

Remembrance is A Caldwell Parish memoir of the life of Creston Curtis Dunn, who lived in three centuries and in the second and third Millennium. Mr. Dunn was one of the most influential and interesting individuals in the history of the Parish.

Remembrance: A Caldwell Parish Memoir

By Creston Curtis Dunn

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CALDWELL PARISH

REMEMBRANCE

A Caldwell Parish Memoir



Creston Curtis Dunn

Edited by J. W. Dunn with editorial assistance from Rickey Pittman

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If Buddy Erskine ever had met Steve Alford, he would've whipped the socks off of him.

Creston C. Dunn

PART FOUR: COMING TO COLUMBIA

1939-1940⁷

In the fall elections of nineteen and thirty-nine, Buddy Erskine had been re-elected to a second four-year term as sheriff of Caldwell Parish. He had two opponents that time: Abe Faulk was a good, honest man, but he didn't have the backing, and I guess Abe must've run for sheriff in every election as long as he lived. The other man, Eugene Cottingham, everybody thought was going to run really strong, but as it turned out, he didn't have much fire behind him either and Buddy beat them both in the first primary. I didn't vote for Buddy that time, and I had told him I wasn't. So, Buddy didn't owe me anything.

I knew those old Erskines out in the edge of Winn Parish all my life. Buddy's uncles and his cousins. Crockett Erskins and old Cap Erskine were first cousins. Cap (Benjamin Eldridge Erskine 1872-1956) was Buddy's daddy. I knew old Cap and Kindred Erskins. I guess I must've met Buddy several years before he joined the army, but we weren't close friends. Oh, I'd see him at places, and I knew him, knew who he was, but we weren't close friends. But I got to know Buddy pretty good after he went to work for John King, who was sheriff here from nineteen and twenty-eight until nineteen and thirty-six, and I liked Buddy after I got to know him. He was a fair man and would help you if he could. I supported him when he ran for sheriff and won his first term in nineteen and thirty-five. But we had a misunderstanding over that election. I had understood that he was going to hire me as a deputy. Well, after he was elected, he never contacted me. Maybe he understood that I was

⁷ The sections titled "The Convicts," "The Students," and "The Convicts and the Students" are based on "The Life Story of William Heard as Told by Himself" an unpublished manuscript and statements given by Voncille Williams, Gerry (Jerry) Harrigill, and Gladys Diamond to "We the People" radio program in September of 1940, and Voncille Williams's statements to the Associated Press, September 4, 1940, byline unknown. Documents in possession of Mr. David G. Erskine, Monroe, Louisiana.

supposed to contact him. I don't know, but Buddy didn't contact me after the election, and I was too independent to run after him.

Instead of me going to work, Gene Cottingham went to work. Cottingham was a brother-in-law to Mr. King, the previous sheriff, and he had been working for Mr. King. Later, Gene and Buddy had a falling out and Buddy fired him. So, in nineteen and thirty-nine, Gene Cottingham ran against Buddy for sheriff, and everybody thought he'd run strong, but he didn't. He didn't have no fire behind him. And Mr. King, I guess had lost his strut. Abe Faulk was a good honest man, but he couldn't rake up enough support to do any good. So, when Abe asked me to vote for him, I told him, I said, "Abe, I'm not going to take any stock in this race, but I'll go down there on election day and vote for you."

One evening during the campaign, Buddy and Archie Coates, Buddy's chief deputy, and a good friend of mine, too, came to my house. I guess they'd got word that I was going to vote for Abe, and they came to try and turn me, sway me to vote for Buddy. We must've talked an hour about first one thing, then another, but it ended on politics, which is what we were talking about all along.

"Buddy, like things are, I like you, and you know it," I said. "And I think you've made a good sheriff, but I told Abe that I'd go down there and vote for him, and I'm going to do it. But I also told Abe that I wasn't going to take no stock in the race, and I'm not."

"Well, Arch," Buddy said. "I don't think we're going to move him."

"I'm not going to fight you, Buddy," I said. "I'm not taking any stock in the race, and if Abe falls out in the first primary, I'll support you." We all stood up and shook hands, and I walked out on the porch with them.

"Creston, that's fine," Buddy said. "If you're not fighting me, well, that's what I'm down here for. We figure the second primary will be between me and Gene Cottingham, and I'll need your support. Now, I'm not trying to sway your vote with a job, but if you'll come with me in the second, and I'm elected, there'll be a job open for you."

Well, Buddy beat them both in the first primary. I'll tell you; Buddy Erskine was a popular man and a good sheriff. It'd take a strong candidate to shake Buddy. He whipped them both in the first go round, and that left me on the outside. I hadn't voted for Buddy, and he didn't need my help or anybody else's help in a second primary. He didn't owe me anything. I hadn't helped him. I didn't hurt him, but I hadn't helped him either.

When the time came to decide on a new deputy, Buddy's top friends and political allies had a meeting down in Clarks. Leonard Jackson was my friend,

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and he knew about me supposed to go to work for Buddy. Frank Gartman didn't know about it, but he was a good friend of mine, too. Frank had brought Fluitt Valentine's name and he was pulling for Fluitt. Fluitt and Frank were good friends. Frank didn't know anything about me supposed to have any chance to go to work for Buddy. I don't really know if Buddy was in this particular meeting at that time or not, but he was down there later.

So, they were discussing about who they thought could help Buddy the most politically and also do the job. Leonard said, he told them, "Well, the way Buddy's left it with Creston, he's going to offer him the job." When Leonard brought my name up, Frank told them, says, "Creston Dunn is a good friend, and if he's supposed to go to work, well I'll just withdraw my petition, and stick with Creston." So that's what Leonard said happened. Later, Buddy called me and told me if I wanted to go to work to be in the sheriff's office down here at a certain time. So, I went to work on the first day of August in nineteen and forty.

I went to work for a hundred and fifty dollars a month. And that was a lot of money then. That was one of the best paying jobs in this country. But I tell you one thing, when I first went to work here, there was plenty of policing work to do.

The sawmill at Clarks was running big at that time. Men working in the mills, working in the woods and on their railroad. Mr. Jay McKeithen had a mill out here off the Ward five road (LA Highway 4) at the railroad crossing. I suspect he was working a hundred men all told, you know, in the mill and the woods. And whiskey hadn't been back legal here but two or three years. People were working, had money and was running wild drinking. There was plenty of policing work to do.

Then between nine and ten o'clock Labor Day night in nineteen and forty, Frank Gartman was murdered out at the Bellevue pecan orchard and man for the next several days, this town was wrapped up with people. There were families here and around Columbia that didn't go to bed for two days and nights afraid those outlaws would break in on them and kill them in their sleep. Every man in town was armed with a shotgun, pistol, or rifle, and kids strolled along the crowded streets like it was a carnival. The sheriff had to run them out of the courthouse so he could conduct the business of a manhunt; newspaper and radio people you've never seen anything like it in your life except maybe for the day of the hangings.

* * *

Buddy Erskine was a man of great character. He wouldn't compromise principles under no circumstances. And to me, he was one of the finest men I ever met. I worked for him for twenty-four years, and we never had any cross one way or the other. If my work didn't suit him, he didn't let me know it. He always backed me up in anything that I did. Of course, I knew pretty well what the law was and what I could do and what I couldn't do when I was making an arrest or executing my duty as a deputy, and I never had any trouble with him whatsoever.

He was a fair man. I guess you could say that he could give and take, you know, the frivolous things he could overlook. Somebody just unthinkingly violating the law, especially young people, he was about the best I ever saw to straighten out young people. He could talk to them, and they'd listen. It seems nowadays, though, you can talk, and they don't listen.

In those days, the sheriff was the man of the parish. I think it's changed somewhat now, but back in those days, when I was working for the sheriff's department, everybody looked up to the sheriff, and Buddy Erskine was a very popular man. He served as an officer and a deputy for over thirty years. He was sheriff twenty-eight years and had served as a deputy eight years prior to that. He was a fine man and a good sheriff.

I went to work on the first day of August in nineteen and forty, and the second day of September that year was Labor Day, and thirty-six convicts broke out of Cummins prison in Arkansas. Six of the convicts hi-jacked a car and came down as far as Rayville, Louisiana, where the car broke down. They stopped some high school kids that were out riding around; two girls and a boy. I remember one of the girl's names was Gladys Diamond, an unusual name and easy to remember.⁸

The Convicts

Because everything depended on four trusty guards' ability to overpower the other trusty guards and disarm them, two riflemen, who were in on the escape plot and had been trusties longest, were given the responsibility of setting the time and place for the break. They chose a pea field farthest from the camp as the place and decided on the first day of September as the

⁸Voncille Williams and Gerry (Jerry) Harrigill were the other teenagers. Gladys Diamond drove Voncille Williams's car. She and Voncille were best friends, and Voncille's father owned the Chevrolet dealership in Rayville, Louisiana.

deadline to execute the plan. But as the date neared, they realized the first of September fell on Sunday. Since no fieldwork was done on Sundays, they postponed the deadline until the following day, Labor Day, nineteen and forty.

