized version sold to outsiders? Was it a cultural misrepresentation meant to exploit the region? Or was it a counter narrative that insisted on telling its own story, a counterweight to the orderly and idyllic version on the local newspaper's front pages in the 1930s throughout the South's small communities?

Three summers had passed since that June 22, 1934, mention in the local newspapers of the missing would-be-purchaser of homemade baskets who disappeared while visiting Woodbury. The paper ran several more mentions of the ongoing mystery and then the story faded from the news as time passed by. However, on Friday, May 21, 1937, when the locals once again opened their copy of the *Cannon Courier*, there was freshly uncovered news:

GRUESOME FIND NEAR WOODBURY BELIEVED SKELETON OF INDIANA MAN WHO VANISHED WHILE HERE THREE YEARS AGO -- A complete skeleton of a human being was discovered Tuesday near Woodbury by two boys while in the woods digging may apple roots... The belief is quite general here that the skeleton is that of Clarence Allen, of Indiana, who disappeared mysteriously here in 1934, while in this community to buy a truckload of baskets ... Three persons were under suspicion in connection with Allen's disappearance here three years ago.⁷

The American South had its fair share of secrets and a healthy portion of religious fervor thanks to many Great Awakenings. In this environment, it seems to reason that the sin of mankind could be an object of fascination, especially if that sin was someone else's. No simple act of revelry, murder was a crime against humanity and the accused's trial was by nature a public display. However, what is public can become a spectacle when consumed as a

⁷ *Cannon Courier*, May 21, 1937.

form of pure entertainment. The following week, the *Cannon Courier* informed the local citizenry that there had been no break in the case:

MYSTERY ABOUT GRUESOME FIND YET UNSOLVED – Nothing has developed thus far that would clarify the mystery surrounding the complete skeleton of a man found near Woodbury on Tuesday of last week ... The opinion still prevails that the bones are the remains of Clarence Allen, the Indiana man who disappeared here about three years ago, but identification is considered as impossible in the absence of Mrs. Allen, wife of the man long missing, and the sheriff's office reports that all efforts to locate her have been futile.⁸

The image of violence, “compels the attention of anyone interested in studying the South,” argues historian South Sheldon Hackney.⁹ Hackney's research is foundational to understanding some of the unique factors that cause so many Southerners to resort to violence. Hackney writes that, “In various guises, the image of the violent South confronts the historian at every turn.”¹⁰

Roger Lane, writing on the subject of homicide in America from a historian's perspective, compared the 1933 homicide rate of 9.3 per 100,000 annually to the seemingly unchanged 1993 rate of 9.5 per 100,000. However, as Randolph Roth points out, in the post-Reconstruction years and the collapse of some of the “political stability that had kept homicide rates in check ... by the late 1920s and early 1930s homicide rates had reached 15 to 25 per 100,000 [in Southern] border states.”¹¹ This is the environment Tennessee is a part of in the 1930s. While there was fluctuation over the years, Lane's work reveals that “many of the

⁸ *Cannon Courier*, May 28, 1937.

⁹ Sheldon Hackney, "Southern Violence," *The American Historical Review* 74, no. 3 (1969), 906.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 420.

patterns... have been with us, with some variations” since the days of Medieval England.

Lane goes on to explain that “Most homicides involved males, who accounted for more than 90 percent of the killers and 80 percent of the victims.”¹²

Lane is even more relevant to the story here though where he introduces the other elements of violence, such as familiarity of killers and victims with one another. Lane also reveals two very important additives to the concoction, explaining that “the event was most likely to occur in the warm months, in the twilight or evening hours of the traditional day off, which in those days was Sunday, when there was time, among other things, to drink.”¹³ Those were the ingredients: men who knew each other with time on their hands to drink. In Cannon County in 1934 (alcoholic) drink was rather easy to come by and many men had idle hands. As the old adage holds, the Devil is always hiring. After three weeks of no real breakthrough or new information in the ongoing effort to positively identify the skeletal remains locked up in the Cannon County courthouse, on June 18, 1937, the *Cannon Courier* announced the news that would drastically change several lives:

Raymond Elkins, Martin Tucker Indicted On First Degree Murder Charge In Allen Skeleton Case—Developments in the mystery surround the finding of a human skeleton near Woodbury May 18 came thick and fast following the arrival last Thursday of Mrs. Clarence Allen ... who has definitely identified the remains as that of her husband. Before midnight of the day of her arrival three men had been arrested and jailed in connection with the case ... Meantime the present circuit court grand jury indicted two of the men in custody, Raymond Elkins and Martin Tucker on first degree murder charge in connection with the case.¹⁴

¹² Roger Lane, "Murder in America: A Historian's Perspective." *Crime and Justice* 25 (1999): 191-224. Accessed May 2, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1147610>. 194-195.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Cannon Courier*, June 18, 1937.

The random disappearance of Allen that had faded from the headlines three years before became a weekly new bold-font headline for readers of the *Cannon Courier*. Various newspapers around Tennessee also picked up the story and ran abbreviated pieces on it, all of which turned the trial into a bit of a spectacle. According to the *Cannon Courier*, on June 18, 1937, a packed house heard the lethal accusations:

Martin Tucker Denies Murder Charge In Clarence Allen Skeleton Case; Swears Raymond Elkins Did Killing With Pistol—Elkins Testifies He Knew Nothing About Killing, That Allen “Got Too Far Along” Drinking And Was Left By Short Mountain Road—Trial DRAWS LARGEST CROWD EVER SEEN AT COURTHOUSE IN WOODBURY—Tucker, testified that Elkins fired upon Allen four times with a pistol in a drunken brawl and left his body at the scene of the killing ... Tucker gave his reason for not disclosing the killing, that Elkins had threatened to kill him if he divulged the slaying ... Elkins made no effort to accuse anyone else of the slaying of Allen.¹⁵

In an interview some seventy-five years later, Elkins’ eldest child, Mallie Lynette, nine years old at the time of the 1937 trial, recalled, “I remember talking to Daddy through the bars outside the jail window, there being a lot of people there, and some of the adults were really nice to us. Someone bought all of us kids ice cream one day.”¹⁶ While young Mallie Lynette did not understand exactly what was taking place with her father at the time, a jury of his peers had made up their minds rather quickly. The *Cannon Courier* on July 23, 1937, announced to everyone in the county what Elkins’ five children had yet to grasp:

¹⁵ *Cannon Courier*, July 16, 1937.

¹⁶ Mallie Lynette (Elkins) Bryson, Interview by author, Woodbury, Tennessee, approximately 2014.

Elkins Gets 35 Years In Skeleton Case Trial; Tucker Makes Bond—Raymond Elkins, 27, sentenced to a term of 35 years in the state penitentiary here last Friday morning after conviction on first degree murder charge in connection with the Clarence Allen skeleton case.¹⁷

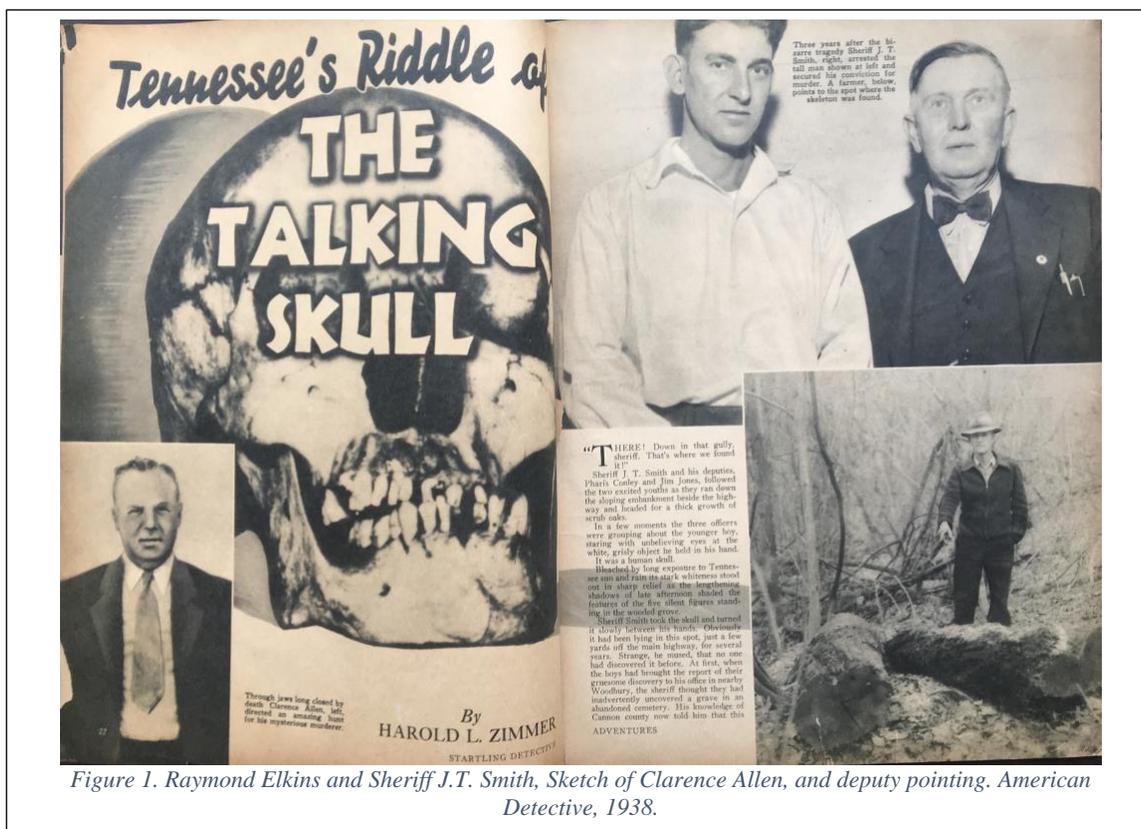


Figure 1. Raymond Elkins and Sheriff J.T. Smith, Sketch of Clarence Allen, and deputy pointing. *American Detective*, 1938.

TRUE CRIME IN TENNESSEE

While the story played out in the sensational and to-the-point headlines of the *Cannon Courier* and the various state newspapers (*The Nashville Tennessean*, *The Chattanooga Daily Times*, *The Nashville Banner*, *The Johnson City Chronicle*, and *The Bristol Herald Courier*), there was an alternate story being formulated elsewhere. In 1938, the year Elkins was released

¹⁷ *Cannon Courier*, July 23, 1937.

after his fifth trial and Tucker was still appealing his conviction, a different story appeared. In cities throughout the Northeast, working-class citizens were opening the flashy illustrated cover of *American Detective* to find a more embellished version of the skeleton murder trial:

EVIDENCE REMAINS -- “A skull!” the sheriff exclaimed, the light of battle shining in his eyes. Then turning to a group of deputies standing near the door, “Come on boys. It looks as if we have a real mystery on our hands.” ... In the distance could be seen the old, ivy-covered mansions of pre-Civil War days, set back in spacious and surrounded by groves of stately pines and majestic oaks. Trucks loaded with split baskets and chairs for which Cannon County is famous whizzed by as the party alighted from their machines.¹⁸

The excerpt above is from the February 1938 edition of the true-crime detective magazine. While not pure fiction, it is pure entertainment and pure spectacle. There are not many “ivy-covered mansions of pre-Civil War days” and “groves of stately pines” in the hills of Cannon County. Today the county’s rolling hills are covered with kudzu forests, but even those had just begun to be planted in the 1930s. This was a land of yeoman farmers where only one percent of the population held enslaved people as property, and the average slaveholder held fewer than ten human beings according to the 1860 slave census.¹⁹ Still, the racial-based chattel slavery system was in full effect in the pre-Civil War era in Cannon County. It is conceivable that some who owned enslaved people desired and envied those with more. It is also feasible that those with no such means aspired to join the ranks of those that did, and this certainly reinforced the racial hierarchy that existed across the American South.

¹⁸ Mackey, Eloise Cooper, “Evidence Remains,” *American Detective*, February 1938, 48.

¹⁹ R.L. Murray, *Searching for Emily: A Compilation of Black History Records for Cannon County*, TN (2018), 97-107.

However, readers were given a different impression in *American Detective* in 1938, as the authors conjured up a haunted antebellum South for their story:

Sheriff Smith placed the remains in the courthouse vault. Then he interviewed news hawks ... In a few hours papers all over the United States were carrying the news of Cannon County's bizarre skeleton case ... weeks passed. The skeleton mystery was still the subject of endless conjecture among the residents of the aristocratic and remote community of Woodbury ... a topic of conversation at dinner in the huge, multi-winged mansions.²⁰

Before pulp fiction, there were many forms of storytelling devices, which this tall tale could have been transported through. The Execution Broadside of the Puritan-dominated culture of New England come to mind, where previous scholarship has shown how they changed over time from their original focus on the preacher to become more about the murderer.²¹ However, the murder ballads that were imported by those saltwater immigrants from the British Isles were more of a tradition in the American Southeast than an execution broadside. Middle Tennessee would go on to become the epicenter of the commercialization of those same murder ballads with the advent of country and western music, which was still in its infancy in the 1930s. But in the printed press, where the Penny Dreadfuls and Dime Store Novels would prove to be a money-making industry, changes in post office rates would lead

²⁰ Cooper, 51.

²¹ Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American popular culture, 1674-1860*. (United States: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 18.

to the format that ultimately came to be known as Pulp Fiction, whose heyday was the 1920s – 1940s.²²

Strong oaks were brought down, split into broad boards, and fashioned into long uncomfortable pews for nervous Puritans anxious to exorcise their most recent sins in the New England region. For white/Euro-American Southerners in the 1930s, their lineage was more closely tied to the 1607 Jamestown settlement which lacked the religious fervor of its northeast counterparts in its early days. However, over

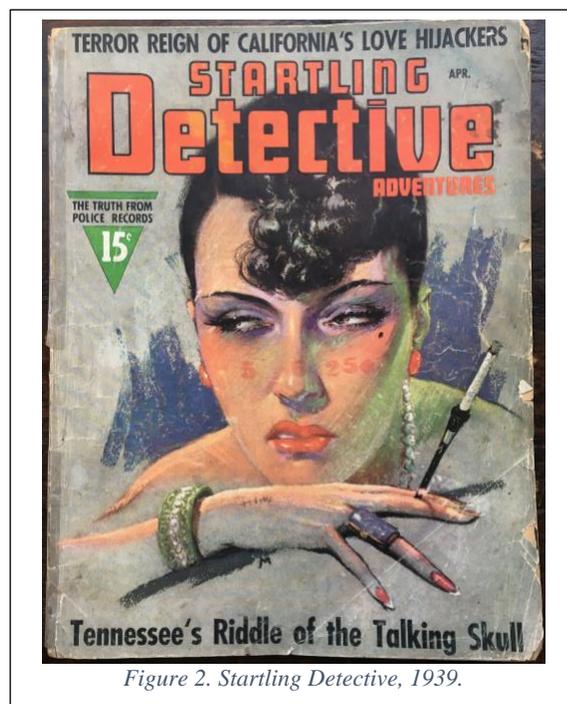


Figure 2. *Startling Detective*, 1939.

time, what would eventually become the American South would develop its own unique brand of religiosity. Amid the multiple religious movements, it might be the Second Great Awakening, with its emphasis on aspects such as the Restoration Movement, that ultimately had more implications for the South by the early twentieth century. Stiff wooden pews would certainly be familiar to most backsides throughout the South as well for those seeking God's forgiveness.

Sensationalism in newsprint in the South would take a longer and different arc than in the Northeast. Antebellum Southern papers avoided issues of race and gender, which were forbidden subjects for a society afraid of slave rebellion or tainting the honor of a white woman. However, in the early twentieth century, printing presses in cities north of the Mason-Dixon line would have found a new industry outside of traditional print newspapers.

²²Smith, Erin Smith, *Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, Working-Class Consumers, and Pulp Magazines*. *Colby Quarterly*, Volume 36, no.1, March 2000, p. 11-28.

American pop culture would find another use for the cheap discarded pulp leftover from those trees being brought down around the country: fiction. Wood pulp would suffice to press together pages that would circulate the tales of other's scandalous deeds (or alleged ones) at an increasing pace. The speed of information of the new pulp fiction flying off the presses would require no splinters: only sinners. In the story that appeared in *Startling Detective Adventures* in 1938, Tucker's name had been changed to Ralph Ames to "protect" the innocent. However, in the real world, the article ran as Tucker himself prepared to be charged for his part in the murder. It would be an entire year before Tucker was cleared and able to return to Akron. Still, for readers glued to the story of "*Tennessee's Riddle of the Talking Skull*" a different version was told:

Ralph Ames was never tried for his part in the crime. He promptly returned to his job in Akron, a wiser and sadder man, his gratitude for the court's mercy almost beyond description. But Elkins has gone where all who flaunt the law must one day go – behind prison bars for the best years of his life.²³

²³Harold L. Zimmer, "Tennessee's Riddle of the Talking Skull," *Startling Detective*, April 1938, 54.

