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A Mystery in the Georgia Woods: The Woolfolk Murders

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Georgia's Outdoor Adventures

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BY JOHN TRUSSELL, WITH
PROFESSOR DONALD E. WILKES, JR.

When you take a walk in the woods to hunt or just to enjoy the outdoor beauty, you never know what might have happened there in the past. A large tract of woodlands in Bibb County is a good example. When I visited there recently, the woods were calm and quiet and the mature oak trees stood in silent witness to the violence that occurred here many years ago. But on August 6, 1887 nine persons were slain at this location in the woods, just off highway 74 in Bibb County. The house where the murders occurred is long gone, but nine members of the Ocmulgee Archaeological Society (strangely, number of murder victims here also was nine!) came to investigate and to re-establish the lost location of the house site. In this goal we were successful and located the house site, along with supporting house debris (such as bricks, hinges, and an old window weight), and the old well. We came to this site not to judge prior events, but to re-examine an historical event and document physical remains of the murder site as an official Georgia archaeological site.

Ocmulgee Archaeological Society members who participated in the visit were Stephen Hammack (and his son James), David Mincey, Brenda Sapp, Alan Marsh, Linda Tatcher, Laura Silsbee, Tony Zelonis and this writer. Much of the information presented below was prepared in previous years by University of Georgia law professor Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. for historical articles and the author thankfully acknowledges his work. Also a book, "The Shadow Chasers, The Woolfolk Tragedy Revisited," by Carolyn DeLoach, has provided additional information. Now, some background information as prepared by Professor Wilkes.

More than a century ago, Oct. 29, 1890, the man who committed the most horrible and notorious murders in the history of the state of Georgia was publicly executed. He killed more persons on a single occasion than any other murderer in America who did not use a gun, poison, explosives, fire, or an automobile. Although he was born and performed his crimes near Macon and was hanged in Perry, the murderer had close ties to Athens, where he was raised. The story of these murders is rarely mentioned in books on the history of crime in America and the story has been almost totally forgotten even here in Georgia.

Thomas G. Woolfolk (pronounced WUHL-ork) was born in Bibb County near Macon June 18, 1860. His parents were Richard and Susan M. Woolfolk, who met while Richard was a student at the University of Georgia and married in Athens in 1852, two years before Richard graduated. Tom Wool-

folk was his parents' third child and first son. Shortly after Tom's birth his mother died and Tom was sent to stay with his aunt, Fannie Moore, his mother's sister.

Tom lived with his aunt at her house in Athens for the first seven years of his life, from 1860 to 1867. Fannie, who later married Athens architect John Ross Crane, lived in a house at 716 Prince Avenue which was torn down many years ago, on the site of which there is now a medical arts building parking lot.

Little is known of Tom's childhood in Athens except that he dearly loved his aunt. While Tom was growing up in Athens the city went through the ordeal of the Civil War. Many times as a child Tom must have ridden in a horse-drawn carriage up and down Prince Avenue as he traveled about the town with his aunt.

In 1866 Tom's father remarried and soon after Tom left Athens to live with his father and new stepmother, Mattie H. Woolfolk, at his father's plantation home near Macon. Tom, who was quarrelsome and irascible by nature, never liked his stepmother; nor did he care for the six children born as a result of his father's remarriage.

Tom's last trips to Athens were in March and June 1887, when he visited his Aunt Fannie. On both occasions he behaved bizarrely: his talk was incoherent, he was insanely suspicious, he paced the floor, and he carried a pistol. It was clear to his aunt that his mental condition had deteriorated, that in fact he was crazy.

Sometime between 2 and 4 a.m. on Saturday, Aug. 6, 1887, nine persons were brutally slain at the Woolfolk plantation home near Macon. The victims were Richard F. Woolfolk, then aged 54; his wife Mattie H., aged 41; their six children, Richard F. Jr., 20; Pearl, 17; Annie, 10; Rosebud, 7; Charlie, 5; baby Mattie, 18 months old; and 84-year old Temperance West, a relative of Mrs. Woolfolk from Americus who had been visiting the Woolfolks.

All the victims were killed by being struck in the head or upper body with a short-handled ax that belonged to Tom Woolfolk and was found in one of the rooms. All the victims were found dead in bed, except the two sons, who were lying on the floor of their parents' bedroom, and 10-year Annie, who was kneeling in front of an open window, evidently having tried unsuccessfully to flee her killer.