The rank-and-file convicts had been planning the break for sixteen months. They devised, then rejected, one scheme after another, as they mumbled and whispered plots over tin plates balanced on their knees, sitting, and eating their noonday meals of peas and cornbread in the shade of the trees which bordered the fields. They passed ideas and schemes back and forth through the building barber, thirty-eight-year-old, William Landers. Landers was the perfect conduit; everyone got a haircut or a shave sooner or later. He was serving twenty-one years for robbery from Pulaski County, Arkansas. And because of his propensity to a sudden and sobbing laughter, William Landers was known as "Willie the Weeper" among the rank-and-file convicts. Weeper was a hardened career criminal, but he had the skills and the gregarious personality of a small-town barber of the nineteen thirties.

The inner circle of conspirators was composed of Frank Conley, 34, who was serving twenty-one years for armed robbery and kidnapping, Leon Johnson, 32, Floyd Boyce, 27, known as "Grandma" or "Granny," serving fifteen years for armed robbery, William, "Big Bill," Heard, serving fifteen years for armed robbery and assault to kill, and William, "Willie the Weeper," Landers.

The plan they had devised called for jumping the trusty guards and the Captain with knives, and holding the Captain as hostage, they could control the guards; they would do as they were told. Heard pointed out that the trusty guards would just as soon kill the Captain as not and would probably kill them all in the melee. The plan was finally dropped, and there followed month after dreary month of plotting and planning. One plan looked workable for a while, then was discarded for one that looked better, but the one item which never changed throughout the search for the perfect plan was the idea of fleeing to Mexico. Any way that they managed to escape, the ultimate plan was to run in several directions, then head for the Rio Grande.

Finally, they decided to work on some of the trusty guards who would be most likely to help with an escape, and those men among the rank, who were most likely to be made trusty guards in the near future. After much feeling out, hinting and talking in general terms, two of the riflemen, twenty-five-year-old Percy Loftin, who was serving life plus fifty-two years for murder, kidnapping and robbery, and forty-five-year-old W. E. Barner, agreed to help and joined the plot.

Heard had not been in on the talks with the riflemen, so he didn't know what was said or how they were convinced to join the conspiracy. He had been planning with Dirg Harvey and Walter Magby, two men among the rank who were expecting to be made trusty guards any day, and they had already told Heard to count them in on the break.

"No shooting at all." They agreed. "Absolutely no unnecessary shooting! We can't afford to draw attention to what's going on. We need at least thirty minutes head-start before they know what's happened to have any chance of getting away."

As the plan began to materialize, nerves began to fray. The breakout had been in planning for over a year by now, and the fear of discovery before the plot could be executed was the conspirators' foremost concern. Troy Wade, one of the shotgun trusties whom Weeper Landers had tried unsuccessfully to recruit into the plot, told Barner, who had joined the plot, that he thought a break was in the air. Barner told him to keep it under his hat, and if such did happen, he and Barner could come out of any attempted break as heroes to the prison farm officials. Of course, Barner told the other conspirators of Wade's remarks to him, and Frank Conley wanted to kill him, but Big Bill, Weeper, and other cooler heads finally persuaded Conley that if he killed Wade, the break would be off indefinitely under the tighter security that was sure to follow the killing of a trusty. They would have to chance that Barner would be able to keep him from talking to anyone else. At last Harvey and Magby were turned-out as trusty shotgun men.

Labor Day, September 2, 1940, will long be remembered. That morning, the two newly turned-out trusties, Harvey and Magby gave Big Bill Heard the nod, and at the first opportunity, they told him to be ready at noon. Big Bill passed on the word. They marched quietly into the fields as usual, the line guarded by four riflemen, five shotgun guards and two horseback riders armed with pistols. By mid-morning, the tension was palpable. Before the rank men could take over, the four guards who were in on the conspiracy had to overpower and disarm the other five guards and two horseback riders. They had to be taken by complete surprise, and Troy Wade, the would-be rat, was one of the shotguns.

At noon, the convicts were brought from the field where they were picking peas and lined up for dinner. Knowing what he did, Big Bill Heard had no appetite, but he went through the chow line and walked over and squatted next to Little Bill Meharg, who was serving eighteen years for robbery. Meharg hadn't been in the inner circle of conspirators, but he was in on the break and was ready to go. Heard leaned his back against an oak tree

and stirred his peas about in his plate with a spoon and glanced nervously about. Nothing happened. He caught the Weeper's eye thirty feet away. Weeper smiled and Heard had the fantastic illusion of Weeper breaking into his sobbing laughter. Weeper turned his face away, slowly chewing. The signal that dinner was over was given. The convicts stood, some still scooping peas from their plates, as they slowly walked to the wood boxes where the plates and spoons were stored until their return to camp in the evening.

"Off your asses and on your feet!" W. E. Barner shouted. "Hit the field!"

Suddenly Frank Conley grabbed Troy Wade and holding the shotgun guard around the neck with one arm, repeatedly stabbed and slashed at his chest and flailing arms with a paring knife.

As the mounted trusties rode toward the disturbance through the convicts, who had immediately pressed around the melee, Barner and Magby pulled them from their mounts, disarmed them, then climbed on the horses.

"You little rat bastard!" Conley shouted. He pulled the shotgun from Wade's grasp and pushed him to the ground.

"Help me!" Wade cried. "He's killed me!" Wade lay in the dirt, his chest and arms bloody from the knife attack.

"Watch it, Frank!" Barner shouted from his horse.

Claude Martin, a rifleman trusty raised his rifle. Conley fired the shotgun before Martin could squeeze the trigger, and as Martin started to crumple, Percy Loftin shot him square in the back with his high-powered rifle. Claude Martin was dead when his body hit the ground.

The other trusties dropped their weapons and raised their hands over their heads. Landers and Heard grabbed up a shotgun a piece.

"All right," Barner shouted. "Get in line, line up!"

"We said no unnecessary shootin'," Big Bill Heard said, scowling at Percy Loftin.

"He wa'n't dead," Loftin said and shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's move!" Barner said, reining the horse along the line. "We've made too much racket! Let's go!"

After lining everyone up, they marched about two miles into the woods.

"This is far enough," Barner said. "From this point, it's every man for hisself. You can run like hell or go back to camp, I don't give a damn which you do, but I'm running like hell, myself." He swung the horse around and kicked his heels against its sides. In all, thirty-six convicts fled, four trusties and thirty-two rank men.

"Let's get to the highway and grab a car before the word's spread," Big Bill Heard said. Weeper nodded and he and Heard set out with four other

convicts with them: Frank Conley, Floyd “Granny” Boyce, Bruce “Butterbean” Fowler, and Little Bill Meharg. They were armed with four shotguns and a rifle. Little Bill Meharg was the only one of the six without a weapon as they made their way through the woods toward U. S. Highway 65. In a matter of ten or fifteen minutes, they struck the highway south of Gould and hid in the woods off the right of way.

“I don’t think the alarms been given, yet,” Weeper Landers said.

“It won’t be much longer, though,” Big Bill said. “We’re gonna have to take the first car we see.”

“Here comes one,” Fowler said. “But it’s headed north!”

“Hell, Butterbean,” Big Bill said. “I can turn it around! Let’s flag it.”

The convicts poured onto the highway waving their arms, then shouldered their guns. The approaching car slowed, then stopped. It was a new Oldsmobile occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Horsfall of Little Rock. Heard handed his shotgun to Little Bill Meharg and opened the driver’s door.

“All right, folks,” he said. “We’re not gonna hurt you. We just need your car and your company for a few miles.” The other convicts climbed into the car as Heard talked: “If you’ll just put the gearshift in neutral and move over, sir, I’ll drive.” Frank Horsfall’s hands shook as he pushed the gear lever into neutral, then slid to the center of the front seat, close to his wife. Landers climbed into the passenger seat, and Frank Horsfall pulled his wife onto his lap. Heard slipped under the steering wheel and shifted gears. He U-turned and headed South.

“Please, men,” Frank Horsfall said. “Let us go. Yall have the car.”

“Don’t worry, mister,” Weeper said, the fresh air blowing in his face as the car gained speed. “We ain’t gonna hurt you. We just need a lift for a little ways.” Suddenly, Weeper laughed his sobbing laugh. “We ain’t taking you to Mexico with us.”

The Students

Voncille Williams rode in the back seat with her steady, Gerry (Jerry) Harrigill and her best friend Gladys Diamond drove. They were students at Rayville High School in Rayville, Louisiana, population, 2,800. (1940) That Labor Day afternoon, the three friends had driven to Start, Louisiana, a small village about five miles west of Rayville, to make photographs. Gerry was an Eagle Scout and had earned his photography merit badge, and on the spur of the moment, the teenagers decided to run over to Start to make some pictures just to be out and to be together. A summer afternoon rain shower brought an

end to their outing, and they headed back to Rayville, with Gladys driving and Voncille and Gerry cuddling on the back seat. Before they reached the city limits, Gladys saw several cars parked on the shoulder of the highway just inside the city limits.

“Hey, y'all,” she said to the back seat. “Looks like somebody’s had a wreck up ahead.” Gladys’s father was town marshal of Rayville.