Whether or not the authors of the story knew or cared, Elkins was no longer behind bars and had been cleared, and Ralph Ames (Tucker) was the one pleading for

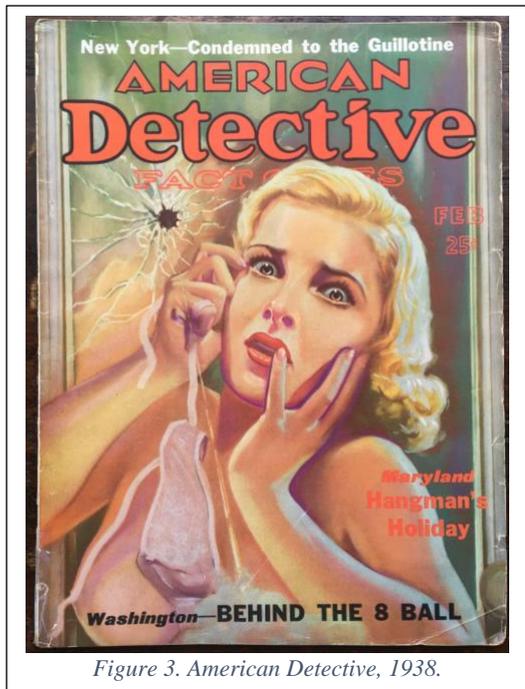


Figure 3. *American Detective*, 1938.

mercy well into 1939. The story sold to readers long after the events of the actual trial appeared in at least two different pulp magazines in the late 1930s. Of course, not everyone in 1930s America read these issues circulating throughout the country. Authors of pulp fiction’s chronicles such as the version above were often “maligned... as ignorant hacks,” according to Erin Smith.²⁴ In *Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, Working-Class*

Consumers, and Pulp Magazines, Smith asserts that many thought these cheap throw-away rags, “denigrated pulp readers as (at best) marginal literates, and deemed these magazines ‘gaudy, blatant, banal.’”²⁵ These pulp titles such as *Startling Detective* and *American Detective* that teased out the story of Cannon County’s mysterious “talking skull” would have been seen by a considerable audience. In documenting their popularity, Smith outlines that, “their heyday [was] in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, their garish covers competing for the attention of their ten million regular readers.”²⁶

²⁴ Erin Smith, *Dressed to Kill: Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction, Working-Class Consumers, and Pulp Magazine*, Colby Quarterly, Volume 36, no.1, March 2000, 11.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

The tawdry glossy images on the cover of these magazines were surely looking right at a particular American consumer. These pulp magazines were looking at people, “[that] were widely held to be socially and economically marginal ... They were working-class, young, poorly educated, and often immigrants ... in a manual job ... in an industrial town”²⁷ What these glossy scintillating magazines were doing to their readers though was helping to “shape male workers into consumers by selling them what they wanted to hear—stories about manly artisan heroes who resisted encroaching commodity culture and the female consumers who came with it.”²⁸ The advertisements throughout the pulps and their provocative covers show who they were meant for and what publishers and advertisers thought of them. Was it the poor, backwards drunken South that was being exploited in these magazine pages? Or was the chump working class in the North being exploited with these tall tales “based” on “true crime”? It is conceivable that the true crime genre served as an instrument of social control—and still might. A story was being extracted from one group and repackaged for commercial consumption to another. However, in 1930s America, this exploitation was not divided by geographic region, but by class.

²⁷ Smith, 11.

²⁸ Ibid.

MAYAPPLE, GINSENG, & BLOODROOT

The two boys who found Allen's skeletal remains in the soft Earth certainly got more than they bargained for that summer morning in 1937. What was the reason these two teenagers were scratching around in the dirt so hard on the hillside three miles out of town? This section of Highway 53 that runs toward Manchester is all uphill. It is, in fact, up the Eastern Highland Rim.

To leave the valley of the Stones River bottom that cradles Woodbury and head towards the "barrens"²⁹ on the edge of the Eastern Highland Rim is now a short drive and you can ride it every day and never see a soul walking along this road (re-named Jim Cummings Highway for Cannon County native and longtime Speaker of the Tennessee House of Representatives—also Elkin's lawyer). I can attest from personal experience it is both longer and harder than it looks. The two boys were likely on foot, and it was probably not that unusual of a trek they made looking for mayapple and ginseng root that day.



Figure 4. *Podophyllum peltatum* - Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen-246 0383-scan.png
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Podophyllum_peltatum_-_Köhler-s_Medizinal-Pflanzen-246_0383-caps.jpg#/media/File:Podophyllum_peltatum_-_Köhler-s_Medizi

²⁹ Robert L. Mason, *History of Cannon County, Tennessee* (Murfreesboro: Lancer Printing, 1984).



Figure 5. Mayapple, photo by Stephen Simmons, May 24, 2022, Manchester, Tennessee.

Like most activities in 1930s rural Tennessee, what drove the boys up that hill (and many other children up many other hills) was economics. Roots were once a booming industry, especially the search for ginseng, but many other botanical crude-drug plants were a

major source of income for Southerners also.³⁰ Edward Price, writing about the declining trade of roots dug and sold for folk medicines in 1960, outlines that at 1930s' prices children could only expect to make two or three dollars for an entire day of digging. Price identifies the processing centers throughout the American South where all the collected roots filtered to. In Tennessee, they were largely clustered around the base of the Smoky Mountains, but there were still two in operation in Nashville in the mid-1930s. Price's scholarship on the early twentieth-century fluctuation of various root prices per pound aside, it is reasonable to suggest these two boys of seventeen and fourteen years old were part of the unseen labor force of their family and the region.

The roots sold in Cannon County likely made their way into Nashville and from there, some roots, such as ginseng, would have ended up in Asian markets. Whether or not these young men realized it, they were taking part in a global market-based system when they struck out with their gunny sacks each day. However, sitting on the stand

³⁰ Edward T. Price, "Root Digging in the Appalachians: The Geography of Botanical Drugs." *Geographical Review* 50, no. 1 (1960): 18.

giving their sworn testimony a month later they would also be participating in another traded commodity. Local and state newspapers ran their story of discovery alongside ads for products. Once they and other locals sold their stories to visiting writers working for the pulp fiction magazines, working-class urban dwellers throughout cities in the northeast would soon read of their macabre find. By examining the advertisements in the cheaply made pulp fiction detective magazines we can see these are directed at young working-class men, many of them immigrants: sold another story of the backward South.

TWO

THREE SONS OF THE SOUTHERN DIASPORA: Clarence "Blue" Allen, Raymond Elkins, and Martin Tucker

The triumvirate of Clarence Allen, Raymond Elkins, and Martin Tucker would be linked in perpetuity after their fateful, whiskey-fueled joyride along Middle Tennessee's winding backroads. The tipsy trio that sipped bottled and bonded and bootleg whiskey and shifted gears going up and down the steep hills and hollows of Cannon County, Tennessee, each also represented a different iteration of the shifting Southern identity in the early twentieth century.

Extensive Southern Diaspora Studies have been done since the 1960s, as scholars have continued to tell the nuanced story of movement of Southern people. Multiple Great Migrations of Southerners into the Northern and especially the Midwestern manufacturing centers greatly changed the face of the United States. Economics, as always, played the most significant role in their movements, or lack

thereof. Change was brought about by New Deal Era programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Public Works Administration, and technological advances like the automobile. These forces led to an increased urbanization, even in the American South, and helped accelerate the transformation of the country—again, driven the hardest by economic factors like The Great Depression.

The Temperance Movement and a fierce resistance to Prohibition and other would-be phases of reforms continued to sweep through the United States South, with clashes of class and culture sparking constant tensions between the two. However, the era these three Southerners' paths became entwined, the 1930s, was a period framed by great World Wars. These interwar years drastically transformed the world, America, the South, and Middle Tennessee. Two of the important characteristics that highlight this era and these three individual's stories, were movement and violence. Theirs was a story propelled by movement but bound by violence, or the presumption of, even if unprovable in a 1930's Tennessee court of law.

THE SEARCH FOR CLARENCE "BLUE" ALLEN

Clarence Allen was a hard man to find—literally and figuratively. When Allen was reported missing by Elkins in June of 1934 in rural Cannon County, Tennessee, search parties spent weeks combing the hills for him. Elkins' wife Virginia wrote to his wife in Indiana, and they checked the Woodbury Post Office where Allen had previously received mail. While law enforcement knew of Elkins and Tucker, they knew next to nothing about Allen, except as the out-of-town merchandiser from Indiana where he

reportedly ran a service station. The selling of local artisanal baskets, chairs, and other furniture was very common in the 1930s throughout the Southern Appalachian Diaspora.³¹ Cannon County was especially well known as a region with a steady supply of families steeped in the traditional making of various types of desirable hand-crafted folk wares.³² The fact that Allen, from Indiana, was there buying baskets for sale would have surprised no one.

The discovery of Allen's remains three years later by the two boys was indeed a freakish find. It is conceivable Allen would have stayed hidden for many years except for the financial motivation of the two young men digging in that one spot. Had Allen's remains gone undetected for several more years, the decline of the roots medicinal market would have removed the motive to dig so often and so deep on Southern Appalachian hillsides. In that case, Allen's remains might have gone undetected indefinitely. As it turned out, Allen was also very hard to find in the records.

Clarence C. Allen was born on January 21, 1888, in Wynne, Arkansas, 50 miles west of Memphis, Tennessee. In my initial ten plus years of research, the only references to Allen's home were in Indiana. The pulp fiction true crime rags that ran embellished stories of Allen's murder in the 1930s, repeatedly referenced the 'out of townner from up North' angle. Even the Tennessee State Supreme Court files that I eventually discovered only made mention of Allen's Gary, Indiana address at the time of his disappearance, but there is much more to the story than the merchandiser from above the Mason-Dixon line

³¹ Roy M. Overcast Jr., Basketmaking: Tennessee Encyclopedia, *Tennessee Historical Society*, October 8, 2017. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/basketmaking/>.

³² Carroll Van West, "Tennessee Basketmaking," *A History of Tennessee Arts: Creating Traditions, Expanding Horizons*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004).

who met an untimely demise angle. There is an element of place and geography. Allen never returns to where he is reportedly from, he is buried in Tennessee, and when his widow comes to identify his remains, it is noted that she has since moved to New York.

As it turns out, Allen was also a son of the American South. More specifically, Allen was part of the Southern Diaspora of the early twentieth century.³³ Allen's father was also born in Arkansas in 1853, but both of his paternal grandparents were born in South Carolina (County unknown) in 1807 and 1817. While Wynne is in the Arkansas Delta, Allen's mother (b. 1859) and maternal grandfather were born in North Carolina, and his maternal grandmother was born in Virginia. Allen was certainly a Southerner, but also a cultural child of the broader Southern Appalachian Diaspora that Elkins and Tucker belonged to as well.

Allen first appears in the 1900 US Census as a twelve-year-old living with his mother and sister in Smith Township in Cross County, Arkansas (The 1890 US Census might eventually reveal his whereabouts earlier, though many of those were destroyed in a fire).³⁴ By the 1910 US Census, Allen was living in St. Francis, Arkansas with a family of seven as a twenty-two-year-old "hired man," whose occupation was listed as "salesman." The following decade would prove to be consequential for Allen. Young men in their twenties in the early 1910s came of age with the threat of the first Great War and Allen was no different. Allen was a veteran of World War I. Hoyt Bryson, Cannon County Sheriff at the conclusion of Allen's murder trial, received the application for the headstone from the War Department. Allen was buried in the Riverside Cemetery in

³³ Ancestry.com.

³⁴ 1900 United States Census, Ancestry.com; Smith is a township in Cross County, Arkansas, <https://digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/township-maps/19/>, <https://www.crosscountyar.org/museum>.

Woodbury, Tennessee. The application for the headstone was signed by J.E. Allen of Mariama, Arkansas on September 9, 1937. According to the application Allen's rank is listed as "Private 1st class, Company 'C', 60."

Allen's military records have not thus far revealed much about his service in the first World War. However, the detailed records of the United States National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers have helped to fill in a few of Allen's missing years in the archives. The National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, a program that was developed after the American Civil War, had twelve branches located around the United States from the 1860s through the 1930s.³⁵ Allen was admitted to the Western Branch located in Leavenworth, Kansas, which was the closest one to his hometown near Wynne, Arkansas on May 12, 1930. His pension was listed at ten dollars per month.

Allen had two enlistment dates with the U.S. Military. The first was in Arkansas at Fort Benjamin Harrison on May 17, 1918, with the 60th Engineers, where he was later discharged on July 22, 1919. He was listed as being treated for "arthritis chronic" at the time he was admitted to the home. Given that Allen was an older enlistee, this makes sense and knowing his work experience as a railroad brakeman. The interesting second enlistment of Allen was also in Arkansas at Fort Logan on February 20th, 1928, with the 23rd Infantry, and discharged on May 21, 1929. Allen was being treated for "bronchitis chronic" at the time of that admission. There was a third discharge listed at Fort Sam Houston in Texas with no dates, and Allen's treatment listed for hemorrhoids. On May 12, 1930, Allen was listed for re-admission into the Western Branch disabled veteran's

³⁵ Ancestry.com

home, and this is presumably tied to the last discharge. However, veterans were allowed to check in and out of any of the branch disabled homes of their choosing. Allen may have simply been taking advantage of this predecessor to the Veterans Hospital Administration while the service still existed.



Figure 6. Clarence Allen Sketch, "Tennessee's Riddle of the Talking Skull," Startling Detective, April 1938.

The only image of Clarence C. Allen I have uncovered to date is the illustration that appears in one of the pulp fiction "true crime" magazines. According to Allen's draft registration card for World War I, his eyes were blue, his hair was dark, and he was of medium build. Allen was also listed as 29 years old, and his age corresponds with his given birthdate.

Allen's enlistment date was given as May 17, 1918, and he was discharged July 22, 1919.³⁶

After the war Allen moved back close to Arkansas to Memphis, Tennessee. Allen's widow, described in the true crime pulp fiction magazines in the late 1930s, was not his first wife. Allen had married Ida Leona Baucum in Memphis in 1921, not long after returning home from military service. Leona's mother, Mary E. Baucum, ran a boarding house in Shelby County, Memphis at the beginning of the 1920s. Widowed and

³⁶ Application For Headstone, War Department, O.Q.M.G. Form No. 628, accessed from Ancestry.com.

forty-nine years of age (from Samuel O. Baucum, age 63, listed on the 1910 US Census as a watchman for the railroad), Mrs. Mary Baucum was listed as head of household on the 1920 US Census along with her two daughters— sixteen-year-old Ida Leona and eighteen-year-old Willie May. Leona was born in Tennessee and her older sister and mother were born in Mississippi. Mary E. Baucum had sixteen “boarders” listed as renting out a room from her property. Clarence Allen, age 28, is one of those sixteen. However, Allen is 32, according to his given birth date on his draft registration, enlistment, death certificate, and what matches the 1910 and 1930 US Census. It is unknown whether Allen purposefully shaved off four years to the census taker, or his landlord, or if it was just a mistake by the government enumerator. All sixteen of the boarders were males who worked for the railroad (presumably the *Missouri Pacific Railroad* where Allen listed as his employer multiple times while living in Memphis), twelve of them were brakemen—including Allen.³⁷

The Memphis Commercial Appeal listed thirty-three-year-old Allen and seventeen-year-old Leona’s license for marriage in the September 8, 1921, edition— though no marriage certificate has surfaced to confirm their ceremony date. Shortly after Allen and Leona were married, they had a son, Clarence Allen, Jr., on October 21, 1921. Leona would pass away just two years later at the young age of nineteen. On Sunday morning, March 11, 1923 the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* ran the following obituary:

³⁷ Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Population, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, accessed through Ancestry.com.

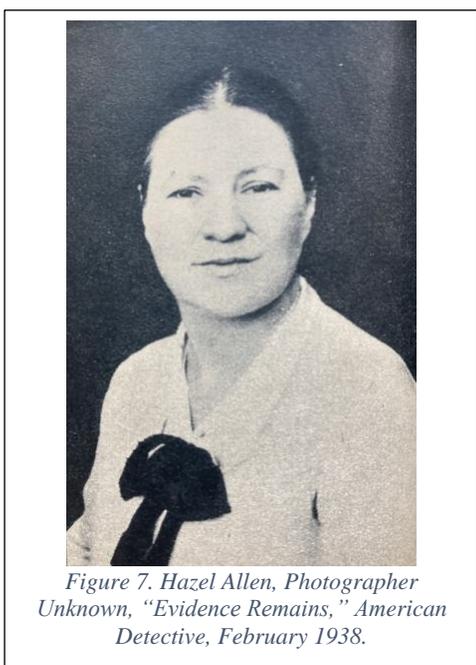
MRS. CLARENCE ALLEN DIES. Mrs. Ira Leona Allen, 19 years of age, the wife of Clarence Allen... died at 5:40 o'clock yesterday evening at the Gartly-Ramsay Hospital. Her death was caused from septic poisoning. Mrs. Allen had been sick for the last 15 days and was removed to the hospital ten days ago. She was a daughter of Mrs. Mary E. Baucum. Surviving beside the husband and her mother, Mrs. Allen leaves one child. Clarence Allen, Jr.³⁸

The only Clarence Allen that can be found in Memphis, Tennessee after this article was Allen's young son born right before his mother's death. Eighteen-year-old Clarence Allen Jr. was listed on the 1940 US Census living in Memphis with his aunt, Willie May Baucum, a stenographer for the railroad. The 1940 census took place six years after Allen Sr.'s death and even all of the ensuing trials and appeals for Elkins and Tucker. No records thus far have revealed the father and son as living together after Leona's death. It is presumed young Clarence Allen, Jr. kept residence with his mother's family. When Allen, Jr. appeared in the 1950 Census he was a twenty-eight-year-old head of household, married with three children and a machinist for the railroad. There is a Clarence Allen who was cited for driving an automobile while intoxicated on August 26, 1925, in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*. Otherwise, records of Allen Sr.'s whereabouts in Memphis or his native Arkansas are scarce following the death of his wife, Leona.