In the rooms where the victims lay brain tissue, blood, and gore was all over the beds, walls, and the ceiling. Pools of blood lay on the floor.

The only inhabitant of the home not slain that terrible morning was Tom Woolfolk, who at daybreak sought help from neighbors, claiming that his father's family had been murdered by unknown intruders and



"Members of the Ocmulgee Archaeological Society who documented the site of the 1887 woolfolk murders were (Left kneeling) -Laura Silsbee, Stephen Hammack, Tony Zelonis (Standing in back, from left) Brenda Sapp, Alan Marsh, David Mincey, Linda Tatcher and John Trussell. In the foreground is the old well where Woolfolk disposed of his bloody clothes. The tall oak trees at the site stand in silent witness to this tragedy many years ago.

that he had escaped death only by jumping out a window.

He then returned to the house before anyone else got there, confirmed that everyone was dead, and, he said, heard the killers exit the back way, slamming the fence gate behind them. He also washed himself and flung his blood-spattered clothing down the well.

Within hours several thousand people had rushed to the Woolfolk home, and a coroner's inquest was held on the spot.

Suspicion immediately focused on Tom. He admitted that the bloody footprints in the murder room were his; he had specks of blood in his ears; there was a bloody handprint on his leg; he behaved oddly (showing no emotion about the tragedy and appearing more apprehensive than grief-stricken); and his explanation of why he alone had survived seemed unlikely. There was no evidence of forced entry or theft. The coroner's jury therefore concluded that Tom was the murderer, but even before the verdict was rendered the sheriff had hurriedly and quietly conveyed Tom to jail, to prevent the angry crowd from lynching Tom.

The horrible murders were widely publicized in the local and national press; they even made the front page of the New York Times. Understandably, the press coverage at times was lurid. The crime was called

"the bloodiest, blackest, chapter in Georgia criminal history," "the most shocking murder ever committed in Georgia," "one of the most heinous crimes committed in this or any other state," a crime "without parallel in the criminal history of the South if not the world," "the bloodiest tragedy in the annals of crime," and "the most ferocious and harrowing crime ever recorded in the annals of civilization."

Tom Woolfolk, as the chief suspect, was described as "the most brutal murderer that ever figured in the annals of our state," "the most notorious criminal of modern times," and even as "the greatest monster of the age ... the cruelest and [most] bloodthirsty brute on record." Tom was often referred to in the press as "Bloody Woolfolk."

Tom Woolfolk was brought to trial in the Superior Court of Bibb County on a charge of murder in December 1887. He was fortunate to have a dedicated Athens lawyer, John C. Rutherford, who worked without being paid and did everything possible in Tom's behalf, laboring so mightily for his client that he died of exhaustion shortly after Tom's execution.

In the 19th century a Georgia criminal defendant was not allowed to take the stand and testify under oath, but was permitted to make an unsworn statement to the jury. Tom

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made such a statement, completely denying the crime. No insanity defense was interposed. The case against Tom was circumstantial but the evidence was strong, and Tom's lawyer was unable to pin the blame for the slaughter on anyone else, with the result that Tom was convicted by the jury and sentenced to death.

However, because several courtroom spectators, referring to Tom, had shouted out "Hang him! Hang him!" during the prosecutor's closing arguments, the Georgia Supreme Court ordered a new trial in February 1889.

Due to community hostility, Tom was granted a change of venue and his second trial took place in Perry in the Superior Court of Houston County. The retrial took almost the entire month of June 1889 and resulted in another jury verdict of guilty and another sentence of death.

Incredibly, Rutherford's closing arguments to the jury took 13 hours, as did the closing arguments of the prosecution! The case against Tom was so strong, however, that the jury convicted him in less than 15 minutes. A year later, in July 1890, the Georgia Supreme Court upheld Tom's death sentence.

Tom Woolfolk was hanged in Perry on the afternoon of Wednesday, Oct. 29, 1890 before a crowd of 10,000 people, some of whom munched on possum sandwiches

while they watched. Since the General Assembly outlawed public hangings three years later, Tom's hanging was one of the last public executions in this state. It occurred near Mossy creek, just a short distance from the courthouse.