“Better stop,” Gerry said. “And let’s see if anybody’s hurt.”

The hood was raised on one car, and several men loitered about the cars. As Gladys slowed, one of the men stepped into the traffic lane, waving his hat. Gladys braked to a stop, and too late, she saw the man was holding a sawed-off shotgun at his side.

“Uh oh,” she said. “We’re in for it now!”

Another man without a gun opened the driver’s door.

“Slide over, little lady,” Big Bill Heard said. “We’re not gonna hurt you. We just want your car.”

Little Bill Meharg and Weeper got into the front seat also, and Little Bill pulled Gladys on his lap. Frank Conley, Fowler, and Granny Boyce climbed into the back seat, and Voncille sat on Gerry’s lap to make room. The teenagers sat mutely as Big Bill started down the highway and entered Rayville on Main Street. Voncille tightly gripped Gerry’s hand.

“We need a back road outta town, little lady,” Big Bill said to Gladys. “Which way do I go?”

In a nervous voice, Gladys began giving directions, “Turn right here,” and “Turn right,” and “Turn left, up there,” until they came to Louisiana Highway 137, where Gladys directed Big Bill to turn south, and they drove toward Archibald, Louisiana.

* * *

Of course, as soon as the officers over at Rayville were notified, they raised the alarm. It was late in the afternoon, and the manhunt was on for the convicts and the children they had kidnapped.

I had drove Eula and the children out in the country to visit my oldest sister. Her name was Eula too. Her husband, Cass Crain, was a Baptist preacher, and he had performed the ceremony when Eula and I married. Anyway, we sat on the porch and drank coffee and talked weather, crops, family, and Long and anti-Long politics, and such as that, till late in the day, but we left to come home well before suppertime. It must’ve been a little after six o’clock when we got back into Clarks, maybe an hour before dark in early September. We got out of the car, and before we reached the front doorsteps

of the house, the telephone began to ring, and it rang until I got inside and answered it. It was Mrs. Juanita Erskine, the sheriff's wife. She told me Buddy wanted me to come into the sheriff's office right away. That some convicts had broke out of prison up in Arkansas and some of them kidnapped some children over at Rayville and may be headed our way. She said Buddy said to bring my shotgun and come on in. They were setting up a guard on the Ouachita River bridge at Columbia.

It was about an eight-mile drive from my house in Clarks to the courthouse in Columbia.

I turned into the street behind the courthouse and saw several cars parked outside the sheriff's office. Buddy had four full time deputies: Archie Coates, Melton Jones, Neil Nethery, and me. Archie Coates was chief deputy and the office deputy. His main job was keeping the books and looking after the tax rolls. Melton Jones had been a deputy several years, but he lived ten or twelve miles south of Columbia on the east side of the Ouachita River. They didn't have a telephone system that far out at that time, and Melton was hard to contact in a hurry. I think Buddy had hired Neil Nethery a little more than a year before, and I had been on the job just two days over a month. Buddy was starting his second four-year term as sheriff of Caldwell Parish, but he had twelve years' experience as a law enforcement officer because he had been a deputy for eight years under John King, the previous sheriff.

Buddy had men he could call on in emergencies, such as Frank Gartman. Frank was one of Buddy's strong political allies, and his close friend, and he'd help Buddy anyway he could. Ab Smith was the Louisiana Central Lumber Company's deputy at Clarks, but he was available to help out anywhere in the parish if the need arose. A young fellow named Tom Burke was Columbia's town marshal, and Jim Humble was the night marshal.

Back then, the sheriff's office was a small room and a bigger room on the ground floor of the courthouse. If you went into the office from the back of the courthouse, you walked through the small room to get to the big one. The small room was used for private talks and such, and a desk stood in the center of the room with two or three chairs around it. The arrest book lay opened on top of the desk. A couple of calendars and several FBI wanted posters were tacked on the walls.

The larger room was divided by a high counter. In back of the counter was another desk with a telephone on it where Archie Coates did his work on the books and taxes. On the near side of the counter, several straight chairs stood backed against the walls with a couple of brass spittoons placed here and there between chairs.

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I walked through the small office into the big one. The windows were raised, and the ceiling fans rolled, and the double doors were opened into the courthouse hall, but the sheriff's office always smelled like cigar and cigarette smoke, even with the windows up. Archie Coates, and A. J., Archie's son, who was about twenty or twenty-one years old, sat on opposite sides of the desk behind the counter ready to relay messages. That was before we had radios, police radios, and all the communication we had was by telephone.

Archie told me we were supposed to go guard the bridge over the Ouachita River here in Columbia. We didn't have any buckshot, so Archie had called around, and Frank Gartman said he had a box. Frank Gartman ran the Chevrolet place located at the intersection of Church Street and U S Highway 165.

Me and Frank had been friends for twenty years or more, and I had just been in his place that past Saturday, the Saturday before Labor Day. I had stopped by to see about buying a new car from him, and by the time we came to terms, the banks were closed. I told him that Tuesday after Labor Day, I'd go by the bank and get his check, then come sign the papers and pick up the car, but Frank insisted that I take the car that afternoon. Like I say, we'd been friends for years, and he knew if anything happened, if I wrecked the car or something like that, why, he knew I'd pay for it on the obligation of my word. You know, back then a man's word was his bond, and his word was just as good to a man's heirs as it was to the man he gave it to. So, I didn't think any more about driving the car home than he did in letting me have it.

Frank gave me the box of double-aught buckshot and said he would come to the sheriff's office as soon as he closed the station. I guess it hadn't been opened. It was a full box. And I carried the buckshot with me. Melton Jones was the secretary of the Columbia Masonic Lodge which met on the first Monday of the month, so he was still at the lodge meeting. I don't know where Neil Nethery was, and I don't remember just how he was implicated in the happenings that evening.

* * *

Buddy had left Mrs. Erskine at home telephoning the deputies to come in, and he had told Archie to stay in the office and as soon as enough help came in to set up guard on the Ouachita River bridge. He took his rifle and left to try and head off the convicts on the back roads coming into Caldwell Parish out of Richland Parish. Buddy was a crack shot with a pistol or a rifle. At Hebert, he stopped at Hardy Poole's place and told him to bring his shotgun and go with him, and they drove around to the Hatch bridge that crossed the

Boeuf River from Richland Parish into Caldwell Parish. They set up guard on the bridge, but the convicts missed a turnoff and drove further south to cross the river.⁹

The Convicts and the Students

It seemed to Gladys that they drove and drove, and they drove through the small settlement of Liddieville, Louisiana, where her grandmother lived, and just kept on driving. One of the men asked her if she knew who they were, and she said no. They hadn't heard about the prison break, and he finally told them that they were six of the convicts that had escaped from the Arkansas prison, that they were headed for Mexico and as soon as they got another car, they would let them go. The kids weren't so terribly afraid, then, and Voncille and Gladys sang "South of the Border" for them.

Past Liddieville, Heard saw a sign at a side road, "Columbia and Alexandria," and he turned there.

Sometime later they came out on US Highway 165 about a mile north of Columbia. They could see the lights on the Ouachita River bridge. Knowing the alarm had been spread they were afraid to try to cross the bridge there. So, they pulled off on a side road to talk things over. On a road map that was in the car, they found where a ferry (Duty/Enterprise Ferry) crossed the Ouachita River some distance south of Columbia. They turned around and headed for that. On their arrival, they were met with the disheartening sign "Ferry discontinued."

What to do was the next question. They couldn't go back toward Rayville. They decided to return to Columbia and chance the bridge. They felt if they could get across the river, they would have a chance.

They never reached the Columbia bridge. Two miles from Columbia a rear tire went flat. While Big Bill was trying to fix the flat, Frank Conley, "Butterbean" Fowler and "Granny" Boyce went up on the levee as lookouts, and "Willie the Weeper" Landers and Little Bill Meharg stayed at the car with Big Bill and the kids.

Several cars had gone by since they stopped, and the Weeper kept insisting they were officers. Heard became uneasy, but the more he tried to

⁹ George Eldridge (Buddy) Erskine was a World War I combat veteran. He served in France as a rifleman in the 1st Infantry Division and participated in major engagements at the Saint-Mihiel salient and the Meuse—Argonne Offensive.

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hurry the tire repair the less he accomplished. The jack wouldn't work. And he couldn't unlock the luggage compartment to get the spare out.

I took the box of double-aught buckshot back to the sheriff's office. I'd taken some shells out for myself, and as the other deputies came in, they got some of the buckshot. The double-aught buckshot was the only buckshot that we had. I went on the bridge with Archie, Jim Humble who was the night watchman, and Tom Burke, the town marshal. By that time, it was beginning to get dark, and traffic was light on US Highway 165 back then compared to what it is now and even less after dark. We flagged the few cars that did cross the bridge from the north and checked them out, but we recognized all the drivers we stopped and their passengers. They were local folks, most of them headed back home after Labor Day visits.