The next decade finds Clarence Allen living in San Antonio, Texas on the 1930 US Census, which aligns with his 1930 discharge from Fort Sam Houston. Allen is listed as a "roomer" along with other tenants at 126 ½ Gonzales Street; age 42, widowed with no occupation. Between 1930 and 1934, Allen changed residence to Gary, Indiana and married a woman named Hazel, and presumably gained employment running a service

³⁸ *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 11, 1923, accessed through Newspapers.com.

station (his occupation listed in several sources during Elkins' and Tucker's trial). A photo of Hazel appears in one of the pulp fiction magazines and she is referenced in court documents as identifying the body but does not testify in the trial and never returns to Cannon County—though Allen's brothers are referenced as attending some portions of the trial.



Mrs. Hazel Allen was still searching for her missing husband in the winter of 1935, six months after his mysterious disappearance. Allen, whose history suggested a drifter's tendencies, could have been suspected of wandering off. However, for this son of the South, it was obviously suspected he could have been drawn back to where his roots were deepest. The following plea ran in *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* on January 16, 1935:

Husband Missing—Information as to the whereabouts of Clarence Allen, World War veteran and former brakeman with the Missouri Pacific Railroad, was sought yesterday by his wife, Mrs. Hazel Allen. He disappeared from Woodbury, Tenn., June 7. Mrs. Allen describes him as being 48 years of age; height, five feet, eight inches; weight, 190 pounds; brown hair, blue eyes, and ruddy complexion. Mrs. Allen's address is 14628 Burgess, Detroit, Mich[igan].³⁹

³⁹ *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 16, 1935, accessed through Newspapers.com.

Two years later at Elkins' murder trial in Cannon County for the killing of Allen, Allen's brother, Walter Allen, was called as a witness by the state's Attorney General to testify to confirm his brother's identity. Walter Allen also confirmed that he had not heard from his brother Clarence Allen in four years. The subject of Hazel was broached by Defense Attorney Jim Cummings in the cross-examination of Walter in the following exchange:

Q. Did he have a wife named Hazel Allen?

A. He was supposed to have. I am not sure about that.

Q. When did you learn that he had a wife named Hazel Allen?

A. That was in 1934.

Q. Do you know where she is?

A. No, sir.⁴⁰

Cummings continues this line of questioning with Mr. Dalton Francis, the constable for the district. When Hazel came to Cannon County to identify the remains of Allen, Francis accompanied him to the discovery site to search for more items.

Cummings asks of Francis:

Q. Mrs. Allen, a lady was in here by the name of Mrs. Hazel Allen or it was said to be her and was here interested in the collecting of his bonus money and even went so far as to have a sort of coroner's inquest and etc?

A. That is what they said that she wanted a certificate so she could collect his bonus money.⁴¹

Attorney General W.B. Knott had multiple objections to Cummings continued insinuation that Hazel's absence from the trial should have cast suspicion on her motives. Knott argued that Hazel came in 1934 and that she was reported sick and under the care of a physician during the trial according to his witness, Sheriff J. Tip Smith. In his cross-

⁴⁰ *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

examination Cummings continued to press the same point with witness Smith. Cummings had Smith acknowledge he had only heard there was a telegram from Murfreesboro and that she was ill and not attending—then Cummings continued:

Q. At the time Mrs. Allen was here she came here and employed counsel to get a death certificate to file with the Federal Government to get his bonus?

Attorney-General Knott: Except.

Mr. Cummings: She is sending wires here that she is sick.

Court: Do you know what she came here for?

Q. We had been trying to find her after we found this skeleton. We had been trying to get her when she come.

Q. Did you have any proceedings?

A. Yes, she swore out warrants for these boys.

Q. I will ask you if she didn't actually go through with a mock proceeding and get a coroner's jury that this was the man?

Q. And all she wanted with the certificate was not for the use in this trial but all she wanted it for was to get his bonus?

Attorney-General Knott: Except.

Court: Do you know anything about that?

No. I wasn't here.⁴²

Cummings' antics aside, Hazel, as Allen's widow, was legally entitled to his military pension and there was certainly no way for her to apply without a death certificate. After all, this was a death certificate that took Hazel three years to produce. Allen's pension that was listed at ten dollars per month in 1930 was not the main compensation. Congress had passed the World War Compensation Act or Bonus Act in 1924 and the Adjusted Compensation Payment Act in 1934 to address the economic condition facing the nation's veterans of the Great War, especially necessary given the impact of the Great Depression. Whatever portion of this bonus Allen's son in Memphis would have been entitled to has yet to be confirmed in the historical record. It is

⁴² *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

reasonable to speculate that Hazel knew of young Clarence Allen, Jr. and the family Allen left behind in Memphis considering her ad in *The Memphis Commercial Appeal*. I suspect it was certainly on the minds of Allen's brothers as well, who traveled from Arkansas to attend the trial—especially with Hazel's absence.

MARTIN TUCKER & THE URBAN FLIGHT OF THE SOUTHERN DIASPORA

Next door to Michigan, in Ohio, another Midwestern industrial region of the country then flush with members of not only the scattered Southern Diaspora, but also specifically the Southern Appalachian Diaspora, was the relocated home of Tucker. The same Tucker, the lifelong resident of Cannon County, Tennessee who had moved his family to Akron for work in 1934. This move would not have been unusual in an era where many Southerners sought employment in “Rubber City,” as it became known for the number of tire and other rubber industry jobs. On Saturday, June 12, 1937, the *Akron Beacon Journal* ran the following story concerning one of their new relocated Southern neighbors:

POLICE HOLD MAN ON DEATH COUNT. William Martin Tucker, 37, admitted one-time Tennessee mountain moonshiner, told Akron police today he was willing to waive extradition and go back to his former home to face a murder charge. A plain citizen here since March, 1935, and working as a basket buyer, Tucker was arrested Friday night at his home... J.T. Smith of Cannon County, Tenn, who wants him in connection with the slaying of “Blue” Allen in Woodbury in June, 1934... Tucker stoutly maintained his innocence and for that reason was willing to go back.⁴³

⁴³ *The Akron Beacon Journal*, June 12, 1937, accessed through Newspapers.com.

Though Tucker was at that time a two-year resident of this burgeoning Midwest industrial center, his occupation is still that of a basket buyer according to the article. The Akron article highlights Tucker's mountain moonshining roots and seems to codify many of the tropes about people of the Southern Appalachian Diaspora residing among their Midwest neighbors. The *Akron Beacon Journal* articles were the first to reveal Allen's nickname: "Blue," presumably for the color of his eyes, as indicated on Allen's draft card for World War I. The draft registration and service records for the men in the early 1900s is a wealth of physical information about those of service age. Height, eye color, build, hair color, as well as occupation are typically recorded. Tucker was also registered, and we get a clearer physical picture of him as well from the military records. Tucker was described as having a light hair color, being of medium height, and of a slender build. One of the most unique features revealed about Tucker is that of the color of his eyes; they are gray—the rarest color found, in less than one percent of the population.⁴⁴ It is also of note that the World War II draft cards had even more detailed information about draftee's physical appearance. Tucker's World War II draft card listed him at 5'8" and 152 lbs., with dark complexion, brown hair, and brown eyes.⁴⁵ Brown, in stark contrast to gray, is the most common eye color found in the world.

William Martin Tucker grew up in Cannon County, Tennessee where he was part of the fourth generation of Tuckers to do so. His parents, Solomon Porter "Jim" Tucker and Lula Johnson were preceded by his paternal grandparents, Andrew Jackson Tucker

⁴⁴ <https://www.healthline.com/health/eye-health/eye-color-percentages#percentages>.

⁴⁵ Ancestry.com

and Elisha J'Lizzie Bragg. Tucker was born on January 3, 1900, and the 1920 US Census finds him living in Cannon County's Civil District 8, somewhere along the Short Mountain Road off the Memphis to Bristol Highway. In Tucker's testimony in Elkins' trial, he states that he lives just behind Muncie's Store about a quarter of a mile off the Short Mountain Road. In 1930 the US Census listed Tucker residing in Detroit, Michigan where his occupation was "Candy Man" for the Creamery Company. Tucker was not unlike many Southerners who left their hometowns in search of work in the Midwestern industrial centers. The fact that Tucker was previously working and living in Michigan illustrates that it was not as suspicious as Defense Attorney Cummings argued that Tucker had headed North after Allen's disappearance—he was already living a mobile lifestyle. Tucker was released and found innocent in his own trial in 1939 in Woodbury and the 1940 US Census finds him back in Akron, Ohio as a "salesman" for the fruit market.

Tucker had married Martha Lou Youngblood, who was born in 1902 in Warren County, Tennessee to Joe S. Youngblood and Eva Earls, sometime before 1920. The 1920 US Census shows Martha, age 17, living with Tucker's family and listed as a daughter-in-law. Tucker and Youngblood are listed in the 1930 US Census in Detroit, Michigan with their six children in Tucker's previously mentioned stint as "Candy Man." At some point after 1930, the Tucker's moved back home to Cannon County where they lived when Allen came to town to buy handmade baskets and furniture. Several months after Allen's disappearance in June of 1934 Tucker moved his family permanently to Akron, Ohio. A decade after their move to Summit County, Ohio and five years after Tucker is ultimately cleared of murder charges brought against him in Cannon County in

1939, Tucker and Martha divorce. The marriage license for their son, nineteen-year-old Wiley Tucker, revealed that Martha was given custody in a June 2, 1944, divorce decree.

In 1947 in Summit County, Ohio at age forty-seven, Tucker married Seba L. Russell, a forty-three-year-old waitress from Carrollton, Georgia. Tucker's occupation is listed as that of "checker." In 1951 Tucker married again, this time to Louise Olive Simmons, in Summit County, Ohio. The marriage licenses in the 1950s contain much more information than their earlier counterparts and the 51-year-old Tucker is listed as being twice married before and now divorced. The 47-year-old Simmons, listed as not previously married or widowed, hailed from Taylor County, West Virginia—another member of the Southern Appalachian Diaspora. The assimilation of Southerners into midwestern urban culture does not seem to happen overnight. The tendency of migrants to stick to their culture, whether out of habit or being outcast in their new environments, persisted for decades. Another interesting reveal of the 1950's marriage certificate in Ohio shows what local authorities were socially concerned about from those seeking to wed. The two parties had to attest to the following:

That neither of said parties in habitual drunkard, epileptic, imbecile or insane, and is not under the influence of any intoxicating liquor or narcotic drug. Said parties are not nearer of kin than second cousins and there is no legal impediment to their marriage. That neither of said parties is infected with syphilis in a form that is communicable, or likely to become communicable.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Marriage certificate, Ancestry.com.

In June of 1934, according to Tucker's testimony, Elkins threatened to kill him if he ever told the truth of what befell Allen that summer day. In the Akron newspapers, after Tucker's apprehension in 1936 when Allen's remains were found, they reported Tucker moved to the area because his wife procured employment in Akron. The warrant sworn out for his arrest from Cannon County after Hazel identified Allen's dentures and a few other belongings, had Tennessee law enforcement enroute to scoop the Southerner up where he was held by Akron authorities. *The Akron Beacon Journal* reported on June 14, 1937, that "Tucker was identified through Bertillon records made last December when he was arrested and later freed on a burglary charge."⁴⁷ The Bertillon system was developed in the 1890s to help law enforcement officials enter and track basic information about criminals to have a database to compare nationally. Previously, countless criminals were tried repeatedly as first-time offenders with no way to track their identity. Whether or not Tucker's eyes were indeed of a rare gray color or the most common brown, he was tracked down for the killing of Blue Allen. Once cleared in 1939, Tucker lived out his years in Akron, Ohio and when he passed away, he was buried in Florida where several of his children had relocated.

William M. Tucker

William Martin Tucker, 76, of 93 W. Crosier st., died April 3, at St. Thomas Hospital, after a long illness.

He was born in Woodbury, Tenn. He lived in Akron 24 years. He worked for the Commercial Motor Freight, with 20 years service.

He is survived by wife Louise (Simmon) Tucker; sons, Doyle, of Sarasota, Fla., Wiley, of Stow, O., Cecil, of Akron; two daughters, Mrs. Pauline Shepherd, and Mrs. Opel Hyett, both of Akron; 18 grandchildren; 26 great-grandchildren; sister, Mrs. Mournain Decker, Okla.

Funeral services Tuesday, from the Eckard-Baldwin Funeral Home, Rev. William D. Davis officiating. Burial Hillside Memorial Park. Friends may call Monday, 7 to 9 p.m. (Eckard-Baldwin, 760 E. Market, 535-7141).

Figure 8. The Akron Beacon Journal, Monday, April 5, 1976.

⁴⁷ "Tennessee Officer Gets Death Suspect," *The Akron Beacon Journal*, Monday June 14, 1937, Akron, Ohio.

RAYMOND ELKINS: SINS OF OUR FATHERS & THE SOUTH THAT REMAINED

Issac Raymond Elkins was born in Cannon County, Tennessee in 1909 to John LaFayette Elkins (b. 1879-1960), and Lillie “Booger” Todd (b. 1886-1977), both of Cannon County. John LaFayette, who was the town Squire in Cannon County, was born to John Newton Elkins (b. 1850-1929), and Amanda E. Lorance (b. 1852-1926), also both of Cannon County. The Elkins were four generations in Cannon County at that time, and before that, multiple verifiable generations in Virginia. However, Elkins’ maternal grandmother, Amanda Lorance’s family was a different matter. Her father, George W. Lorance (b.1805-1885), was born in North Carolina and died in Cannon County. In the 1880 US Census the 73-year-old George W. Lorance is listed as head of house with the occupation of farmer. George’s eldest son, 36-year-old Bedford, is listed living with him and his occupation is that of “chair maker.” While basket and furniture making is often not the primary occupation of Southerners who depended on that craft for extra income, in this instance it appears to be. In addition, Cannon County was one of the most important basket making centers in the region.

With so much written about the Scots Irish and English basketmaking tradition in Southern Appalachian culture, and the majority of Elkins family pointing to those same roots, I, too, had made assumptions about where the basketry craft came from. However, one new piece of information was also listed in the 1880 US Census, George W. Lorance’s father’s birthplace was listed as Germany. His father, Michael Lorenz (b.1749-1834), was born in Bayern, in the Bavaria region of Germany. Lorenz changed his

surname to the English spelling of Lorance sometime after immigrating. Lorenz died just outside of Cannon County in Browns Mill, in neighboring Rutherford County, Tennessee. Presumably, he moved from North Carolina with his son, George W. Lorance, where he met his wife, Poley Northcutt (b. 1809-1880), who was from the Rutherford and Cannon County border region.

Most scholarly work on basket making culture in Appalachia rightly explores the Scots Irish and English tapestry that were the assumed dominant threads of the region. However, in her scholarship on *German-Speaking Peoples in Tennessee from Colonial Times to World War I: An Introduction and Bibliography*, Maria Slonina argues that the size of German and Scots Irish immigrant populations in the Southeast was, if not equal, slightly tilted towards the German. Slonina also argues that one reason the Scots Irish are perceived as such a large group is because of their outsized political and leadership roles, whereas the German influence was seen more in areas such as agriculture.⁴⁸

Less is written about the tradition in German culture in Tennessee, though studies have been done on urban centers in Nashville and especially in Memphis. In general, there has been a diminished study of German culture throughout the Southeast, outside of areas such as the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and other regions to the east of Tennessee. There is still some disagreement to the percentage of the population in the US Southeast that was German. This is partially due to assimilation that occurred after the Civil War and Reconstruction, when German citizens of the South joined the broader white culture.