Going by the news that we had, if the convicts had come straight on through from Rayville, they wouldn't have time to get to the bridge before we were out there. Archie and Jim stood on one side of the highway and me and Tom Burke on the other. Me and Tom didn't know each other very well. His daddy was the Caldwell Parish Health Unit doctor, and I don't remember where the doctor lived originally, but he wasn't from Caldwell Parish. Tom grew up in Columbia and had graduated from the high school here in town. He was very sociable, about twenty-five years old. I liked him right off. Later, I found out he wasn't scared of anything. Tom had been town marshal for about a year. He was a good officer for a young man. He was a good man too, he'd help you. Stout as a bull, he could handle those drunks like nobody's business. That was a big part of law enforcement in small towns back then, and still is, I guess, corralling drunks and breaking up fights.

At around eight-thirty, Melton Jones drove up on the bridge from the Columbia side of the river and stopped where we were standing guard. Archie leaned at his car window, and Melton told him that when he had come from the lodge hall and saw the lights on in the sheriff's office he went by and A. J. told him what had happened. He had got some buckshot and was going out to his house to get his shotgun, then come right on back.

During the time Melton was gone home to get his shotgun, it got to be about nine o'clock, something like that, and Ab Smith and Frank Gartman came to the bridge. Archie told me and Tom to go get coffee if we wanted, but we had better hurry. Old Capp McCullen who ran Capp's Inn, the restaurant on top-of-the-hill, closed at ten o'clock on the dot, and he and Jim would go get coffee when we got back. So, Tom and I went. Capp's Inn was about three miles south of Columbia on top-of-the-hill and sat in the forks of

the road where Louisiana Highway 4 veers south and west off U. S. 165. We weren't gone more than ten or fifteen minutes, but when we got back to the bridge, everyone was gone. So, me and Tom went around to the sheriff's office to find out what was going on.

In the office, A. J. told us that when Melton was driving back to town, he'd seen a car broken down beside the road at the pecan orchard at Bellevue. Bellevue was on the east side of the Ouachita River. It wasn't a town or even a post office, if anything, it was an intersection where Louisiana Highway 133, coming from the north, abutted Louisiana Highway 4, running east to west. Belle Bayou headed up right close to the intersection and meandered northeast through fields and woods and eventually ran into Lafourche Bayou. Bellevue had once been a large plantation along its banks, but by nineteen and forty, it was cut up into several smaller farms. At that time, a pecan orchard just east of the intersection of Louisiana Highways 4 and 133 ran right up against the Ouachita River levee.

Melton said there were several men at the car, and it looked for sure like they were the convicts, so the five of them, Melton Jones, Archie Coates, Frank Gartman, Ab Smith, and Jim Humble had driven over there to check it out and arrest them if they were the convicts. A. J. said they'd been gone about ten minutes or so.

* * *

Later, Jim Humble related how the thing happened. Jim said they drove out Louisiana Highway 4, and when they got to Bellevue just past the intersection with Louisiana Highway 133 where the highway parallels the levee and cuts through the edge of the pecan orchard, the suspects were working on changing a flat tire. They had parked the car on the shoulder across the road from the levee side.

"That's bound to be them," Archie said, and he drove on past. At the end of that long curve, there about where Mr. John Smith lived, why, they were out of sight of the suspects, and Archie pulled into the right and parked. That's on the levee side of the road. Jim said they all got out of the car and split into two groups. Archie Coates, Melton Jones, and Ab Smith climbed up the levee and walked on top of it, and Jim said he and Frank slipped along the foot of the levee at the edge of the road, working their way back to where the suspects were fixing the flat tire. I think that's the way it was. I don't know if Jim actually knew just where everybody was or not, but he and Frank were together at the foot of the levee.

When Melton Jones got parallel with the car, still on top of the levee, they heard one of the suspects say, "Let the jack down. Everything's all right." Or something to that effect.

"This is the law!" Melton shouted. "Throw your guns down! You're under arrest!"

By that time, Jim and Frank had gotten up beside that last big pecan tree on the levee side of the road.

"You're under arrest!" Frank said. He threw a light on the car with his flashlight, and the convicts started scrambling around trying to get into the car trying to get away, and Melton shot at a tire to disable the car, to keep them from driving off. Then, the shooting started.

Jim said Frank dropped his shotgun and flashlight and kind of staggered.

"Well, they got me," he said.

He didn't cry out, didn't hardly raise his voice, Jim said. He just said, "Well, they got me," or something like that. He started falling, and Jim said he laid him down, just kept laying him down on the ground. Jim said he went slack as a dishrag; he said there was no doubt that Frank was dead by the time he lowered him to the ground. Jim crouched there at the edge of the road beside him until the shooting stopped. Jim Humble nor any of the other officers were hit.

The Convicts and the Students

The convicts told Gladys and Voncille to scream if they started shooting, and they screamed and told the officers not to shoot there were girls in the car. They wanted to know what seat they were on and Voncille told them she was on the back seat and Gladys yelled out that she was on the front seat. They told the girls to come out of the car and they told them they couldn't because the convict had guns in their back. Then the shooting stopped and "Willie the Weeper" grabbed Voncille by the arm and dragged her across the roadside ditch and over the fence. The other convicts followed, with Big Bill and Little Bill dragging Gladys with them and using the girls as shields. Gerry didn't have to follow because the convicts were not dragging him. They had turned him loose, and he could have gone free, but he followed. They were just a little way off the road in a cornfield when the convicts stopped to talk over the situation and smoke a cigarette. They were all now in the open, but they didn't think they would be shot at and told the kids not to worry. The rest of the night they wandered through the field. Stumbling through the darkness,

falling into ditches, but always on the alert. Twice they saw lights of a car and lay down in the weeds until the car disappeared.

When Tom and I left A. J. in the sheriff's office, we drove back over the bridge. A little less than half a mile from the foot of the bridge, Highway 4 turned east off 165. Back then, Highway 4 was a gravel road, and Bellevue was about a mile and a half from the U. S. 165 intersection. We stopped at the intersection so we could flag down and check any traffic coming from the north on 165 until we knew what Arch had found at Bellevue.

I pulled off on the shoulder of the highway, and we got out. We hadn't had time to close the car doors before we heard a pow! Pow! Pow! From the direction of Bellevue. I don't know how many shots were fired, but Tom and I heard the shooting, and there was quite a bit of popping there for a while.

Tom and I climbed back into the car, and I turned on to Highway 4, and headed for Bellevue. I had just rounded that first big curve when we met a car tearing down the road, heading toward us, and the driver began to dim and brighten his headlights.

We cranked up our windows to keep the dust from wrapping us up, and I pulled over on the right shoulder of the road. The other car suddenly slowed then stopped just before passing us, the tires crunching in the gravel. Archie was driving. He hooked his arm out the opened window and leaned his head out. I cranked down my window.

"Don't y'all go down there, Creston!" he said. "You'll get yourselves killed. Them outlaws are down there, and they've killed Frank! Wait till we get some more help."

"Where's Frank?" I asked.

"They killed him. He's a-laying beside the road at the far edge of the pecan orchard. Y'all don't go down there. Them convicts is afoot and laying in wait by now. We're gonna need more help." And Archie drove on.

We hesitated. I turned off the car motor, and we listened and heard nothing from the direction of Bellevue. So, I cranked the car and we headed on down there, driving slower. We were going down there when the ambulance passed us. Geney Cottingham was with the ambulance. When we got there, they had the body in the ambulance and were headed back to Columbia. We didn't see signs of anybody, wasn't no sound around there. The car was still there on the roadside. The outlaws had scattered. We later learned that William Heard, William Landers and William Meharg had taken the kids and gone northeast into Belle Bayou swamp and that Frank Conley was wounded in the groin in the shooting and had crossed over the levee and

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hid in a gulley and that Bruce Fowler and Floyd Boyce had got over in a field and went up toward Riverton. Frank Conley had gone down next to the river and hid in a kind of a ravine, or wash.

The shooting happened along about ten o'clock that night, and the next day, of course everybody in the country was over here hunting those convicts. Some of the men were strolling around down next to the riverbank across the levee from Bellevue, and they found Frank Conley in this ditch down there, and he was in bad shape. They said a fellow from West Monroe by the name of Rogers shot him. Cuz, they called him. Some said Conley was already dead; I don't know, but if he was still alive, they should've taken him prisoner, captured him for evidence. But these trigger-happy people. He had several shots, shot with pistols. So, they finished killing him. Conley's body is buried up here in Columbia Hill Cemetery.

Bruce Fowler and Floyd Boyce had been on the levee, too. They didn't know what had happened to Conley. Of course, the purpose of them being on the levee was that they were supposed to be guarding for the ones changing the flat tire.

* * *

After the shooting, Bruce Fowler and Floyd Boyce had run up the levee a way toward Columbia eastside then came down and crossed Highway 4 and got into those cotton fields along there. During the night, they walked north through those fields, avoiding the highway, until around daylight the next morning they came out on U. S. 165 near Riverton and flagged a man named A. L. Hinton. Mr. Hinton was on his way to work at the Bosco gin about twelve miles north and hadn't heard anything about convicts being on the loose, and he stopped and picked them up. Fowler and Boyce forced him to drive north into Ouachita Parish, and at Bosco, they made him turn east and cross the Lafourche swamp to Louisiana Highway 133. They went north on 133, and over there somewhere, they took Mr. Hinton's clothes and put him out of the car. Highway 133 was gravel then, and ran parallel to U. S. 165, crossed Louisiana Highway 15 about twenty miles east of Monroe, at Rimes, and continued north to intersect U. S. Highway 80 at Start, about five miles west of Rayville. They turned east on U. S. 80, and over about Waverly, close to Madison Parish, Mr. Hinton's car either ran out of gas or broke down. I

don't remember which. It happened that a couple of ladies came along with their nephew. And they stopped her and got in the back seat.¹⁰

They forced her to continue east toward Vicksburg, Mississippi. Of course, the Mississippi authorities had been alerted to be on the lookout for these escaped convicts. But I don't remember if the officers in Richland Parish actually knew that these ladies and their nephew had been kidnapped.

Anyway, the Mississippi River bridge at Vicksburg was a toll bridge. They'd made it to the Vicksburg bridge, and the lady knew it was a toll bridge. Bruce Fowler told her to keep driving. But she said that she drove at a moderate speed, and just before she got to the toll house, where they collected the fare, she turned the switch off and took the key out and when she got even with the house, she put on the brakes. Well, this Bruce Fowler raised up with that rifle, and they blew his head off. The officers there at the station house killed him, in the back seat of that car.¹¹

Floyd Boyce was sitting on the opposite side of the car from Fowler, and he lay down on the floor. I guess he might've lay down on the floor though, when Fowler raised up with his gun, I don't know, but he had glass all in his neck. They shot Fowler through the windshield. We had to carry Floyd Boyce to the doctor several different times to get the glass taken out of his neck and face. It'd fester up, you know. And we'd carry him to the doctor and the doctor would get all the glass out that he could. We carried him down there two or three times, to get the doctor to take that glass out of him.

Boyce was taken into custody there. Then, some of the officers from here, I didn't go, Buddy might've gone over there and picked him up after a day or two.

It didn't take long for all kind of different stories to start around about the shooting. And some stories have even said that Frank Gartman may've been shot by people in his own party. That wouldn't be true because the sheriff's office, and the people out there in the posse were with the sheriff's office, didn't have anything as far as shotgun ammunition was concerned, except double-aught buckshot. And Frank was definitely shot with number four buckshot. I believe it was in the small of his back. It looked like he might've been sideways to the shooter more or less. Now the only other person hit in the shooting that night was the convict, Frank Conley, and he could've been

¹⁰ Mrs. H. L. Erwin, Texas, Mrs. C. E. Eldridge, Monroe, Louisiana, and their nephew, Woodrow Wall, Monroe, Louisiana.

¹¹ Wall was said by Sheriff Julius M. Buchanan of Warren County, Mississippi, to have been shot in the shoulder. The two women were unharmed.

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shot with a rifle. He was shot in the groin, and I don't believe that they ever identify the shot that hit his groin. I don't remember if they did.

* * *

The next day, they brought a couple of blood hounds and tried to set them on a trail back of the Bellevue field. I don't think they ever struck a scent. There's a little wooded area over there back of the field that hadn't been cleared at that time, and there was some timber the wind had blown down close to the back fence. The escapees were in a treetop just over that fence. They told us after we had got them caught that they saw me and Tom and also that they could've killed Buddy. He was on his horse. We didn't see Buddy, so he passed the treetop before or after we did. They said he rode right up by that treetop and didn't know why he didn't see them. But he didn't. And we didn't see them either. We were on one side of the fence, and I think Buddy was on the other side on horseback. They wouldn't let the children say anything. Buddy rode right along by them, right by those treetops out there.

The Convicts and the Students

When daylight came with the clouds breaking up and the sun shining through, the convicts knew they had to get out of the open fields, so they crossed a fence into the woods. They had just begun to think they had thrown off all pursuit when the unmistakable sound of a bloodhound baying rose on their trail. It didn't do any good to tell the kids that the dog wouldn't harm them. They had heard too many tales of vicious bloodhounds that would eat up a man, woman or child. The dog didn't scare the convicts but who might be following the dog did scare them.

Just as they found a suitable place to hide, the dog broke through the bushes. It stopped several feet from them and stood silently looking. They couldn't afford to shoot him because of the noise of a gunshot, so Big Bill Heard made a leap to catch him. Luck combined with desperation guided his groping fingers to its collar. The hound put up quite a struggle to get loose but Heard grimly hung on. Finally, the dog quieted down and just in time. The men following the bloodhound passed just off to their left. Little Bill Meharg said he saw a man on a horse. They passed on by without knowing how close they were to the convicts.

Soon after, they heard an airplane and quickly got under the thickest shelter they could find. All morning they remained there while two planes

circled back and forth. Once one of the planes made a sharp turn directly overhead, and they thought sure they had been seen.

All this time the convicts thought Conley, Fowler, and Boyce had left them when they had the flat tire, and they talked about them running out on them while they were hiding there in the woods.

The planes were coming over less frequently, and they decided it was safe to start on through the woods. The planes could be heard coming far enough away for them to find a hiding place before they arrived overhead.

By noon, they stopped to rest and while the convicts were dozing, Gerry wanted to grab the convicts' guns while they were dozing off. When he told Voncille what he wanted to do, she begged him not to do it, so he didn't try to take the guns.

* * *

After we'd walked the fence behind Bellevue field and were satisfied the convicts weren't there, Tom and I came back to town and went around to the Gartman home on the corner of Riser and Blanks streets to pay our respects to the family. I don't remember seeing Flava. Naturally, she was terribly upset, and somebody, it may've been Leonard Jackson, told us that Dr. Sherman had been by earlier and given her a sedative. Frank's casket was against the south wall of the living room, his head to the east, and wreaths of flowers were already beginning to fill the room. Tom and I walked over and stood at the open casket for a few minutes, and we left. The convicts who had killed Frank were still on the loose.

We got into my car, and I drove to the sheriff's office. When I parked, Tom pulled his shotgun from the back seat and said he was going to check in over at town hall. As town marshal, he had to keep up with his town business. The town hall was catty-cornered across Pearl Street from the courthouse.

I walked into the sheriff's office. Archie stood behind the counter, leaning on it on his elbows, and Melton Jones and Neil Nethery sat in chairs on the near side of the counter. I took a seat, and the phone rang. In just a few minutes, Archie came back to the counter.

"Melton," Archie said, "You and Neil and Creston run around to the levee on the other side of Dr. Sherman's house. Miz Sherman says some boys saw a couple of men down between the levee and the riverbank. Some of them convicts may've swum across the river."

We hurried out the back door. I naturally went to my car because my shotgun was in it, and Neil came with me, but Melton got in his car. As I cranked up, I saw Tom coming from the town hall, his shotgun across his

shoulder He looked like he was going squirrel hunting. I waved to him to come on. I pulled out on Pearl Street and slowed.

“Hop on the running board here, Tom.” Tom jumped onto the running board on the driver’s side and held on with his right hand inside the open window and gripped his shotgun in the other hand. “Somebody reported seeing them convicts across the levee,” I said.

When I made the left turn onto Jackson Street, there where the old telephone exchange used to be, I slung gravel up into Dr. Brown’s yard. It’s not fifty yards from that corner to where the street comes to a dead-end against the levee. Before I stopped good, Tom jumped from the running board and took off up the levee. I pulled my shotgun from the back seat, and Neil and I followed him. Melton pulled in behind me and got out of his car. Children had begun to gather in the yards of the houses there.

“You young’uns get on away from here. Yall go home!” Melton said.

The area between the levee and the riverbank was grown up in sycamore, willow and bitter pecan trees.

“Let’s spread out and walk through these thickets,” Melton said. “Keep a sharp look out.”

We spread abreast and started walking, looking for any sign, footprints, or such, in the sand and mud near the water’s edge. A half mile or so down river, no one had seen any evidence of human presence, so we turned and walked back to our cars. The children were still loitering about the houses next to the levee.

“Any of you kids seen anybody across the levee here. Down by the river?” Melton said.

They shuffled their feet, looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

“We heard some men were seen over there,” Melton said.

One of the boys said they hadn’t seen anybody.

The others shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads.

We loaded up in the cars and went back to the sheriff’s office.

The Convicts and the Students

The convicts seemed lost in the woods and didn’t know what to do or where to go, they just traveled around in circles and walked all around the swamp, about ten or fifteen miles all together. Gerry Harrigill’s Scout training had taught him something about directions in the woods and they asked him and the girls for suggestions a number of times. Gerry thought the posse

would close in on them at any time and thought it would be better to just keep leading them in circles so they wouldn't get away.

About five o'clock Tuesday afternoon they started looking for the road again and about dark they found it and followed it to a farmhouse. They all were terribly thirsty but were afraid to approach the house. Voncille started crying and said she was about to faint. So, the convicts sent Gerry and Voncille for water and told them to bring them some.

Right after they left for the farmhouse a car drove up in front of the house and another car that had been there all the time pulled out followed by the first. The convicts thought for a minute that Gerry and Voncille had been picked up by one of the cars. They had been gone long enough to have reached the house. Just as they had decided they should move they saw Gerry and Voncille walking toward the house.