⁴⁸ Maria Slonina, "German-Speaking Peoples in Tennessee from Colonial Times to World War I: An Introduction and Bibliography" (M.A. thesis, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1975), 33. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

In the early 1900s Americans of German descent also kept a lower profile in the era leading up to the first World War and continuing through World War II. It is easy to see how several decades of suppressing cultural ties led to forgotten family origins. Slonina, in her examination of the different German Diaspora groups located in the United States Southeast, singles out the usage of the term “Dutch.” Slonina writes, “and the ‘Dutch,’ insofar as this term does not indicate persons born in the Netherlands but represents a mispronunciation by the Americans of the German designation for German--Deutsch.”⁴⁹ Slonina also points out, “Many German family names were either changed slightly, for whatever reason, or else they were translated into their American counterpart.”⁵⁰ The

mispronunciation coupled with the altered names led to many forgotten family lineages, such as when Elkins’ great-great Grandfather Lorenz became Lorance.



Figure 9. Raymond Elkins and Sheriff J.T. Smith, “Tennessee’s Riddle of the Talking Skull,” *Startling Detective*, April 1938.

⁴⁹Slonina, 2.

⁵⁰ Slonina, 10.

BLOODLINE

Elkins married Virginia Mitchell in 1927 in Cannon County where they had ten children, four of them at the time of Elkins' trial and jail sentence. The eldest, Mallie Lynette Elkins, was nine years old during this time and has the clearest memories of her father in jail and the crowds at the Cannon County Courthouse. The embellished account of the murder and trial in *American Detective* has one interesting detail of one of the witnesses who saw Elkins. According to the eyewitness, he would never forget Elkins as his eyes were a peculiar steely gray color. It turns out that Elkins' eyes were blue, if we are to trust the United States Army. Elkins' World War I draft card revealed his eye color along with the rest of his physical appearance just as Allen's and Tucker's had. Elkins' draft card reports that he was 5'11" tall, 175 lbs., with brown hair, blue eyes, and was of a "light" complexion. The draft card stated he had one defining physical characteristic, a scar over his right eye.

I had always thought this was unusual, if correct, not just because of the rarity of gray as an eye color, but I had imagined his eyes might have been green. Green eyes are also extremely rare, but they run in my family. Green was the color of Elkins' daughter Mallie Lynette's eyes, as well as the color of my mother's.



Figure 10. Raymond, Mallie Lynette, and Virginia Elkins, approximately 1918, Cannon County, Tennessee.

Raymond Elkins was my maternal great-grandfather though he died over twenty years before I was born. My grandmother told me on many occasions that he was a “good daddy when he was sober.” Oftentimes, at her kitchen table, she would repeat, “He always believed in me and thought I could do anything, but he wasn’t much fun to be around when he’d been drinking—him or Mama.”⁵¹ Reviewing the criminal court records in the run-up to Elkins’ arrest the summer of 1937 for the murder of Allen, it is safe to say that he had become very well acquainted with local law enforcement.

The week in June 1934 that Allen went missing, Elkins was defending a charge for larceny. The following year on August 3, 1935, Elkins appeared on the Cannon County Court felony docket entering a guilty plea (again) for larceny.⁵² Elkins was ordered to pay a fine and until that was met, serve hard labor for a set period of time. It is unclear at this time if Elkins’ larceny cases in 1934 and 1935 were related or a part of a pattern. Whatever Elkins stole, and from whom, in the late dog days of that Tennessee summer is only speculation with no further mention in the record. However, if

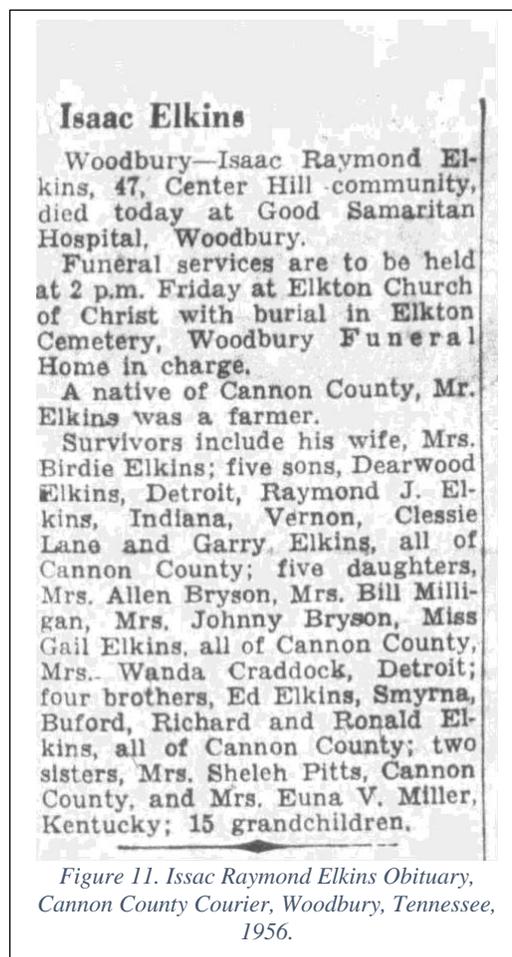


Figure 11. Issac Raymond Elkins Obituary, Cannon County Courier, Woodbury, Tennessee, 1956.

⁵¹ Mallie Lynette (Elkins) Bryson, Interview by author, Woodbury, Tennessee, approximately 2014.

⁵² *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Cannon County Circuit Court, Felony Docket 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Woodbury, TN, 1935).

something was gnawing at Elkins, it was certainly not finished with him that following winter.

On February 6, 1936, Elkins was arrested and charged with “assault with the intent to commit murder in the first degree.” The Cannon County felony docket did not mention the victim, but in the cross examination during the Allen murder trial in 1937, it is revealed that officer Harrison Smith was the target. John Morgan Manus, also one of the four men originally picked up for suspicion in the Allen murder before charges were brought against Elkins and Tucker, was also charged. The court transcripts revealed that the Elkins and Manus tried to run officer Smith over with a vehicle while the officer was serving an arrest warrant. Furthermore, the cross examination in 1937 revealed that Elkins had fled to Texas and had to be retrieved by Marshalls for prosecution in 1936. Elkins contested that he broke his bond, and it is unknown at this time whether there was a Texas family connection. Elkins contested the assault charges and asked for a mistrial to no avail, he was sentenced for “assault with the intent to commit murder in the second degree... [and] he be committed to the State Penitentiary at Nashville, Tennessee, for a period of time of not less than one year nor more than five.”⁵³

This year-long sentence put Elkins in the state penitentiary in Nashville till at least the spring of 1937. Elkins had been home to his wife and children for less than six months when he was scooped up and promptly put back in jail, charged with the 1934 killing of Clarence Allen. That time not for intent, but in action. The court dockets in

⁵³ *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Cannon County Circuit Court, Felony Docket 1, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Woodbury, TN, 1936).

Cannon County in 1937 are still often difficult to read due to the handwriting, and while the legalese is verbose and foreign, the initial verdict is clear: a jury of Raymond Elkins and Martin Tucker's peers charged that the two men "did unlawfully, feloniously, willfully, deliberately, premeditatedly and of malice aforethought kill and slay one Clarence Allen and upon him thereby commit unlawfully, feloniously, willfully, deliberately, premeditatedly, and maliciously the crime and felony of murder in the first degree, against the peace and dignity of the State."⁵⁴ For the next two years Elkins is in local and state newspapers for multiple trials and appeals regarding the murder of Allen. The two (known) pulp fiction stores were printed around the time Elkins was finally cleared of wrongdoing by the Tennessee State Supreme Court. Elkins only shows up in the newspapers once more in the 1950s for illegal whiskey selling. Elkins' longtime lawyer, Jim Cummings, was the Speaker of the Tennessee State House by this time. The article appears to be more of a photo op for the state legislator than serious criminal matter. Elkins and Virginia remained in Cannon County and raised ten children. Elkins died of cardiovascular disease at the young age of forty-seven.

How were the Southerners who stayed behind different? Were the men and women who remained in the American South their entire lives unique? Elkins, like many of his fellow rural Middle Tennessee neighbors grew up in and still lived in a horse-drawn world. The sleek technology of the Model-T Ford Allen drove into town represented a thing of wonder and spectacle on the dirt roads of Cannon County—as well

⁵⁴ *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Cannon County Circuit Court, Felony Docket 22, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Woodbury, TN, 1937).

as rapid movement. Throughout much of his testimony, Raymond described walking into or out of Woodbury, or a store, or a neighbor's house. It is difficult today to imagine the intimate knowledge of geography possessed by people who traced the paths of their homelands on foot day after day and year after year.

Historical research on the Southern Diaspora and associated studies has extensively covered many of the major movements of Southerners. Multiple movements of Southern populations, of both Black and white Americans, took place in many different eras—and for many different reasons. The United States' migration patterns even favored conditions in the 1970s into the 2000s that saw the movement of people back into the Sunbelt region, it is worth noting that many of those families had Southern roots. For many of those families it was not just economics—it was about going home.

In his 2005 work *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, author Gregory Downs lays out what he argues is the “the first historical study of the Southern Diaspora in its entirety.”⁵⁵ Gregory's work, unlike the significant scholarship of migratory patterns of Southerners into various regions of the country, attempts to tell the collective story of Southern migration. However, in so much as a collective story can be told, Gregory points out there is an important distinction when it comes to race. *The Southern Diaspora* makes the case that, “we need to think in terms of two Great Migrations out of the South. But they were also related.”⁵⁶ One important way that they were related was economics. If some Southerners were leaving the South for employment and opportunity, then what can we make of those

⁵⁵ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

who did not? Were those men and women unable or unwilling to leave the same rural spaces that so many Southerners freely moved into and out of?

The South that emerged in the interwar years, continued to be divided by each movement of the populations out of the Southeastern section of the United States. Generations of white and Black Southerners left the region for Midwestern industrial centers seeking work, as well as Black Americans seeking freedom from oppressive and racist post-Reconstruction policies and the violence that often went hand in hand. In many ways, those Southerners left behind became increasingly isolated. The connectivity and modernity offered by urban centers, and proximity to information, altered many Southerners who left rural spaces. Rural spaces, like Cannon County, had traditionally been geographically isolated. However, The Memphis to Bristol Highway and the growth of the automobile was beginning to change life in the 1930s on the edge of Southern Appalachia.

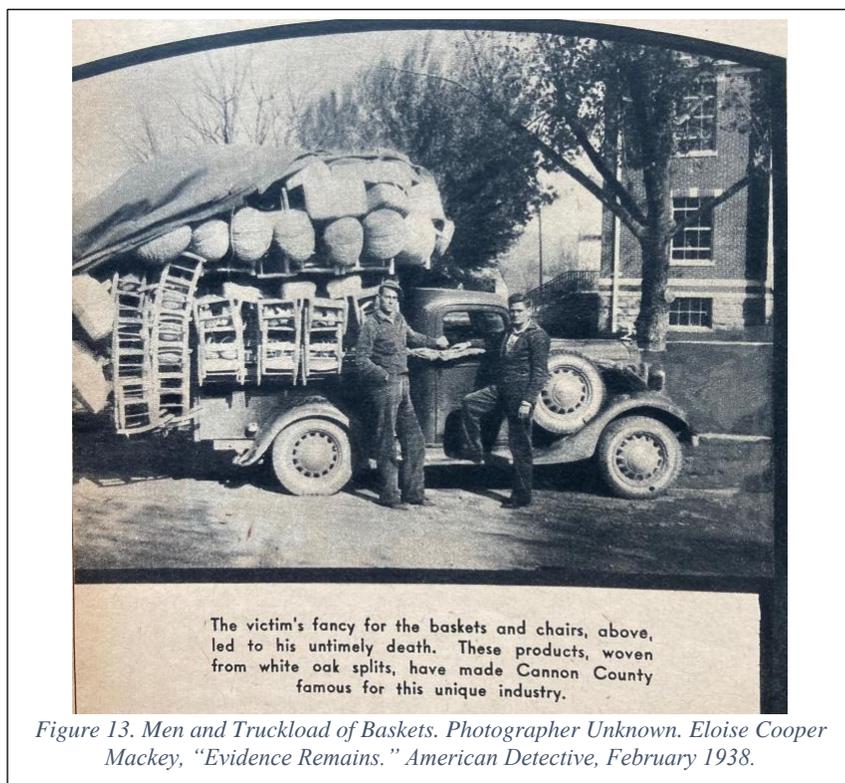
PASSING STRANGE

The author of the Tennessee State Supreme Court opinion on Elkins' trial summed up his assessment of the errored conviction as "Passing Strange." Elkins and Tucker had criminal backgrounds to be sure, but the evidence for a murder conviction was not present. The loaded gun Tucker claims Elkins possessed might not have been real, but all three men were undoubtedly loaded on Tennessee whiskey. Buzzed along those backroads, it is possible to imagine hands surfing out rolled down windows to beat

THREE

GREAT WHITE OAKS: Love and Theft

Just what was it about the Cannon County baskets that drove forty-nine-year-old Clarence Allen to make the trek down from Gary, Indiana to the rolling hills of the edge of the Eastern Highland Rim in the first place? The Tennessee Supreme Court in Elkins' appeal case in 1938 referenced Allen "mingled in purchasing



and gathering up such baskets and chairs to carry back north for sale."⁵⁷ *American Detective* phrased it dramatically differently in 1938, claiming, "The victim's fancy for the baskets and chairs...led to his untimely death."⁵⁸

The pulp fiction versions were printed primarily in industrial northern cities. However, by the time they reached newsstands, Elkins had been cleared and it was Tucker on trial—though his conviction was also overturned later. From the court

⁵⁷ Tennessee State Library and Archives, "The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins," Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

⁵⁸ Eloise Cooper Mackey, "Evidence Remains," *American Detective*, February 1938.

transcripts of the last days before his disappearance, it is clear Allen spent a good deal of time looking for whiskey, too. It is also clear from the transcripts that Elkins certainly had enough sources in that department that they would not want for a drink, at least not while in the Stones River watershed. Allen might have sought out whiskey during his stay, but the business that brought him rolling down rural highways in his Model T-Model Ford Sedan in the first place was indeed the purchase of baskets and chairs. Specifically, Allen sought out Cannon County's 8th Civil District and the type of baskets that the Elkins family made. Allen was in Cannon County because of economics and on business to buy handcrafted Appalachian baskets for profit back in Northern markets.

Why Cannon County? The traditions in and around the hills of Woodbury, Tennessee have their roots in the initial colonial settlers making their way across the southwest territories of what is now North America. Baskets, like many other items of material culture, were brought by settlers moving west across the continent. These European immigrants adopted many portions of material culture from American Indians, often making use of what was available. Settlers continued to encroach deeper and deeper into Indigenous Tribal lands, and far ahead of the Old-World comforts such as blacksmiths. Roy Overcast of the Tennessee Historical Society explains how certain “white settlers in the mountains of East Tennessee brought the techniques and traditions of basketry forms learned in England, Scotland, [Germany,] and Ireland and the same traditional forms produced in East Tennessee today trace their origins to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in those countries.”⁵⁹ This same line of thinking is applicable to

⁵⁹ Roy M. Overcast Jr., Basketmaking: Tennessee Encyclopedia, *Tennessee Historical Society*, October 8, 2017. <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/basketmaking/>.

the settlers of Middle Tennessee. However, it is the blending of the two cultures that would ultimately make these items so desirable. Specifically, as Overcast writes, “The adaptations of these forms to local Tennessee native materials—oak, hickory, birch, pine needles, willow, corn husks, and river cane—make them unique.”⁶⁰ Overcast goes on to explain that even “today, Cannon County still provides the best examples of the fine ribbed baskets, or typical egg basket forms, in part because of the plentiful supply of swamp white oak.”⁶¹

Carroll Van West in his chapter on “Tennessee Basketmaking” in *A History of Tennessee Arts: Creating Traditions, Expanding Horizons* adds that, “The rib basket is closely associated with the basketmaking traditions of the eastern half of the state, from the Appalachian Mountains to the Highland Rim of eastern Middle Tennessee.”⁶² Southern Appalachian communities had made items in isolation out of necessity for generations. To understand what reconnected these people with the outside world, and have their craft more widely known and sought after, we must look at technological changes that happened in the early twentieth century in the rural mountain South. As West emphasizes, “During the 1920s improved transportation systems enabled several rural communities of basket makers to extend their reputation across the region.”⁶³ One road proved very important for the families in Cannon County and others along its route.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Carroll Van West, “Tennessee Basketmaking,” *A History of Tennessee Arts: Creating Traditions, Expanding Horizons*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2004) 178.

⁶³ West, 180.



Figure 14. White Oak Egg Basket by Sue Williams. John C. Cambell Folk School. John C. Cambell, "Cannon County Basket Tradition with Sue Williams." Folk School Blog.

“The completion of the Memphis-to-Bristol Highway, the first modern road to link the state’s northeast and southwest corners, passed through what had been isolated, small farms in the Cumberland Plateau and the Highland Rim of Middle Tennessee,” writes West.⁶⁴ It is

the completion of this road that would bring Allen into Cannon County. That and the Southern Appalachian Craft Guild created in Gatlinburg, Tennessee in 1929 that credentialed the craft and created a market for elites.