When they returned Voncille tried to get them all to go up to the house for water. The convicts wouldn't do it. Finally, Gerry said he and Gladys would go back and bring a bucket of water if they would wait. They were gone a long while, but when they returned, Gerry had the well bucket, rope and all, and they all drank.

Refreshed by the water they continued on down the road in the direction taken by the cars. They knew it could not be far to a highway. Soon they turned a bend in the road and saw the lights of a car traveling at right angles to the road they were on. It was the highway they had been on the night before. By watching, they learned they were surrounded by men close enough together to forestall their slipping through.

They all went to one side of the road and laid down in some bushes. Gerry was between Voncille and Gladys and they dozed off with their heads on Gerry's lap. The convicts slept a little, also. About one-thirty or two o'clock in the morning the convicts woke up and told the hostages that they were going to leave them, and Gerry took an oath on his Scout honor that they would not leave until daylight and Gladys took an oath on her Girl Scout honor. They were gone about thirty minutes and returned and said they had them surrounded. They said they would have to keep them hostage until they found a way out.

* * *

On Wednesday morning of the hunt, a sergeant from Angola State Penitentiary, I can't remember that man's name, but he brought about fifty trusty guards up here to help find the three convicts still on the loose and still holding those high school kids as hostages. The trusty guards were convicts

themselves. Back then, they didn't have civilian guards down at Angola; they used trusties for guards, but they've changed up all that now. And a fellow by the name of Alford, Steve Alford, was head of the state police then, and he brought about twenty-five or thirty of those trainees from the state police academy up here. And that's besides all the officers and deputies that could be spared, you know, from different parishes. They came from as far as Madison Parish over here, and Tensas. And back the other way also, Winnfield, and man, this place was wrapped up with police.

But by then, Buddy had decided that the convicts weren't around the Bellevue field anymore, that they'd done got out of there, and I figured he was right. We had covered that ground pretty close the day before. So, Buddy rode his horse into Lafourche swamp to look for them, and Tom and I drove in as far as we could on Marrango Bayou to search there. But of course, we didn't find anything, and after a couple of hours of tramping up and down those bayous and sloughs and through the woods, we gave it up and drove back to town.

The Convicts and the Students

About six o'clock Wednesday morning the convicts sent Voncille out to find a car. She walked out to the road and couldn't see a car, nor did she see anybody. If she had walked twenty more yards, she could have seen a car. She went back to the convicts and at seven-thirty Wednesday morning they sent her out again to make a trade with the posse. The convicts said they would let all of the hostages go free if the police would furnish them a car with one man in it and the doors of the car open to be sure that there was no one hiding in it.

Voncille walked out to the road and saw a Louisiana State Highway Patrolman and he asked her what she was doing on the road and if she wanted to be kidnapped. She told him she was one of the girls kidnapped from Rayville and he immediately took her to Columbia to General Alford, Superintendent of the Louisiana Highway Police. She told General Alford all about it and he took her back to the place where she had come out of the woods to show him where the convicts and Gerry and Gladys were.

After Voncille went out to meet the posse the convicts and hostages expected something to happen every minute. Gerry took a short nap and tried to rest a little and he was awakened by the sounds of the men closing in on them. There were fifty or more trusties from Angola State Penitentiary, five of them were blacks and they were encircling the convicts and the kids chanting, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" on down the line. General Alford had a hundred or more of

his highway police with him and besides this there was a large group of people from Rayville, and all the towns nearby closing in. One of the big black trusties behind one of the convicts told him to put down that gun, that he had him. Heard raised his hands and Landers and Meharg dropped their guns and did likewise.

They surrounded the prisoners and put them in a car over on the gravel road. Gerry and Gladys were transferred to General Alford's car and taken to the hotel in Columbia where Voncille and Gladys hugged, and all were so excited.

"I never was so glad in my life to be safe," Voncille said.

* * *

When Tom and I got back to Columbia, the courthouse yard was full of people, talking and milling about, a lot of excitement. I pulled in back, and we went into the sheriff's office, pushing our way through the crowd of men that jammed both rooms. I finally got to the counter in the big room. Archie was at his desk talking on the telephone. Melton Jones and Neil Nethery were the only ones behind the counter with him. Archie looked up and saw Tom and me and waved us to come around the counter too. By the time we worked our way back of the counter, Archie had hung up the telephone.

Archie said that the trusties from Angola found the convicts over back of Bellevue field somewhere, and they hadn't hurt the kids. He had just got through talking to Sheriff Milton Coverdale up in Ouachita Parish, warning him about what was happening. He told him that the crazy man, Steve Alford, put the three prisoners in his car and was taking them to Monroe to put them in the Ouachita Parish jail for safe keeping. Archie had told Alford that he didn't have the authority to take the prisoners anywhere, that he'd better talk to Buddy first, but he did it anyway; took them to Monroe. He hadn't been gone five, maybe ten minutes when Buddy came into the sheriff's office, and Arch told him what Alford had done. He said Buddy was fit to be tied. He took off after Alford, burning the tires off that '39 Ford, so Arch thought he'd better call Coverdale to warn him. He told him if he didn't get Alford gone from his office right quick, he's liable to have a killing on his hands when Buddy Erskine got there.

Sheriff Coverdale knew Buddy, and later, he said he told Steve Alford, "Man, you better get gone. Buddy Erskine is on his way up here to get his prisoners, and if you're around—"

And Buddy didn't see him, either. Alford placed the convicts in Sheriff Coverdale's custody and made himself scarce. Of course, when Buddy got

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there, Coverdale turned those prisoners over to him, and Buddy brought them back to Columbia.

Coverdale said he told Steve Alford, “I don’t know how many mistakes you’ve made in your life, but you’ve made one bad one this time. Under the law, you had no authority to move those people unless the sheriff requested it. Now, you’ve got Buddy Erskine to deal with.”

I tell you, I worked for Buddy for twenty-four years, and when he got mad, he got kind of crazy, and if he’d ever met up with him—he never could meet him. If Buddy Erskine ever had met Steve Alford, he would’ve whipped the socks off of him.

I tell you, that was a big hanging, four people at one time. Getting them ready, and all that stuff. Leading them up there. Those fellows were jovial to the last minute.

Creston C. Dunn

PART FIVE: THE LAST HANGING

1940-1941

Hangings legal and illegal had taken place in Caldwell Parish. In the late 'twenties or early 'thirties, a black man named Hodges killed another black man out around Holum community and he was tried and hanged here in Columbia. That was before the new courthouse with the gallows on the roof was built, so a scaffold was built on the courthouse square.

And there were illegal hangings, too. During the Depression, a fellow by the name of Mannheim was the depot agent for the railroad here at Columbia. It was told that a black man came along and robbed Mr. Mannheim and killed him. I think someone came along and saw the black man getting away. I don't remember just how they said it happened, but the alarm was raised, and they caught him, and a mob hanged him on a telegraph pole up close to the depot. I didn't see that. I lived out in the country, but I remember it being talked about.

In nineteen and eighteen a black man was accused of killing Blanchard Warner, a young man at that time. They were having some kind of school down in Ward ten. It must have been a black school, but I'm not sure. A young black man was accused of killing Warner and a mob took him. They carried him down to Banks Springs, right about where the Citizens Hospital is now, but across the highway and hanged him from a white oak tree. Of course, there wasn't a highway there then, just a wagon trail.

It must have happened in late spring or early summer of nineteen and eighteen before I had typhoid fever that summer. I was working at Louisiana Central Lumber Company in Clarks, and we heard reports of the lynching and several of us went up there. The black man was still hanging there on one of those low limbs. We weren't there when the hanging took place, so I don't know just who was involved in the mob. But the black man was still hanging there when we came up.

Several years after then, I heard that some white man who was dying admitted killing Warner. But I don't know if there's any truth to that or not,

and I don't remember if I ever heard who it was that was supposed to have confessed to the killing.¹²

But another case that I heard about as a child happened before the turn of the century. There was a white man that killed a black man down in the Copenhagen Prairie area. I remember hearing my parents and the grown folks talking about the incident. The black man was well liked and respected. The white man was arrested, and a mob went down and took him out of jail, took him away from the sheriff and hanged him in a tree behind the courthouse. That's the only incident of a white man being lynched for killing a black man that I know of.

* * *

In nineteen and forty, Mr. Ellis Roberts was jailer here. He and his wife, Sally, lived up in the jail on the third floor of the courthouse, but of course, their living quarters were separate from the lockup. Ellis was ten or twelve years older than me. He was about fifty-seven or -eight years old at the time, but I'd known him all my life. His daddy was Fleming Roberts, and during my early life, they lived over on the Winn Parish side not far from the community where we lived on the Caldwell Parish side. Ellis's mother died when he was a small child, and my grandparents, John and Nancy Dunn, took him in and raised him. I guess it was too much on Mr. Fleming, taking care of a small child, but folks did that back then; older women taking in motherless children. Along about nineteen and one, Ellis worked for the Laird family, and he married Miss Sally Laird. Miss Sally did the cooking for the jail, and I'll tell you, the prisoners in the Caldwell Parish jail ate good.

Of course, I helped Ellis all I could with the prisoners. We didn't have no manpower. Wilson Smith, Ellis's son-in-law, came up and helped out as much as he could, but he wasn't on the payroll; he was just helping his folks.

Melton Jones and I were the only field deputies here at that time. Neil Nethery had left. I think he had a cousin or some relatives up in Washington State, and he went up there to a better paying job, and Melton lived down on Long Lake, and they didn't have a telephone system down there. At that time, most of the work was at night, corralling drunks, and working car wrecks. We didn't have a state policeman stationed here in Caldwell Parish then. And stealing, and stuff like that happened after the sheriff's office closed at five o'clock in the afternoon and everything was left up to Buddy and me to

¹² The hanging tree was cut down when U. S. Highway 165 was expanded to a four-lane highway in the early 2000s.

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handle. And it was pretty tough here for a long time. Jim Humble was the night marshal, and Tom Burke was town marshal here in Columbia, so we had help in town. But Tom got fired between the time the four convicts were tried and convicted and when they were hanged. So, we just kind of had to tough it out the best we could.

I wouldn't have quit Buddy during all the trouble with the convicts and all, and him working shorthanded, but if I hadn't liked Buddy as a man, as I did, I guess I would've later on account of being aggravated at having to get up so much at night; corralling drunks and settling disturbances and such, and Buddy and I were the only ones to do it. But I guess it worked out for the best. That kind of work grows on you, and I'll tell you, Buddy Erskine was tough. He could stand a lot of that work. He could stand a lot of it. And he liked it, and he didn't mind doing it, night or day, and the rougher it got the better he liked it.

Buddy wouldn't compromise on principles under no circumstances. If a man was violating the law, he'd get him, he'd arrest him, but I've seen him pick up a man, and carry him to court, and he'd have to pay a fine, and Buddy, I've seen him do it, would sign a note for him to pay his fine. I've seen him do it for more than one man. Buddy Erskine was one of the finest men I ever knew. One of the best men that I ever worked for. Buddy was a man of principle, and he hated a liar worse than any man I've ever seen. If a man just willfully told him a lie, he'd never risk him again. better not tell him a lie.

A few days later after we got the four convicts in jail here, things quieted down a bit. Back then, we were in the Eighth Judicial District, which was composed of Winn, Grant, LaSalle, and Caldwell Parishes. Harry Fuller from Winnfield was the District Attorney and Vincent Mouser from here in Columbia was the Assistant District Attorney for Caldwell Parish. If I remember right, Mouser presented the case against Meharg, Landers, Heard, and Boyce to the Grand Jury and asked for an indictment of first-degree murder against all four.

I guess it was about this time that I went around to Frank's place of business to settle up on my new car. Chandler Yonge, Buddy's brother-in-law, had worked for Frank for a couple of years, and he was running things until David, Frank's son, kind of got his feet under him so to speak. It was a solemn bit of business, and when we'd signed the paperwork, we stood and shook hands.

“Well, Creston,” Chandler said. “It looks like you bought the last car Frank ever sold and his signature’s not on any of the paper. I just wish he was here to sign it.”

“So do I, Chandler.”

* * *

On Friday afternoon, September 13, Buddy sent Milton Jones into the courtroom as bailiff, and he and I walked up those long, narrow stairs to the jail to get the prisoners. We brought them down to the jury room and sat them at a table there to wait for the call of the court. After a while, Melton opened the door and nodded.

“Let’s go,” Buddy said and jerked his head toward the door. His voice always had a kind of growl to it, and when he was serious, you could really hear it. I guess the convicts had got used to his voice and tone by then because they didn’t hesitate, they got to their feet and filed into the courtroom. Buddy and I followed them in.

F. E. Jones was the judge that day. It was well known that a few years before he had sentenced Will Harper to hang for the murder of Hardy Pepper over in Winn Parish. I don’t guess the four convicts knew it, but you could look into the old judge’s eyes and know you were in bad trouble. Judge Jones told them that they were all charged with the first-degree murder of Frank Gartman and asked them if they could afford an attorney. After each of the prisoners in turn answered, “No, your honor,” the judge appointed A. D. Flowers and J. M. Henagan of Jena to represent them. Later, when they were arraigned, two attorneys from Monroe, Elliott Thompson and J. H. Dorman, were entered as counsel of record. I guess it was along about this time that Judge Jones dropped out of the picture for some reason. I don’t remember why, if I ever knew, but Cass Moss from Winnfield ended up as the presiding judge, and about the same time, Thompson and Dorman were replaced by Fred Fudickar, Jr. of Monroe to assist Flowers and Henagan in the defense of the four convicts.

The trial started on the fourteenth of October in nineteen and forty. The four accused were convicted and sentenced to hang. At that time, I don’t think they ever appealed a case to the federal courts. I think it was the law at that time in cases of capital convictions that the Louisiana Supreme Court would review the trial and that’s as far as it went. If the State Supreme Court didn’t find a flaw in the trial proceedings, the verdict stood. Then the governor had to sign a death warrant and order the execution. They were convicted in

October, and the next March, the seventh of March in nineteen and forty-one, they were hanged up there above the jail. Four of them.

Since they've had this reorganization and stuff the courts brought on, chances are they wouldn't hang any of them for killing Frank now. Because I don't know that you could prove that any one of them done the shooting. I think now that you have to sum it down to the man that did the actual shooting before you can get a capital conviction. They had committed four capital offenses in Louisiana. Three in Rayville, and one here. They had kidnapped three kids over at Rayville. That was three counts of kidnapping which was a capital offense then. It's not, now, and murder was a capital offense, which they did that over here. The convicts didn't know which one done the killing. They actually didn't know. Floyd Boyce thought maybe that Frank Conley, the one that got killed down on the Ouachita riverbank, did the shooting. Boyce said that Conley was on the levee and was supposed to be guarding while they were fixing the flat tire. He said Conley must've been the one that done the shooting that killed Frank Gartman. The way Gartman was standing though, it looked like the shot came from that car. Looked like the people that killed him were at the car.¹³ *

But I helped Ellis Roberts as much as I could. We'd search those cells every two or three days to make sure no weapons were smuggled into the prisoners. And of course, after a while, I got to know them. Meharg was the youngest. He was about twenty-four years old. They were just like anybody else after you got to know them. They knew they were gone, and they told me and Mr. Roberts about things that they had done. But one thing that they told us was that they'd rather go to that gallows up there than to go back to Arkansas: that they'd rather be in Hell than to be in that Arkansas prison. That old warden came down here from Arkansas Cummins Prison, and I could imagine he had executed several himself. They said he was a tough dude, and there were some tough people in that prison.

¹³ Floyd Boyce's theory is plausible. Earlier Creston Dunn stated, "Frank (Gartman) was definitely shot with number four buckshot. I believe it was in the small of his back. It looked like he might've been sideways to the shooter more or less. Now, the only other person hit in the shooting that night was the convict, Frank Conley." Conley was guarding on the levee, which would have put him behind Gartman and Humble, and when the shooting started, perhaps he heard Gartman call out, "You're under arrest!" and saw his flashlight beam and shot him. Possibly the convicts at the car saw the flash of Conley's gun and shot him. All plausible.

In those days, criminals sentenced to death in Louisiana were not transferred to Angola State Penitentiary for execution. They were hanged in the parish where they committed the crime that they were convicted of, and the sheriff of the parish, as the executive of the court, was responsible for carrying out the sentence. Of course, Buddy contacted the warden at Angola, who put him in touch with Grady Jarratt, one of the State's executioners.¹⁴

* * *

Tom Burke, at the time, he had got drunk and whipped some blacks around here, and his daddy fired him. He got on to some of those blacks down there and raised a right smart of a disturbance, and Dr. Burke, his daddy, went down there and took his pistol and badge away from him and fired him. Tom was much of a man and wasn't scared of anything. He was a plumb bear, but he was a nice fellow too, and the next day, he saw what he'd done, and he quit. He was going to join the marines, and he wanted to go up to the Hawkins place. Mr. Hawkins lived up there close to where that plant is above Riverton. There's a house just the other side of that plant, off to the right there. That used to be the Hawkins place. Malloy's father and mother lived there, at that time. The Burkes and Hawkinses were all good friends, and they treated Tom like he was their own child. Tom came over to the sheriff's office and wanted to go up there and kindly get over this thing. He was going to join the marines. So, I drove him up there, and after he got straightened out, he did, he joined the Marines. That was before World War Two.

After Tom left, we didn't have a town marshal. I done the marshaling here, and deputy sheriff too, here for about six or eight months. Finally, the town council hired Mr. Hugh Thompson, appointed him marshal. But almost anytime he had anything, got a call at night, he had to have somebody to go with him. I don't know why. I guess he wasn't used to that kind of work. He'd call me a lot of times, maybe I'd just been off on a call, and I'd have to go with him. Anyway, we made it. The convicts were hanged the seventh day of March in nineteen and forty-one.