Elkins and his family, only a few generations removed from the first white man’s ax that took down a white oak tree in Cannon County, had adapted to the economy of 1930s rural Middle Tennessee. Thanks to the boom in middle-class commercial interest in Appalachian craft items, such as the furniture and baskets Elkins’ family made, many economically distressed Southerners turned to the production of traditional family crafts for income. Handmade craft items, such as baskets, had previously reminded many rural Southerners of poverty and hardship.⁶⁵ The industrializing middle-class consumer interest in these items was tied to a view of their makers as “others,” and the people were marketed as simple and docile. However, these were complicated and complex

⁶⁴ West, 180.

⁶⁵ West, 179.

individuals who bore the social and cultural scars of poverty and hardship, though they proved to be just as industrious as any other Americans.

“All KINDS FROM LITTLE TWIGS TO BIG BASKETS”

When questioned by attorneys on the witness stand during the Allen murder trial, Elkins was asked what kind of baskets his family made. His reply, “All kinds from little twigs to big baskets,” was the beginning of his testimony.⁶⁶ The story, it seems, began with baskets. I knew very little about the history of the tradition or my family’s role in it. I knew, generally, that the Elkins side of my family used

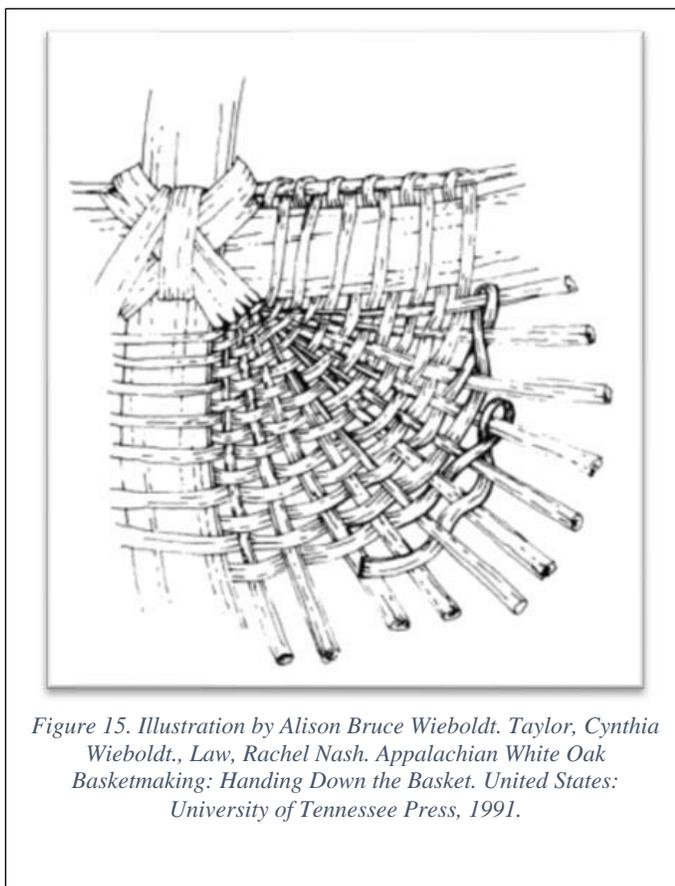


Figure 15. Illustration by Alison Bruce Wieboldt. Taylor, Cynthia Wieboldt., Law, Rachel Nash. Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking: Handing Down the Basket. United States: University of Tennessee Press, 1991.

to make white oak baskets. I knew that Cannon County was known for handcrafted baskets and chairs. My initial discovery of the murder trial and the disappearance of Allen all centered around whiskey, guns, and foul play.

⁶⁶ Tennessee State Library and Archives, “The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins,” Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

“Before paper bags, tin cans, and plastic containers, our forebears relied on baskets of all shapes and sizes as utensils essential in the daily routines of an agrarian society,” wrote historians Rachel Nash Law and Cynthia Wieboldt in *Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking: Handing Down the Basket*.⁶⁷ In their scholarship outlining the history and tradition of basketry in the Appalachian region Law and Wieboldt assert, “our inclusion of the areas of central Tennessee and southcentral Kentucky in the ‘Appalachian region’ may be controversial. However, we feel strongly that these regions should be included in this study, because these western areas share many cultural similarities with eastern mountain regions.”⁶⁸ The authors argue that these regions, which includes Cannon County, are well documented and should be included in their survey of central Appalachian basketmaking.

The white oak that is central to the basketry is prevalent in Cannon County and the example by Sue Williams in Figure 4 is an example of the “Cannon County Tie” an X pattern that exemplifies one of the regional distinctions that developed over time there.⁶⁹ “Ribbed baskets, constructed of ribs, hoops, and splits, are typical of Tennessee-style basket making. The traditional ribbed egg basket is the most popular style created from these three elements,” writes Corie Marie Podielski for the John C. Campbell Folk School Blog ⁷⁰ Below are various examples of baskets by Cannon County artisans Ida

⁶⁷ Taylor, Cynthia Wieboldt, Law, Rachel Nash. *Appalachian White Oak Basketmaking: Handing Down the Basket*. United States: University of Tennessee Press, 1991, 3.

⁶⁸ Taylor, Cynthia Wieboldt, Law, Rachel Nash., xvii.

⁶⁹ Cory Marie Podielski, Cannon County Basket Tradition with Sue Williams, John C. Campbell Folk School Blog, April 26, 2020, <https://blog.folkschool.org/2020/04/26/cannon-county-basket-tradition-with-sue-williams/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Pearl Davis and her daughter Thelma Davis Hibdon in figure 5. The main makers of baskets tended to be women in most of the cultures associated with basketry. The basketry of European immigrants, like the Cherokee of the region before them, was predominantly a woman's world. In the 1930s the Elkins family indicated that it was more of a family process. The families 1930s expanded basketry was for a commercial market though and that would have implications for the makers and the buyers.



Figure 16. Cannon County Baskets by Ida Pearl Davis and Thelma Davis Hibdon. Case Antiques Auctions and Appraisals. <https://caseantiques.com/item/lot-526-5-cannon-county-signed-baskets-2/>.

Accept, to begin, that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past. A continuous process situated in the nothingness of the present, linking the vanished

with the unknown, tradition is stopped, parceled, and codified by thinkers who fix upon this aspect or that, in accord with their needs or preoccupations, and leave us with a scatter of apparently contradictory yet cogent definitions.⁷¹

⁷¹ Henry Glassie, *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, (United States: University of Illinois Press, 2003)176.

CULTURAL THIEFS

“Tourism is an economic strategy, but a cultural thief,” opined historian Sarah H. Hill in her 1997 scholarship on Cherokee baskets *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*.⁷² Hill was writing about the Eastern Band of Cherokee women in her research on Cherokee basketry. However, there are parallels between the Cherokee and Appalachian “crafts” that were sold to consumers. In *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940* Jane S. Becker breaks down the trends that drove the movement. Becker explains how “folk” came to mean the things produced by certain people, as she argues, “in the first half of this century in the United States, when intellectuals, reformers, artists and museums, and business and industry all defined the nature and meaning of American’s folk by assigning

⁷² Sarah Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 323.

them to society's margins as relics of a generalized past, accessible mainly through the commodities they produced."⁷³ "Folk" came to mean something from the past, and as Becker explains, "The past that the folk were thought to inhabit was a generalized one, stripped of the specific conflicts and tensions that shape social and economic life."⁷⁴

The era that Becker writes about was one defined by, "The burgeoning of



Figure 17. John Lafayette Elkins and wife Lilly "Booger" Elkins. Tennessee Virtual Archives.

industrial capitalism, urbanization, and immigration" and the reaction many had to it was that they "looked back longingly to an imagined past."⁷⁵ Or, as 90s/2000s country singer/songwriter extraordinaire Kim Richey might have phrased it, "You Remember The

⁷³ Jane S. Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930-1940*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Becker, 3.

Way It Never Was.”⁷⁶ Not only did folk come to mean the past, but as Becker adds, “*Folk* became synonymous with *colonial*.”⁷⁷ Colonial was also a term that less and less defined the makeup of America, but as Becker argues, the term folk came to represent a, “Homogenous vision of ideal community, in vivid contrast to the actual growing diversity of American society.”⁷⁸ It was also against the backdrop of the 1930s Great Depression when Clarence Allen, and others like him, were making trips to communities such as Cannon County, Tennessee for handcrafted items to sell. Becker writes that, “During the depression decade of the 1930s, the folk and their traditions seemed to offer Americans the foundation for a way of life that did not rely on material wealth.”⁷⁹

To understand what drove Allen to Woodbury, Tennessee in the 1930s we must understand the context of the nation’s mindset at the time. Becker explains, “In this decade, Americans enthusiastically collected, presented, marketed and consumed the nation’s folkways, past and present.”⁸⁰ It was here that the idea of Southern Appalachians as “others” intersects with the nation’s new consumer habits. It is also here where the question of exploitation enters the story. The soft and smooth version of “sweet ole” Southern Appalachia that was peddled to consumers did not resemble many of the rough and ragged edges of its people. As Becker argues, “‘Traditionalizing’ mountain craftwork and its producers served to obscure the conflicts and specific histories that constituted the reality of mountain life and craft production...The worth... depended...upon the

⁷⁶ Kim Richey, “You Remember the Way It Never Was,” *Glimmer*, Mercury Nashville, 1999.

⁷⁷ Becker, 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Becker, 5.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

invisibility of the Southern Appalachian people in the present.”⁸¹ There were inevitable social consequences to the cultural isolation and the dire poverty of the Southern Appalachian region.

In 1930s Depression Era America, the South was considered a ward of the state in effect. Much of the New Deal was targeted toward the South, and plenty of it towards Tennessee and Southern Appalachia. As Becker reveals, “The potential of handicrafts as a means of rural revitalization and relief engaged not only particular programs within the TVA in the 1930s, but also the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its Extension Service and the Works Progress Administration (WPA).⁸² In essence, the New Dealers intended to “save Appalachia” with an industrial scale effort at manufacturing handicrafts from Southern Appalachia.⁸³ In the end, Becker argues, “government reformers helped create a new definition of crafts as handmade commodities for the middle-class home.”⁸⁴ Handcraft goods from the highland South would be marketed as authentic, folk, and other—but it became a corporate enterprise. Becker argues that while the selling of tradition became a capitalist venture, it depended on portraying Southern Appalachia as “benign” to middle-class consumers—something they were not.⁸⁵ Again, that ignored the grit, resolve, and perseverance that served Southern Appalachians so well as they adapted to a changing world. That characterization also glossed over the more malignant effects associated with distressed communities.

⁸¹ Becker, 7.

⁸² Becker, 93.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Becker, 124.

⁸⁵ Becker, 190.

In *Buying into the World of Goods Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*, Ann Smart Martin's scholarship on the backcountry of the British Empire, many of the ancestors of Cannon County settlers would eventually migrate from, Martin, writes, "Another key feature of backcountry life was the one-on-one violence that surfaced even as people evinced a desire to create a stable and prosperous place. Its position as the ragged edge of empire meant that the backcountry was an unstable composition."⁸⁶ Martin is writes of a society which existed a century-and-a half earlier on the other side of the Cumberland Gap in a place roughly six-hundred miles to the west of what would become Cannon County; yet her same subjects would largely become the great-grandparents of the society being discussed in this paper. Elkins' great-grandparents were predominantly from Virginia, but also North Carolina and Bavaria. The elderly versions of some of the backcountry Virginia hands Martin wrote about touched the hands of the newborn children of those that settled in the Middle Tennessee region. Martin writes of an era and place that, "hovered between ordered permanent settlement and dangerous frontier... it constituted the shifting edge of the empire."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008) 5.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

Cannon
County was not
the edge or
front country of
an expanding
American
empire in the
1930s of
course, but it
was less than
one hundred

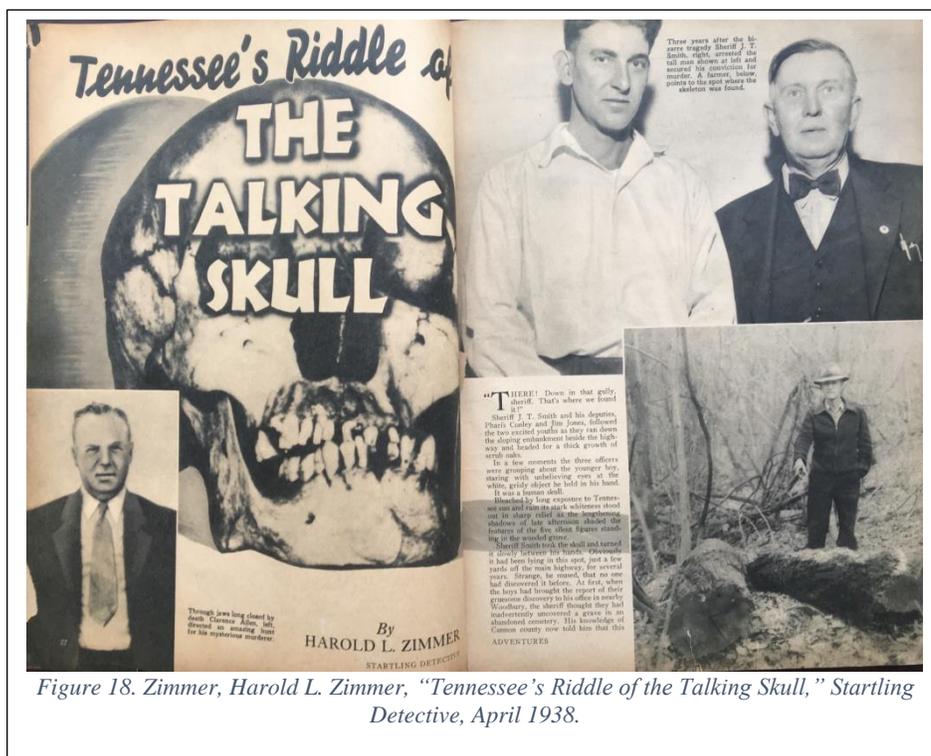


Figure 18. Zimmer, Harold L. Zimmer, "Tennessee's Riddle of the Talking Skull," *Startling Detective*, April 1938.

years removed from being such. The shifting edge of the empire that Martin writes about has shifted to a full-on new world and a new edge when the mid-1800s arrive in Middle Tennessee. However, these children of colonial frontier settlers are only one generation removed from the Cherokee American Wars.⁸⁸

There is no "middle ground" as some scholars argue for places that exist between nations with amorphous and shifting boundaries that are elastic and subject to the hot blood that runs through the veins of clashing cultures, not so much "sharing" space as "violating" it.⁸⁹ The violence that transpired as this region was transformed might have settled by the mid-1800s, but it had not vanished entirely. Martin's assertions on the

⁸⁸ Also known as the Chickamauga Wars

⁸⁹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); I use the term "middle ground" as it was originally popularized in White's 1991 scholarship.

backcountry of Virginia one-hundred-and-fifty years earlier are still relevant when examining the basketry of the Elkins' family in the 1930s. Martin argued that material objects, "symbolize and communicate intangible ideas, build relationships, and proffer pleasure...[and are] complex bundles of individual, social, and cultural meanings grafted onto something that can be seen, touched, and owned."⁹⁰

The commercialization of the handcrafted baskets that the Elkins family and others were making for the market very much reflect on new relationships that were built. In that process the baskets also became less functional and more purely decorative items for the collectible market. The baskets no longer represented the necessity and the poverty that they once did for many families, and they certainly represented something different to the middle-class consumers who purchased them and projected their own cultural meanings. The story that was implied in the pulp fiction magazine tales of the Allen trial characterized a cautionary tale as though Allen's lust for the items brought his untimely demise. Allen clearly was extracting products from the people of Cannon County on his trips for commercial enterprise. The pulp magazine versions and the official newspaper accounts all only refer to Allen as a man from Indiana. Allen was just one small player in the economic system that brought Southern Appalachian handcrafted goods to the marketplace. Still, the images of poor Southern families in overalls by wagon loads of baskets are evocative ones and harken back to the heart of the "cultural thief" concept that Hill spoke of.

⁹⁰ Martin, 9.

But who stole from whom? Even if an increasingly commercialized country wanted “authentic” craft goods from “others” who represented a way of life that they feared was disappearing, how long had those “other’s” ancestors’ “authentic” way of life existed? Three generations? Before that? Did they belong to the King of England? Did they belong to the French and their somewhat co-dependent relationship with Indigenous Tribes? Or did they belong to the Spanish who were the first Europeans to hack their way through the dense Appalachian forests? Those great white oaks brought down by colonial settlers belonged to the land of the Cherokee (and other) tribes for thousands of years, if not longer. The original habitants certainly did not cede them without resistance. “Treaty” is a problematic word to use when someone has a gun to your head.

WHAT “TIN LIZZIE” NEVER TOLD

Allen, Elkins, and Tucker were all lovers of good whiskey, whether it was bootleg or bonded, and all trying to make a dollar. All three of these men were Southerners—and fathers. Allen could have been many things to many people, but the charge of carpetbagger would not stick. Nor could the charge of exploiting poor Southern culture. Allen was Elkins’ father’s age and a decade older than Tucker, but the three men were all cut from the same Southern Appalachian cloth. The drunken bender that the three men had that week in the summer of 1934 ended with Allen’s disappearance and the startling find of his skeletal remains three years later certainly ended in tragedy. The result was fatal for Allen, whether it was caused by his heart, whiskey, or bullets.

I'm a rambling
gambler and I'm
drunk every night
I tell you boys I'm
ragged but right⁹¹



Figure 19. 1924 Model T Brochure. National Automotive History Collection

The only other eyewitness to the events of June 7, 1934, was Allen's Model-T Ford Sedan. The popular Model-T Ford car, also known as "Tin Lizzie," was noted by multiple witnesses as unmistakably Allen's car. Every word that was spoken between the men was within her cab and she carried them every single whiskey-fueled mile they traveled. When they drunkenly crashed her into Julia Glimpse's yard in town, she straightened herself up, and quickly rushed them south down the Manchester Highway 53. She hauled them up the steep climb onto the edge of the Highland Rim till they were safe from the law—but not from one another. When they opened her doors and stepped out for another drink, she could only watch. It is easy to picture Lizzie pulled off the Manchester Highway's hillside, with headlamps like eyes quiet about all that she saw.

I'm on my way to Heaven, and I tell you just how I feel
I 'druther ride a wagon and go to Heaven, than to Hell in an automobile⁹²

⁹¹ Riley Puckett, "Ragged But Right," 1934.

⁹² Uncle Dave Macon, "From Earth to Heaven."

KILLING JOBS

In Becker's *Selling Tradition* she quotes the words of a rug hooker in rural Tennessee: "she described hooking rugs for the market as 'a killing job,' ...invisibility and amnesia also meant the dissolution of personal histories."⁹³ The dark side of the folkcraft boom of the early twentieth century placed rural Southern Appalachian people in hard working conditions for little pay to satisfy the demands of the market. The "authentic" items many middle-class consumers purchased were just a means of making money and surviving for many of the hands that created them. Southern Appalachia was thrown into capitalism, for better or worse. The same factors that caused many Southern Appalachian women to resume basketry in the early 1900s applied to women of the Eastern Band of Cherokee in the Mountains of North Carolina. In *Weaving New Worlds* Hill wrote that, "Weaving secured their world for so long that no one could remember how it began or who wove the first strands. When the weaving gives way, according to the Cherokee story of creation, they will die as a people and the world they know will disappear."⁹⁴

Weaving is tied to the ancestry of many cultures around the world. For some families in Cannon County in the 1930s, the making and selling of baskets might have painful memories associated with the enterprise. It is understandable that the Elkins family preferred to forget some of them altogether. No matter what transpired that summer day in 1934, the three men's stories are now woven together forever. Like splits of white oak

⁹³ Becker, 237.

⁹⁴ Sarah Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 2.

harvested from trees on the hillside, they were bound into something strong enough to carry secrets among its contents.

FOUR

REMOVAL & REPLACEMENT IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA: Internal Colonization

During the Colonial era, multiple Indigenous Tribes such as the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Shawnee, Yuchi, Choctaw, and Seneca called current day Tennessee home. The Tribes that still resided here, such as the Cherokee, many of whose ancestors likely had inhabited the Tennessee region for thousands of years, were forcefully removed forever in the first half of the nineteenth century from their ancestral homelands. Cannon County was far to the southeastern edge of the land claimed by the Middle Tennessee Cumberland Settlements of the 1790s and would not fall under a land treaty transfer “officially” till the Third Treaty of Tellico in 1805. In the following decades, thousands of permanent settlements took place in the region and Cannon County was officially created in 1836 out of parts of Rutherford, Smith, Wilson, and Warren County.

In 1838, one route of the Trail of Tears, the forced march of Indigenous Tribes to Indian Territory, camped for several days in the center of Woodbury. Many American Indians had attempted to assimilate to some extent into the white settler culture by the early 1800s, including participating in the enslavement of African Americans. Indigenous Americans owned thousands of enslaved men, women, and children at the time of removal—and enslaved people marched with them. By the time of the 1840 US Census

for Cannon County, there were over seven thousand new inhabitants already on the rolls (including 605 enslaved African Americans).⁹⁵

One-hundred years later, the first “history” of Cannon County was produced by members of a local historical committee to celebrate Cannon County’s centennial birthday. Sterling Spurlock Brown, a practicing lawyer who authored the book, stated in his opening acknowledgement, “It has been the intention of the committee and the writer to give an accurate account of the events and of the people who caused them from the time the first white man visited this section of the state to the present time.”⁹⁶ In his summation of the settling of the frontier, Brown writes, “Of these Southern tribes the one that gave the white settler the most trouble was the Cherokees . . . Whatever may have been the origin or the true character of the Red Indian, he was from the beginning of the invasion of the pioneer into his territory a deadly foe of the white man, and cruel in this methods . . . his bravery and treachery caused many a brave pioneer to lose his life in the great struggle between the two races for supremacy, which could have but one ending—the triumph of the Anglo-Saxon.”⁹⁷

Brown, a product of the Jim Crow South he came of age in, clearly saw the history in stark racial terms. A few decades shy of a second Centennial, and many Cannon Countians talk very differently about the Cherokee men and women who lived here long before their Scots Irish, English, and German ancestors did. A great number of

⁹⁵ R.L. Murray, *Searching for Emily, A Compilation of Black History Records for Cannon County, TN*, (Self Published, 2018); United States Department of Labor and Commerce Statistics, 1840 Population Census.

⁹⁶ Sterling S. Brown, *History of Woodbury and Cannon County, Tennessee* (Manchester: Doak Printing, 1936), 6.

⁹⁷ Brown, 12-13.

descendants of those early white Euro-settlers now even declare indigeneity of their own—such as undocumented American Indian ancestry. What happened in those two-hundred years that the descendants of settlers, who removed and replaced the Indigenous population, for their land, would bear future generations who identified themselves as Indigenous?

THE SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN DIASPORA AND BEYOND

The Southern Appalachian region covers the swath of the infamous Appalachian Mountain range and its highlands as it stretches its way down through the upper and

lower Southern states. The region covers Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. The Southern Appalachian Diaspora, which

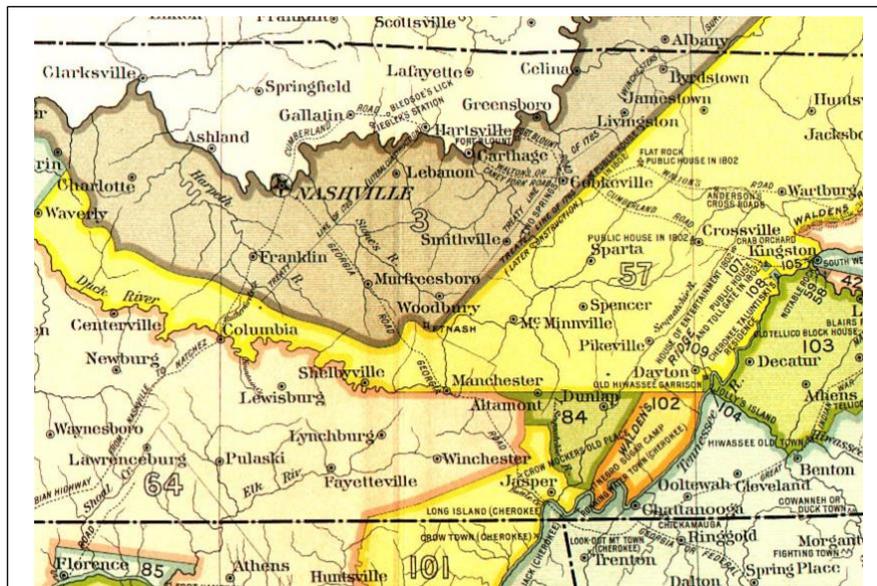


Figure 60. Treaty Map, Middle Tennessee, *The 18th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology 1896-1897, Vol. II., Smithsonian.*
<https://www.tngenweb.org/cessions>. (Accessed May 4, 2022).

covers the regions its people moved to, extends to the Midwest and Rustbelt states many Southerners traveled to as they sought work in different migration phases out of the Southeast. Midwestern states above the Upper South, cities such as: Akron, Ohio;

Detroit, Michigan; and Chicago, Illinois; saw their ranks of Southerners swell in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While the people who moved about from the Southern Appalachian region are also part of the larger Southern Diaspora, they also have characteristics that have historically been defined as unique to Appalachia. In *Appalachian Odyssey, Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*, authors Thomas E. Wagner, Phillip J. Obermiller, and Bruce Tucker examine the period after World War I when America was enforcing stricter immigration laws. In *Appalachian Odyssey* they write, “Southern mountain workers were recruited heavily for jobs in northern factories ... employers established their hiring practices with a particular view of mountain folk.”⁹⁸ The word “peculiar,” that seems to follow Southerners around, in this case, dealt with the fact that northern employers, “associated Appalachian workers with mechanical aptitude, a strong work ethic, and resistance to unionization and the blandishments of communism.”⁹⁹

These “shuttle migrants” of the 1930s would be only the tip of the Great Migration. World War II was the peak accelerant that drove the depletion of four million people from Appalachia.¹⁰⁰ After three generations, *Appalachian Odyssey* argues that many of these migrants became “bicultural, that is, becoming adept at normative speech, dress, and behavior in public while retaining Appalachian cultural characteristics in their personal lives.”¹⁰¹ The authors write that, “Their labor was welcome, but their ‘peculiar ways’ were not ... public officials, business leaders, police, educators, and social workers

⁹⁸ Phillip J. Obermiller, Thomas E. Wagner, and E. Bruce Tucker, *Appalachian Odyssey, Historical Perspectives on the Great Migration*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2000), xii.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Obermiller, Wagner, and Tucker, *Appalachian Odyssey*, xiv.

sought ways to deal with what was then called ‘the SAM problem.’¹⁰² “SAM,” which stood for Southern Appalachian migrants, was kinder than street-level terms such as *Cracker*, *Hillbilly*, and *Red Neck*, etc.¹⁰³

The people of the Southern Appalachian Diaspora region even more directly affected the areas of the South just outside of the highland regions. Generations of Southern Appalachian families’ children left the highlands for the Southern urban centers in towns like Nashville, Tennessee and Atlanta, Georgia that lie just outside of their

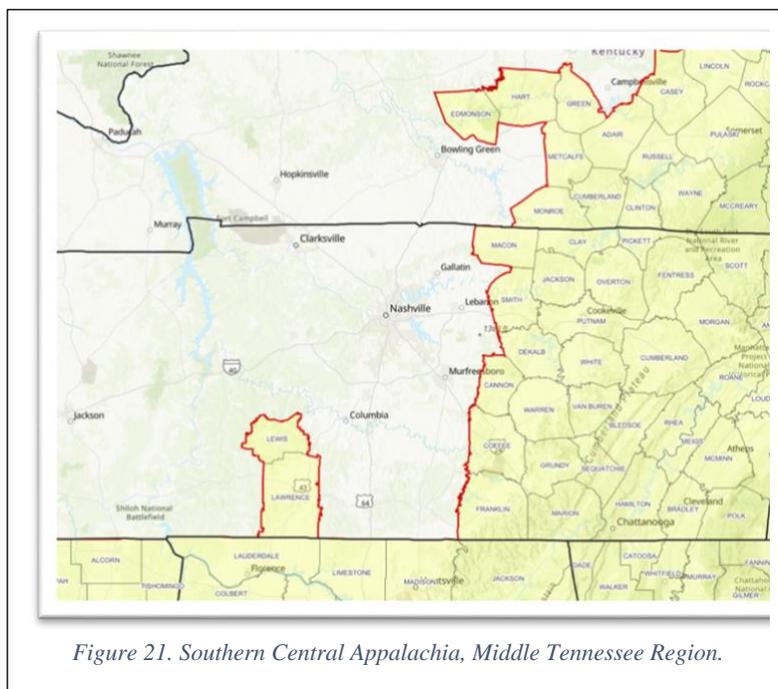


Figure 21. Southern Central Appalachia, Middle Tennessee Region.

homelands. Nashville, for example, is surrounded by a crescent-shaped Appalachian arc to its east that forms a semi-circle around the basin town that is now the capital of Tennessee. The waxing crescent moon shaped highland region that

reaches around and hugs the eastern side of the Nashville Basin has an outsized influence on its culture with the considerable movement of people back and forth from this region.

One important reason to include Nashville in this study is its cultural importance as the capital of Tennessee. Here in the Great Basin is the place white Euro-settlers built

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Tennessee's state house (though it was briefly in Murfreesboro). Nashville sets policy, not just for the Middle Tennessee region, but from the Smoky Mountains to the Mississippi Delta, and all that falls within its borders. Those borders also touch eight surrounding states, extending that influence. Nashville, as the capital of the second Trans-Appalachian state from the Southwest Territory admitted to the Union (sandwiched between Kentucky and Ohio), was also a primary producer of cultural content such as music, art, books, universities, and newspapers.

WAR AMONG THE WASTE PEOPLE

The descendants of white Euro-settlers that came to call the Southern Appalachian Mountain region home and their diaspora, were to the British, a waste people; to the American elite, they became white trash and rednecks. Still, to many, they were extolled for their virtuous "old time" ways and as honorable and honest mountain folk. An isolated subset of settlers seemed to develop (and maintain) a unique cultural identity, such as language and music. Much of the scholarship since the 1960s by historians examines the people of Appalachia as a distinct group and focuses on Scots Irish identity and the legacy of their exploitation and displacement.¹⁰⁴ The physical seclusion that can be provided by a massive mountain range, and the stunning natural beauty of a region such as the Appalachian Mountains, understandably made generations feel at home in the region.

¹⁰⁴ For examples of this type of scholarship see Phillip J. Obermiller, Thomas E. Wagner, and E. Bruce Tucker, *Appalachian Odyssey*; Kathryn M. Borman and Phillip J. Obermiller, *From Mountain To Metropolis*.

In America, class trumps all cards and transcends all other identifiers—whether its citizens are conscious of its effects or not. In her timely 2016 work, *White Trash. The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, Nancy Isenberg masterfully dispels much of the mythmaking in America of upward mobility. Much of the population England used to colonize her New World Colonies with was from what Isenberg referred to as “waste people.”¹⁰⁵ A nouveau elite class attempting to enrich themselves in the New World used the paupers, vagrants, and waste people from its cities’ streets, such as London, to work as a permanent underclass in places such as New Virginia and the Carolinas. And as Isenberg argues, North Carolina was the “original white trash colony.”¹⁰⁶

In the twenty-first century, wealthy nations like the United States and the United Kingdom sends some of their *literal* waste abroad to less economically blessed nations for processing. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, England made a habit of sending what it referred to as its “waste people” abroad to clear its streets and colonize contested foreign shores. Isenberg documents some of the class-fueled origins of American’s discontent and caste system in *White Trash*. The newly formed Republic of America attempted to brand itself and self-identify as upwardly mobile and make a break from the aristocratic bonds of feudalism that dominated England for centuries. America spun a myth that many white European immigrants came to hold true. Isenberg argues, “we [Americans] as a people have trouble embracing: the pervasiveness of a class hierarchy in

¹⁰⁵ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash, The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, (New York: Penguin, 2010), xxix.

¹⁰⁶ Isenberg, 47.

the United States. It begins and ends with the concepts of land and property ownership: class identity and the material and metaphoric meaning of land are closely connected.”¹⁰⁷

There were undoubtedly people who improved their lot in the New World. However, for scores of individuals that moved into the Upper South region, especially those in North Carolina (the mother state of Tennessee), removing those individuals from the metropole did not change their wasted potential in the eyes of elites. Isenberg combs the archives to describe how it was viewed in the beginning, writing that it was, “Populated by what many dismissed as “useless lubbers” ... North Carolina forged a lasting legacy as what we might call the first white trash colony.”¹⁰⁸ The movement of people in the Southern Colonies into and through the Appalachian Mountains carried much of this baggage and legacy into the overland regions of the Cherokee and other Indigenous Tribes in the Southeastern region of North America. As Isenberg describes it, “Early republican America had become a “cracker” country... the rural majority fanned outward to the edges of civilization.”¹⁰⁹

This conflict of the rural majority and its mother country pitted the burgeoning British Colonies against the will of its would-be master back in London. England sought peace with many Indigenous Tribes, in part to counterbalance the restless tendencies of her Colonies, and to ensure her primary goal: a working colonial population, using enforced labor and previously stolen land, to produce wealth to send back to the mother country. In respect to the British Colonies, the Cherokee Nation and the British Empire were aligned on this one issue. Isenberg writes that, “While the British had made an

¹⁰⁷ Isenberg, xxix.

¹⁰⁸ Isenberg, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 107.

attempt to prohibit western migration through the Proclamation of 1763, the Revolutionary War removed such barriers and acquiesced to the flood of poorer migrants.”¹¹⁰ On the other side of the Proclamation Line stood the Tennessee Territory, as well as Ohio, Kentucky, etc. The vast lands of the Indian Reserve on the Western side of the Proclamation line were, in fact, one of the main reasons for the American Revolution.