¹⁴ The story goes that several years before when Buddy was a deputy under John King that a man was sentenced to hang here, and the police jury didn't want to or couldn't come up with the money to pay for a hangman, so Buddy was going to do the hanging. But Buddy's mother, Daisey Graves Erskine (1871-1949), said no son of hers was going to be a hangman, and she put up the money to pay for the executioner.

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* * *

In nineteen and forty-one, I think there were two or three hangmen that the sheriffs throughout the state could hire to do the deed when the occasion arose. I guess the executioners were paid by the piece, so to speak, so much money for every man hanged. The hangman, who came to Columbia a couple of days before the execution, was a fellow from Shreveport by the name of Grady Jarratt (27 Feb 1888-1 Jun 1973). He wore a coat and tie and seemed like a sociable, jovial kind of fellow, really friendly and talkative; one of those backslapping sorts of fellows. Years later, in the early sixties, Jarratt came by the sheriff's office. Buddy wasn't in the office, I don't remember where he was, but Buddy's son, David, who had just graduated from college and was working as a deputy, was there. I introduced David to him, and Jarratt told us he was coming back from Angola where he'd gone to electrocute a fellow. I guess when the state changed the method of execution from hanging to electrocution, he'd learned how to do that and kept right on. Anyway, Governor Jimmie Davis had commuted the condemned man's sentence at the last minute, and Jarratt seemed a little huffed at the Governor for calling off the party, and he got to telling about hanging the four convicts here in nineteen and forty-one and how that party just had got started good when he ran out of partners. He was a real jovial fellow in a gruesome sort of way. I believe he said the four convicts he hanged that day make him an even twenty-four.

* * *

We were getting all kinds of grapevine information from different places that different people, some of the toughs that'd come in here, were going to break them out. All that kind of talk. Nothing never did develop. To try to take them out. That was their friends. It never happened, but we stayed on guard though, day and night, till after it was all over. I don't know how we did it. Mr. Jim Humble was the night marshal, and he stayed there round the foot of the courthouse most of the time. Ellis Roberts's son-in-law, Wilson Smith, was there during that time. Smith wasn't hired but he was helping his folks.

The prisoners never made a move at me or Ellis or Buddy anytime we went into their cells. But I went in there one day in a hurry to help Ellis and I had stuck my pistol in under my coat in my belt. That's one of the things you don't ever do is go in the cell with a gun. I guess I forgot I had it until I got in there. And Mr. Roberts had to go out and it just left me in a cell with one of the prisoners. I just told him to go over there and sit down. He did, and when Mr. Roberts came back, I went outside and put my gun up. I don't think the

prisoner ever noticed that I had my pistol. I just told him to sit down over there. He did. He must've known I had it, too. I made a big mistake there. I could've got killed. But he'd have taken a great chance, to try to take my gun away from me. He would've had to put up a fight. Back in those days I was much of a man myself. He'd probably made me kill him, and then I'd been in trouble. I had no business in there with a gun. After then, I saw Buddy, not with them but with other prisoners go into the cell with his gun on. But I wouldn't do it.

I don't know how it was decided who would be hanged first. I really don't remember who went up to the gallows first or what order they went in.¹⁵

They just came got one and then another. They had his feet tied. He was handcuffed with his hands behind him. He had this black cap jerked over his face and Jarratt pushed that trigger and let him go. . .so.

Landers and Boyce were about the same age. Heard too was along about that age. Heard said that he was raised an orphan and was raised in Natchitoches. He said that he started stealing apples and bananas from an Italian shop. And from that he got to stealing more stuff. He got into hijacking as he got older. I think he'd been in every prison around except Louisiana, he never had been in prison in Louisiana, but he'd had trouble with the authorities when he was a kid over there in Natchitoches. Frank Conley was an older fellow too; he was about thirty-five or forty. This Meharg, he was the youngest one. He was twenty-four years old.

Landers, he'd taken cigarette packages and got that tinfoil and some pasteboard, and he made a pretty good-looking pistol out of it. It looked like maybe a .32 automatic. Something like that. It looked pretty good. I don't remember just who found that imitation pistol, but it was found during one of our searches. But they never did try to break out.

* * *

That's a pretty gruesome thing. They didn't have nothing but those narrow stairs from the jail, and I brought one of those fellows down from the gallows to the jury room on my back. Fluitt Volentine brought one of them, and I don't know who brought the others. But I brought one of them down there and I remember getting a little blood on one of the caskets, and Monor Riser, the undertaker, said something about it. I had all I could handle to get

¹⁵ Louisiana's Last Hanging: "No Way to Win in Crime" by Burk Foster appeared in *The Angolite*, November/December 2001, pp. 34-36.

William Meharg went first at 12:09 p.m., followed by Floyd Boyce, at 12:39 p.m., William Heard, at 1:13 p.m., and William Landers, at 1:57 p.m.

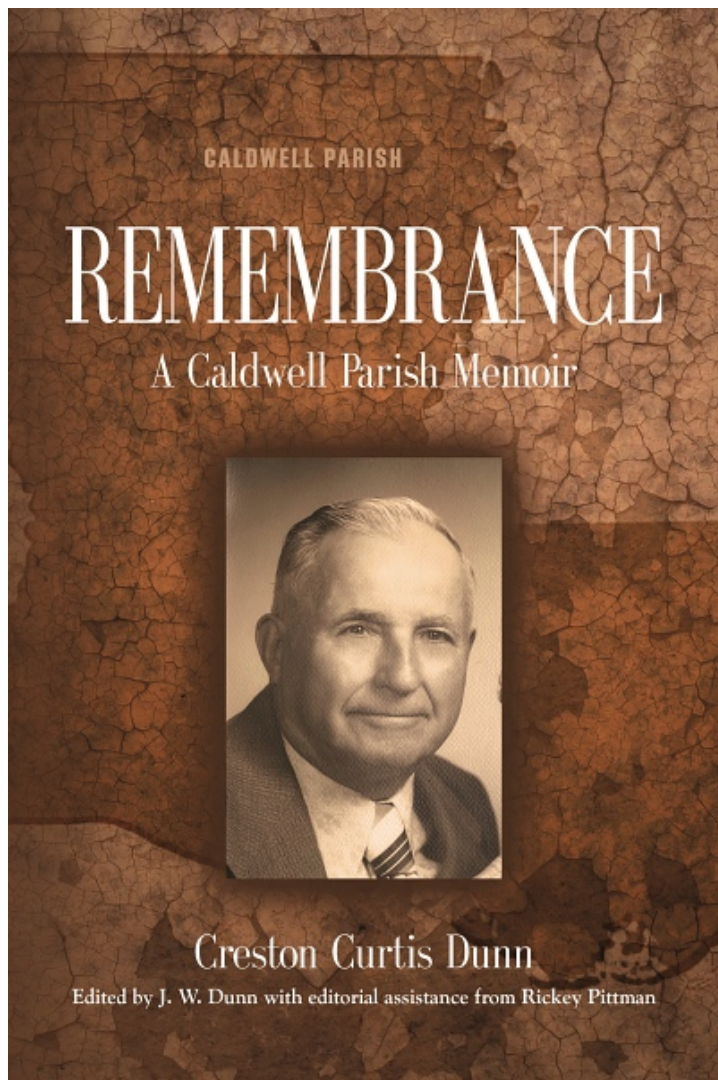
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down those narrow stairs with a dead man on my shoulders and put him in the jury room. Just come down that stair there and turn to your right and go into the jury room, that's where they were fixing the bodies up. Had the caskets in there. I got a little blood on one of the caskets, and Monor said something. That burnt me up, that just burnt me. I had everything I could do. Maybe blood spurting or something you know. That's the reason I voted to repair the courthouse down there. I found out for sure that they were putting an elevator up to the jail. I wasn't implicated anymore, but I knew just how bad it was.

I'm the only one I know that's living (Dec.10, 1983), that had anything to do with that hanging. I tell you that was a big hanging, four people at one time. Getting them ready, and all that stuff. Leading them up there one at a time. Those fellows were jovial to the last minute.

But they were tough men. Floyd Boyce was from Oklahoma. He was tough. And Landers. He must've been tough because when he was on the gallows, he told Bruce Fowler (the one killed on the Vicksburg bridge) they called him "Butterbeans." That's what they called him in prison. Butterbeans. And Landers says, "Hurry up Butterbeans and get the coffee hot. I'll be down there in a few minutes." Just before he dropped through that hole.

Meharg's mother lived in Missouri. I think she and her daughter came down here and claimed his body. Landers had a brother that was a barber over in Texas. He didn't ever come over here, but he got lawyer Flowers to carry his brother's body to Jena and bury it down there somewhere. Frank Conley was killed on the Ouachita riverbank, and he's buried in Columbia's Cemetery Hill and Floyd Boyce and William Heard are buried there next to him.



Remembrance is A Caldwell Parish memoir of the life of Creston Curtis Dunn, who lived in three centuries and in the second and third Millennium. Mr. Dunn was one of the most influential and interesting individuals in the history of the Parish.

Remembrance: A Caldwell Parish Memoir

By Creston Curtis Dunn

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