SETTLER COLONIALISM IN THE TRANS-APPALACHIAN SOUTHWEST

Settler Colonialism, as opposed to Colonialism, is one of the more useful concepts in the toolbox of historians seeking to examine and explain the formation of Neo-European Colonies and the new nations they spawn. Lorenzo Veracini, in “Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview,” described Settler Colonialism as, “autonomous collectives that claim both a special sovereign charge and a regenerative capacity.”¹¹¹ That “special sovereignty” that Veracini is describing is partly what pitted settlers in the British Colonies against Her Majesty’s wishes. Another way Veracini has phrased the phenomenon is, “whereas the colonialism *reinforces* the distinction between colony and metropole, settler colonialism *erases* it... Colonialism *reproduces* itself, and the freedom and equality of the colonized is forever postponed; settler colonialism, by contrast, *extinguishes* itself.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Lorenzo Veracini, “Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview,” 2010, 3.

¹¹² Lorenzo Veracini, “Introducing Settler Colonial Studies,” <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648799>.

In other words, Settler Colonialism is removal and replacement. Many of the “waste people” the British cast off to North America were people who had been oppressed themselves—some for generations. It is impossible, other than to read a settler’s own words in primary sources, to know to what extent they knew they were a cog in a wheel. For that matter, I would argue, it is an irrelevant exercise—for what choice did they have? Therefore, I argue, settler colonialism is much worse than Colonialism, as it pits oppressed groups against each other. Neither can escape this form of capitalistic fatalism. Would-be Colonizers can be expelled, such as the Colonies of Britain, Belgium, and Germany were in Africa, some after many decades or even generations.

Settlers crossed the Appalachian Mountains and continued to flow into the lands of the Overhill Cherokee settlements in the late 1700s, even though the Cherokee fiercely resisted the continued encroachment. Consequently, it was the *Adventure*, the flotilla of John Donelson’s party, bound for the banks of the Cumberland River near French Lick that would change conditions drastically for the Cherokee Nation. Hundreds of miles to the western rear of the Cherokee capital, The Cumberland Compact, as the settlers referred to their group, was the blow that sent shock waves through many Indigenous tribes in the region. For the next twenty years, the Cherokee, Creek, Shawnee, and (for a while) the Chickasaw, fiercely fought these invaders on their shores. Tribal leaders understood the stakes concerning the party of white settlers who staked their claim on the Cumberland River on Christmas Day, 1779. Settler colonialism comes to stay—it cannot be undone.

A settler colony severs its ties with a metropole, in this case London, over a conflict of interest. The settler colonialism model depends on the expansion through removal and replacement of whatever Indigenous inhabitants are impediments to the settler project. The last phase of settler colonialism often involves a reframing of identity from the replacement society and the claiming of indigeneity or native-ness. This is not unique to the Southeastern portion of the United States, nor is it unique to America. Settler colonialism is reflected in both North and South America, Australia, Africa, Indonesia, the Trans-Pacific, the Trans-Atlantic, and countless other examples where scholars continue to unpack the settler colonialism phenomenon's legacy on societies.

The bulk of scholarly work on settler colonialism is only a few decades old, and one of its foremost authors, Patrick Wolfe, reminds readers that “Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event.”¹¹³ In “Survival and Survivance Under Settler Colonialism,” author Ashley Riley Sousa argues that “Settler colonial nations, therefore, construct entire societies and histories upon the structure of settler colonialism, eliminating the Indigenous presence physically at first, then culturally, then finally appropriating indigeneity to establish their difference and independence from their mother countries.”¹¹⁴ The establishment of that cultural indigeneity we will return to—but Sousa's scholarship, which builds upon Wolfe's, reminds readers that when it comes to settler colonialism, as Sousa writes, “It never stops.” A structure never does.

¹¹³ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (December 2006): 387-409.

¹¹⁴ Ashley Riley Sousa, “Survival and Survivance Under Settler Colonialism,” in David Meola, ed., *A Cultural History of Genocide: The Long Nineteenth Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

While settler colonialism studies are still new and developing, much work still needs to be done in the examination of the Southern Appalachian region. The gap in that scholarship aligns with the gap in scholarship on Middle Tennessee history in general. The Middle Tennessee region has been written about extensively, especially the Donelson-Robertson Party and the perspective of white Euro-settlers. Much less has been examined from the perspective of American Indians, and the impact on their societies, especially events such as the Nickajack Expedition—and its implication of settler genocide against those two Cherokee towns. Much like Lost Causes sought to recast the South's motives and role in the Civil War, and to undermine Reconstruction; descendants of white Euro-settlers who would presume to write the history of Middle Tennessee would lean heavily into the "Vacant Quarter" theory. The misuse of this term, meant for describing ancient Indigenous societies that previously collapsed in the region, was often a thinly veiled way to downplay the number of American Indians that lived in Middle Tennessee and to undermine their tribal sovereignty and rights.

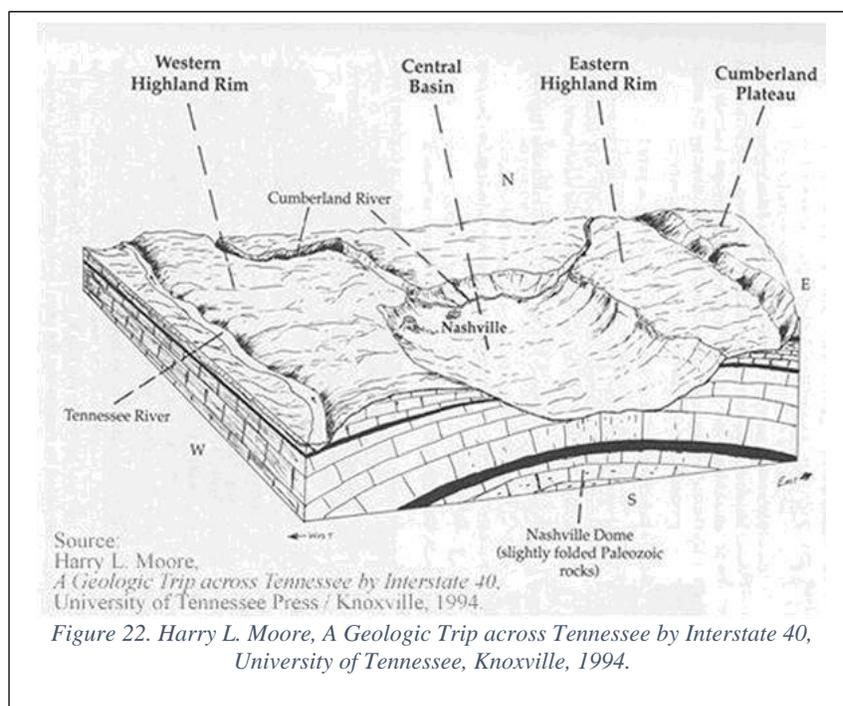
IN THE MIDDLE OF A GREAT BASIN

The South Central Appalachian Region that cuts through almost half of what is now the state of Tennessee, makes a dramatic geological shift in the center of the Volunteer State. Here, on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau and its Dividing Ridge, the Great Basin rips away from the Highland Rim of Appalachia. The Middle Tennessee region cascading toward the bottom of the Great Basin was, at one time, the center of the hot war on the Colonial and American Southwestern Frontier between Indigenous Tribes

and white settler militias. Fort Nashborough, nestled on the banks of the Cumberland River in the late eighteenth century, became the epicenter of an increasing number of forts and stations that began to weave a network of settler activities throughout the so-called Mero District.

The Nickajack Expedition, and a host of others, that originated from the foothold on the muddy Cumberland River, created a web of expanding militia activity. The militia's targets were against what the settlers considered to be "warring tribes"; that is, tribes attacking them for moving into and claiming lands deep into territory that was

legally protected by treaties with both the British Government and later the United States federal government. These settlements existed in defiance of the federal authorities; and so, too, were their militia raids illegal.



Indigenous societies, forced into defensive positions, could not continue to untangle themselves from the ever-expanding violent excursions into their tribal lands. The story of how Middle Tennessee was acquired from its original Indigenous occupants is just as bloody and full of the usual unsavory characters as is the standard for settler

frontier expansionist stories in North America. Problematic figures that helped perpetuate the white-Euro-Settler Colonial project abound in each tale of removal and replacement. The Donelson Party, celebrated for the founding of Nashville, was certainly notorious to the Indigenous Tribes in Middle Tennessee in the late 1700s—particularly the Cherokee. Similarly, the Transylvania Company that Richard Henderson used to justify stealing Cherokee lands in Middle Tennessee gives land speculators a bad name—no small task.

Too many Tennesseans grow up with only a passing knowledge of local and state history (including this one). That absence of a complete story often gets filled in with counter narratives—such as self-indigenization. The story of the Cumberland Compact, the name the settlers gave their governing body and its associated militia, is generally known as part of the white settler origin story in the Middle Tennessee region. The general story of a westward expansion of predominantly white Euro-settlers and the enslaved people they brought with them, moving across the continent fits neatly into the Manifest Destiny version of U.S. early American History. However, the story of the settling of Middle Tennessee did not fit that east to west narrative.

When Donelson's party skipped over half of what is now Tennessee by using its waterways, it followed the more nuanced back and forth complicated movement of white European settlers into Native spaces. For students of the cliff notes version of Tennessee history, it is akin to a needle skipping forward on a vinyl album that skims a few inaudible bites of sound before landing in a groove in the middle of the record. The Indigenous Tribes, who "attacked" the fort on what is present day Nashville's downtown riverfront, were characterized for many years as side characters to the history of the region. The actual western contested edge of the Southwest Frontier was in East

Tennessee when Donelson made his trip down the Tennessee waterways. The illegal settlements in what is now East Tennessee were the main cause of much of the hot war between the Cherokee Nation and white settlers on the frontier up to that point. Hundreds of miles into the interior of Indigenous Tribal lands, the white settlers seeking to establish a foothold on the Cumberland River were the “other,” the side-show characters, in the history of this region—not the other way around. The Indigenous groups military exercises against the white settler encroachment were perceived offensive but the Cherokee were defending their home, and the Donelson’s did not exactly come in peace.

Writing in 2020’s *Voyage of the Adventure: Retracing the Donelson Party’s Journey to the Founding of Nashville*, Cherokee Activist and historian, Albert Bender, explains, “Whenever possible the colonial soldiers acted with genocidal barbarity, savagely killing men, women, children, and the elderly. Accounts abound of women being tied up and burned alive in their flaming homes, children swung by their heels against trees and boulders until their brains were bashed out, and women decapitated as they ran from soldiers swinging broadswords (this was reportedly a form of sport for the troops).”¹¹⁵ A white history, told from the perspective of the white settlers, focused on the “attacks” by Indigenous groups and the atrocities done to the trespassing white settler’s military invasion.

John Donelson and James Robertson were wealthy men with large holdings and plenty of political power on the Southwest Frontier. Why would they risk life and limb,

¹¹⁵ Bender, Albert, John Guider, Jeff Sellers, Learotha Williams, and Carroll Van West. “A Cherokee Perspective on the Founding of Nashville and the Late Eighteenth Century.” In *Voyage of the Adventure: Retracing the Donelson Party’s Journey to the Founding of Nashville*, 112. Vanderbilt University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv167569j.9>.

including that of their families, to venture hundreds of miles into contested Cherokee territory? Donelson and Robertson knew, more than most, that their reception would be “hostile.” After all, it was a brazen rebuttal of hammered out treaties between the American government and various tribes. As Bender argues, “It must be speculated that simple greed was a factor. The Robertson-Donelson emigrants wanted large acreages worked by slaves. These settlers dreamed of large plots of land that were suitable for hosting vast amounts of enslaved laborer in the Cumberland basin, and they could not advance further down the Tennessee River because of the strength of Cherokee resistance.”¹¹⁶ From the perspective of the Cherokee, now fighting a war on two fronts—to its northeast and now to its northwest—the situation was militarily, an urgent one. Bender writes, “Moreover, it must be kept in mind that the Robertson-Donelson incursion eventually turned Middle Tennessee into a “militarized zone” with more than thirty forts spread across the region.”¹¹⁷ The next twenty years would be bloody ones between the settlers and the Cherokee. The blow that ultimately broke the Cherokee resistance in Middle Tennessee was the destruction of Cherokee war towns near current day Chattanooga. Bender writes, “Keep in mind that the Ore expedition that destroyed ... [the] Nickajack and Running Water [towns] ... was dispatched from Nashville.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Bender, 113.

¹¹⁷ Bender, 113.

¹¹⁸ Bender, 113.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION & MEMORY RECONSTRUCTION

Human beings have long memories, even if they are imperfect ones. It is one of the defining survival traits of the species and one of evolution's great gifts. Modern historians have much more acceptance and appreciation for communities' oral history than their predecessors. A collective memory of a community can often be formed by rallying around historical injustices. It is hard to imagine an Indigenous Tribe this would not hold true for, but examples are abundant, and plenty are extreme—such as race-based slavery in the United States or the Holocaust. History is also full of less extreme examples, and those communities can still forge deeply held cultural identities. For communities with long memories of what was done “to them” by a ruling capitalistic class, such as in Southern Appalachia, it would seem to reason these groups also know full well when they have been exploited. In *The Scotch Irish: A Social History*, author James G. Leyburn notes, “Lacking a general knowledge of the social background of the Scotch-Irish in their first two mother countries, descendants of this people have often come to inaccurate conclusions about their forebears.”¹¹⁹ Leyburn explores how many descendants enjoy a “pleasant myth, deriving principally from the romantic view of Scotland.”¹²⁰ In much the same way, many of those Scots Irish descendants whose ancestors lived generations in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, also have developed a self-indigenization myth.

¹¹⁹ James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch Irish: A Social History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), xiii.

¹²⁰ Leyburn, xv.

Family and community are foremost among those identifying features, but so is place. For some, place takes on outsized importance. People seeking indigenous ancestry are ultimately seeking authenticity. A yearning to feel pride of one's heritage might even insinuate a distraction from someone's current place, or caste, in society. To learn your ancestors were used as waste people by a ruling class and were not the mythic characters of American storybooks for children, would cause you to wonder "by whom?" And if you learn that, what does that say about the structure of a society that did that to your ancestors? Then there is the even more difficult question, what does that say about the structure now? Yes, back to the structure.

In Sterling Brown's 1930s' telling of the history of Cannon County, like much of Southern Appalachia, Middle Tennessee was in phase two of settler colonialism's structure. That is, the Indigenous population had been physically removed and replaced during phase one; and now the second stage, where Indigenous people are replaced culturally, was underway. With a hundred years having passed since the mass removal of American Indians along the Trail of Tears, Brown was busy re-writing his version of history. Almost another hundred years since Brown, Southern Appalachia is squarely in phase three of settler colonialism's structure—appropriating indigeneity. There is little evidence in the historical record that our ancestors thought of American Indians as "one of them," or in any way identified with Indigenous Tribal ways of life. Quite the contrary, if there were ancestors that did, their voices are largely silent.

Stephen Pearson argued for a more thorough examination of White Appalachians in the subjects of his Indigenous and settler-colonial scholarship in his 2012 article "'The Last Bastion of Colonialism': Appalachian Settler Colonialism and Self-Indigenization."

Pearson noted that the region, “has been the site of such pivotal events as the formation of trans-Appalachian frontier settler polities (such as the Watauga Association), the genocidal Jacksonian population transfers—including the iconic Cherokee Trail of Tears—and the founding of Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the first off-campus reservation school and model of eliminative assimilation.”¹²¹ Pearson lays out what makes this all the more ripe for analysis is the cultivated image of White Appalachia as an exploited other in its own right. Pearson points to these “distinct frontier identities—the yeoman farmer, the mountaineer” that White Appalachian culture cultivate “as sites of their own resistance to capitalist exploitation.”¹²²

This victimization that Pearson sees in some Appalachian discourse has recast the White Appalachian as the “Indigenous population” and they, “are [now] the victims of a form of colonialism analogous to that dominating American Indian nations.”¹²³ Pearson argues this, “reinforces and perpetuates the interwoven settler-colonial structures and genocidal processes that have characterized the region since the initial European invasions ... [and] precludes the settler from engaging in decolonization efforts in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.”¹²⁴ Pearson explains that “This interpretation allows Appalachian Whites to maintain their whiteness while obscuring the privileges that whiteness bestows.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Pearson, Stephen. “‘The Last Bastion of Colonialism’: Appalachian Settler Colonialism and Self-Indigenization,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2012): 165-184.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Pearson, 165.

¹²⁴ Pearson, 165-166.

¹²⁵ Pearson, 167.

It is essentially the removal of an entitlement to acknowledge that wrongs done to you, or your ancestors, pale in comparison of other groups. Furthermore, that your ancestors played a role in the subjugation of other groups, and that you might even be the beneficiary of that subjugation, is an even more bitter pill to swallow. That is one of the primary motivations (even if unconscious), of Appalachians to see themselves in this light of indigeneity. Pearson argues Appalachians are, “Positioning themselves as Indigenous victims of colonialism [and this] allows Appalachian Whites to remove themselves from complicity in the capitalist economy and permits them to inhabit a romantic image of anticolonial struggle.”¹²⁶ The truth is, both things can be true. Southern Appalachians can be victims of exploitation *and* have benefited from their whiteness. We can see in our own era how common the rejection of this dualism can be.

When Americans on the Southwest Frontier in the nineteenth century spoke of the last of their kind, they were referring to American Indians “vanishing” from the region. Jean O’Brien, in her 2012 work, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*, explains how “These local stories were leashed to a larger national narrative of the “vanishing Indian” as a generalized trope and disseminated not just in the form of the written word but also in a rich ceremonial cycle of pageants, commemorations, monument building, and lecture hall performance.”¹²⁷

Later in the twentieth century, it would be Southerners, and very specifically Southern Appalachians, who society would see as the vanishing culture. I would argue, one primary reason Southern Appalachians are so prone to falling into this trap of seeing

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Jean O’Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiii.

themselves through the self-indigenization lens; is that their treatments, have at times, been similar. Pearson found that in Southern Appalachia there had been little change between 1810 and 1981 in land ownership. Three-quarters of the lands remained in the hands of absentee owners, primarily corporations. Land ownership, a primary way of escaping poverty in America, has still eluded many in the Southern Appalachian region all these years later. As Pearson writes, “Thus, a large proportion of the White settler population remains destabilized.”¹²⁸ However members of the Southern Appalachian Diaspora feel now about their connectedness with American Indians, their recent ancestors felt very differently. In 1852, living in Nashville, Tennessee, settler William Hall reflected in his personal writings about his time in the Great Basin on the Cumberland River:

Having lost my father, two brothers, two brothers-in-law, and a sister and her child to Indians, it seems to me I have suffered as much as anyone could have suffered in the early settlement of this country. It is some satisfaction to me that I have not been driven from my heritage, but that I have been able, with the assistance of the brave men of the period gone by, to defend it through all attacks. I am living at the same place which was settled by my father, having been here 66 years since I first came to the country.¹²⁹

-William Hall, 1852

The words of William Hall more accurately sum up the case for settler colonialism in the Middle Tennessee region than any historian could ever write. Hall is the living embodiment of remove and replace and claims “heritage” because his father “settled” the area. Hall’s small plot of land was occupied for a millennium by Indigenous

¹²⁸ Pearson, 168.

¹²⁹ William Hall, 1852, *Chronicles of The Cumberland Settlements 1779-1796*, Paul Clements, with maps by George M. Clements, (Self Published by The Foundation of William and Jennifer Frist and by Paul Clements, 20212), 519.

Tribes; yet, without a hint of irony, he boasts of his sixty-six years of occupation as living proof of his claim.

FIVE

DECLENSION AND DEPRESSION: All My Life

In that summer of 1934, the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. Some regions and industries were hit harder than others. The American South was already a poverty-stricken region before the Great Depression. In the 1930 Census, just over 50% of adults in Tennessee were employed in the five largest cities, where roughly a quarter of the population lived, but statewide the number dropped to 47%.¹³⁰ Agriculture was an industry hit hard, and that is where 39% of Tennessee's population found their income. In a society where there is land, but very little money or gainful employment to speak of, it stands to reason people would dig up and sell anything—nailed down or not—to get by.

The repeal of the 18th amendment had just happened in 1933 and there was not much effort to hide the whiskey running in the court transcripts. In Tucker's testimony, he acknowledged that the three men had secured a half gallon of whiskey and had drunk it all day and stopped on the way to town for Elkins' court appearance to grab another quart of whiskey and Elkins' pistol. Elkins' defense attorney proposed that this was an odd way for a man to head to a court hearing. The day-to-day habits of Elkins, Tucker,

¹³⁰ "Occupation Statistics," 1930 US Census Bureau, accessed April 27, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1933/dec/1930a-vol-04-occupations.html>.

and Allen leading to his disappearance are one long whiskey-bender. Elkins, for his part, acknowledged that Allen wanting to find whiskey is actually what caused them to take up riding together in the first place. For three days they drove all over the county and even to Murfreesboro all taking turns passing out or sleeping in the back of Allen's Model T Ford. At one point they left a drunken Allen in the countryside to go to town to fetch his mail, which included a stop at the Yellow Jacket Saloon for a few beers before they headed back out. When Tucker crashed Allen's vehicle in town the last day anyone else saw Allen alive, there were several witnesses, and none were sure if Allen was still alive or just passed out drunk in the backseat. Elkins, who was passed out on the floor, was aroused to help Tucker get the vehicle out of the ditch as they were both wary of local law enforcement happening by. This is where Elkins' and Tucker's stories diverge.

Tucker testified Elkins shot Allen shortly after this account on the Manchester Road. Tucker alleged it was a drunken argument over a few dollars. Elkins swore they left him drunk in a field to sober up and he wandered off to never be seen again. Tucker and Elkins both had long rap sheets that got brought out in the trial and the hung jury had difficulty deciding who was telling the truth. Tucker, ten years the elder, swore he never told the truth before as he feared for his life that Elkins would make good on his threat to kill him if he ever spoke a word. The trial has a bit of flair to it, in no small part thanks to the skeletal remains of Allen lying on the table in the courtroom. His wife Hazel was ill and did not return for the trial, but two of Allen's brothers attended. It is not difficult to imagine the rumors that were flying around the community at the time of the trial, especially considering some still survive today. Elkins, for his part, never accused anyone

of wrongdoing and when asked if he and Tucker had been good friends simply replied, “all my life.”¹³¹

NO BONES WERE INJURED, NO BULLETS FOUND

The residents of Cannon County in the 1930s were the second and third generations of white settlers to move into the region. Their parents and grandparents lived and fought a bloody Civil War and the legacy of Bushwhacker violence still loomed large. This was also the era of Jim Crow in the American South, and those policies were enforced by violence, or the threat of violence. The voices of African Americans in this community during this era are largely hidden from the primary sources available to me in this project—but they are there. Less than a hundred years before, American Indians were forcibly removed from the Southeast; one leg of the Trail of Tears came through Cannon County with the refugees camping right in the center of town. A few decades before that and the settlers in Middle Tennessee were living on contested Indigenous Tribal lands during the Cherokee American War. Bloody expeditions, such as the Ore Party of 1792, that destroyed the Chickamauga towns of Nickajack and Running Water, loom large in this region’s violent history. It is no coincidence that Cannon County was formed in 1935, the same year as the Treaty of New Echota that ceded all Cherokee lands East of the Mississippi River.

¹³¹ *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

“The story of violence shattering the South is a story of human cruelty, not biological bad luck,” wrote historian Matthew H. Jennings in *Violence in a Shattered World*.¹³² Jennings was not writing about the Jim Crow South, The Civil War, or the Cherokee American Wars, but the collapse of Mississippian Societies in the two centuries following the first contact with Spanish army. These were not virgin forests the pale-skinned settlers hacked their way through in their trousers. The chain of violence that began with contact was unbroken. Still, by the time the *Cannon Courier* ran the gruesome skeleton story in 1937, it presented a picture of a more ordered society. The blood that was spilled might have dried up, but their generation still knew where the bodies were buried just below the surface. Sometimes, a grave was so shallow that two boys digging for mayapple root on a hillside in Cannon County stumbled across a human skull.

As much as locals suspected foul play, the bleached white skull that two boys found in the black loam on the hillside could not tell Cannon Countians what had befallen it. Allen’s skeletal remains certainly may have given some on the jury the spooks and seemed to be calling out from the great beyond, but his demise would remain a mystery. As the high court noted in its decision, “They were all drunk, the witness, the defendant, and Allen... They were drinking white corn liquor ‘white lightning’ ... Did he die of alcoholism? Did his heart fail him? Were the shots effective and fatal or was the moonshine effective and fatal?” Again, “No bones were injured: no bullets found.”¹³³

¹³² Robbie Etheridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall, *Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slaved Trade and Regional Instability in the American South*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 278.

¹³³ *The State of Tennessee Vs. Raymond Elkins*, Tennessee State Supreme Court, Felony Docket 33458, Tennessee State Library and Archives, (Nashville, Tennessee, 1938).

Newspapers around the state alerted followers of the two-year-old trial what had finally come to pass:

Skeleton In Courthouse Scheduled For Interment – At last, Cannon County’s skeleton in the courthouse can be buried—literally. Circuit Judge T.L. Coleman sent the skeleton back to its closet for the fifth and last time yesterday when he directed a verdict of acquittal for Martin Tucker, on trial for complicity in the murder of a Gary, Ind., businessman. Previously Raymond Elkins, in four trials, had been acquitted in the case... The skeleton was kept in the courthouse used as gruesomely mute evidence in each of the five trials. Attendants said it would be buried before the week’s end.¹³⁴

Something happened to Clarence Allen in the hills of Cannon County on June 7, 1934. It is unlikely to have happened as Tucker claimed, subsequent trials brought forward witnesses that contradicted his version. Had Tucker simply panicked and made the story up to save himself on the ride down from Akron with the sheriff, although neither he nor Elkins had done wrong? Or was there really a dispute and the bullets that Elkins fired through Allen’s flesh still lay deep beneath the soil and covered in a web of mayapple root? Or had it been Tucker who had words with Allen that turned violent? If so, did Elkins keep quiet for loyalty or fear? Or did Elkins really tell the truth? There will never be a definitive answer to that question at this point.

On the other issues of economics and culture, time has shed some light. Was Allen in Woodbury acting on “carpetbagger” type business? No. Tucker had made several trips up North running baskets for sale, which had replaced the whiskey running he was doing prior to a run in with law enforcement. A few years of folks running baskets up North for sale, had brought Allen down South to pick them up. It seems plausible that

¹³⁴ *The Johnson City Chronicle*, June 8, 1939.

a community that needed income as desperately as the rural South in the 1930s did was eager to sell baskets, whiskey, roots, or anything else someone with a need might purchase: even stories. Were the publishers of the pulp fiction pages exploiting their subjects? Yes and no. Some locals participated and were likely compensated for their accounts.

For some though, this was a shameful and horrific experience. It had to have been difficult for the family of the accused to live in this small community where drunken, violent, and allegedly murderous, behavior had been constantly in the local and national news. To rub salt in that wound, now the embellished and inaccurate account would live on for years in the glossy covered pulp magazines that were lying around in stacks across American cities. I can say from personal experience, it must have been hurtful and shameful enough to keep the story from an entire family. That is, until one day a seventy-year-old worn-out pulp fiction magazine found its way to a friend of the family.

Foreign objects will trigger an immune response in the body as cells begin rejuvenating to push the visitor up towards the skin until it is expelled. If the leaves and the earth on that Cannon County hillside slowly covered up the remains of Allen over the course of three years where he passed away, it is tempting to look for metaphor in the way his bones found their way back to the surface. However, it would be an imperfect metaphor as Allen's remains would not be leaving Cannon County's rich alluvial soil. Allen's skeletal remains, which almost spent as many years in the county courthouse as on that hillside, were finally laid back into the ground to rest in peace. The local paper this time alerted residents to the end of the six-year-old saga, and Allen's funeral arrangements for Riverside Cemetery in Woodbury:

Last Rites and Burial July 30 for Clarence Allen, Dead 5 Years—Funeral services and burial ceremonies are to be conducted Sunday July 30 at 1:30 p.m. at the Riverside Cemetery, for Clarence Allen, of Indiana, just about five years after his mysterious disappearance in the county, death being later established by the finding of his skeleton in a lone woods near Woodbury. The belated funeral service is to be in charge of the Ex-Servicemen of this county ... Two men were charged with responsibility for his death but both finally came clear. The case hung fire in court a long time and attracted nationwide interest. The skeleton has been locked up in the county courthouse since it was used as evidence during the prolonged course of the case in court.¹³⁵

EPILOGUE

“In every child who is born, under no matter what circumstances, and no matter what parents, the potentiality of the human race is born again.” — **James Agee**¹³⁶



Figure 23. Mallie Lynette Elkins.

Raymond Elkins went on to have five more children with his wife Virginia, making my grandmother the eldest of ten siblings. Mallie Lynette Elkins quit attending school and left home at fifteen (in



Figure 24. Raymond Elkins.

¹³⁵ Article, unknown source, July 21, 1939, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/73318948/clarence-allen>.

¹³⁶ James Agee, Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families*, 1969.

approximately 1943) to move into town at the Good Samaritan hospital after securing work to be trained as a nurse under Dr. Jessie Frank Adams in Woodbury. Here, in the county's first hospital, as a teenager she was taught to put patients to sleep for surgery. Dr. Adams had also been charged with determining the cause of death just six years earlier on the mysterious skeletal remains that shook up the town in 1937. We can only imagine what life might have been like for a young girl entering her teen years in a one-room school after the two-year trial.

Many young people who came of age during the 1930s in the rural South came from difficult backgrounds, but Dr. Adams might have been uniquely aware of Mallie's circumstances growing up. Dr. Adams even gave young Mallie a nickname that she went by the rest of her life: Judy. This young woman reinvented herself and never looked back. Never looking back is an understandable defense mechanism for survival, even if that means pieces of family history disappearing for her descendants. Judy, as everyone knew her, would continue her work at the hospital long after Dr. Jesse Adams retirement, staying on to work for his son, Dr. Carl Adams until she began having children with her husband William Allen Bryson.



Figure 25. Mallie Lynette Elkins with photo of Dr. Carl Adams and his wife Mrs. Jennie Mae Adams, Murfreesboro Medical Clinic, Murfreesboro, TN, approximately 2016.

Dr Adams offered to send her to nursing school to further her medical training, but Judy's growing young family made that exceedingly difficult. The region's prospects had vastly improved since The Great Depression her parents struggled through and she was born

into, however, the economic realities of 1950s' rural Middle Tennessee still had its limitations—especially for women. Raymond Elkins, though, would not live a long life. He died of heart and cardiovascular issues at the age of forty-seven in 1956, the same age I was the first time I typed that sentence. Mallie Lynette, then known as Judy Bryson, was a twenty-eight years old and had just had her fifth child (of seven) earlier than year.

Growing up, almost every day my family drove by that spot off the Manchester Highway 53 where the murder reportedly took place. It was the road we lived on and I stared out the window every trip to town, looking at the wooded hillsides trying to imagine who was here before. I did not know about my great-grandfather and his trial. I still do not know if murder runs in my blood, yet statistics say it runs in us all. I did not know about my ancestor's participation in the Civil War, and I did not know about the human beings some of those ancestors owned. I did not know who the stone arrowheads belonged to that my grandmother turned up with her garden hoe, nor what or whose blood stained them. Still, the past continues to bubble to the Earth's surface as things work their way out.

CONCLUSION

While Southern Historians might still sip on the sweet tea that is the tragedy of the South, it remains the subject of race that stirs the drink. While blasphemous as a Southerner to suggest drinking tea of the unsweet variety, I would at least like to propose adding to that drink. The ingredients of race-based chattel slavery, a brutal and bloody Civil War, and settler colonialism together is what makes the American Southern cocktail

of violence so historically strong. Southern spirits like Mint Julips are for movie-made characters to drink. This drink bites like bootleg brown liquor and burns the insides—it is no elixir.

Like many thorny heirlooms our ancestors bequeathed to us, violence and tragedy are legacies we must contend with—even as we wrestle with them today. This attempt to understand them is as much about understanding ourselves. At our best, we try to move our own society forward in our own era in a just and equal way. We might hope and pray many of them did this in some manner within their own means, but it is as difficult to judge those efforts in an era we did not live, as it would be for them to comprehend the world we now call home. Historian John H. Arnold in his crisp and pointed *History: A Very Short Introduction* wrote that “Visiting the past is something like visiting a foreign country; they do some things the same and some things differently, but above all else, they make us more aware of what we call ‘home’”¹³⁷

To be clear, though a shift towards a more equal and fair society has occurred, it falls short in both speed and breadth. With each generation a little bit more is revealed and a little bit more sinks into the general consciousness. Knowledge serves no purpose in a dusty history book on a shelf in a university where only a few professors know of its contents—and thus can do no good. If all that I have learned in these 80 some odd pages goes back onto that same shelf, then what has been my purpose? Can a would-be social historian gain anything if it cannot be shared? To be sure there will be, and I would

¹³⁷ John H. Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press) 2000, 122.

argue, we are experiencing now, a reactionary push back from those still wrestling with, or unwilling to accept, facts that run counter to what many of us were taught by previous generations in our society. Ancestor worship often comes at a great cost. We do them and ourselves an injustice if we color them in to be as we want and not as they were. There are Lost Causes, and then there are lost causes—it is up to us to know the difference. As ugly as some of those efforts may be, they could be a sign of positive change and an indication of a fundamental shift. Likely only the powers of a rear-view mirror will be able to make that determination and let us hope those changes are indeed closer than they appear. There are truths—both big and small—in the past, but it is still much too soon to stop digging for them.

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