While on the scaffold, literally at death's door, Tom once again affirmed his innocence, disappointing the crowd which had hoped for a last-minute confession. His death was gruesome and painful: the fall through the trapdoor did not break his neck and it took 15 minutes for him to choke to death at the end of the rope.

The only mass murder in Georgia possibly comparable to the Woolfolk case is the mass slaying of six members of the Alday family in Seminole County in 1973. There are striking similarities between the Woolfolk and Alday murders. In both murder cases the victims were all members of a prominent local family; in both cases the press coverage was extraordinary; in both cases the initial conviction and death sentence was set aside on appeal; and in both cases the accused received a change of venue at the retrial. Amazingly, Carl Isaacs, the alleged ringleader of the murderers of the Alday family, was, like Tom Woolfolk, retried in Perry, found guilty, and sentenced to death there. On the other hand, the Aldays were shot rather than axed, and died at the hands



Not much is left at the site and the house disappeared many years ago, but the group did find old bricks, hinges and a large window weight.

of total strangers rather than a relative.

The victims of Bloody Woolfolk lie buried together in the Rose Hill cemetery in Macon, while Tom Woolfolk is buried in Orange Hill Cemetery in Hawkinsville.

If you are interested in history and archaeology, you are invited to attend the monthly meetings of the Ocmulgee Archaeological Society, which meets in Macon the first

Monday of each month in room 143 of the new Science and Engineering building at Mercer University. For more information or questions, contact OAS President and attorney David Mincey at 478-836-3148, OAS Treasurer John Trussell at 478-953-9320 or OAS Secretary Stephen Hammack (a registered archaeologist) at 478-718-3398.

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SAFETY

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over the fact that people do get injured, maimed, and killed while hunting and fishing. I've already amply illustrated this with my own personal examples. According to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources website, in Georgia there have been an average of 73 hunting accidents and an average of eight hunting fatalities each year since 1979. And most of these accidents are preventable.

Question 2. What causes and circumstances lead to these accidents? Here are a few statistics gleaned from several sources.

In Georgia, tree stand accidents and accidents resulting in self-inflicted injuries accounted for 72% of the total accidents.

Shooter/victim accidents accounted for 38% of total accidents.

One out of three people who died on the water died while fishing, hunting, or on the way to fish or hunt.

According to the National Rifle Association, more hunters die each year from water-related accidents than from gunshot

wounds.

Between 1995 and 2000, 91% of sportsmen who died in boating accidents were not wearing a life jacket (47% did not even have a life jacket on board).

Compared with the general boating fatality population, sportsmen were far more likely to have not worn a life jacket than all other boaters.

70% of hunters who died in boating accidents fell overboard as a result of the boat being improperly loaded or due to moving around in the boat unsafely.

In the typical sportsman boating fatality:

88% percent of fatalities are from drowning,

40% of fatalities come from vessel capsizing,

Cold water and strong currents were reported in a high percentage of accidents,

Most accidents happen in open motorboats of 16 feet or less.

Question 3. Who is injured or killed most frequently in these activities? With age

comes wisdom, right? Well, not exactly if you look at the age of folks most likely to be injured or killed in hunting and fishing accidents. Here's what the statistics show. A six-year study in Pennsylvania by medical researchers found 280 hunters who received medical treatment following falls. Six of them died. That study revealed that the highest rate of falls was in hunters age 50-59. Slower reflexes and poorer coordination probably account for a portion of that statistic. However, Marilyn Bentz, Executive Director of the National Bowhunter Education Foundation, thinks that lack of education is a key component of the accident rate in this age class. Here's another statistic that calls the age/wisdom axiom into question. Men ages 30-50 are the most common victims in the typical sportsman boating fatality. These statistics beg the question, do we get wiser as we get older or do we go into a state of denial about our physical capabilities and vulnerabilities? It appears that the latter may be the case.

Question 4. How can these injuries and deaths be prevented? There are a host of things that we can all do to make our outdoor

experiences safer. Some of these are simple and should become a part of our routine every time we head to the outdoors. Other strategies may require a little more effort and coordination with our family and companions. However, these are well worth the effort. Next month, I will provide a more detailed and systematic approach to developing and implementing a safety plan for your outdoor adventures. In the meantime, stay safe and for the benefit of ourselves, our loved ones, and our country, let's improve on the statistics presented in the article. This column is dedicated to the memory of John O'Meara and Dan Schlegel. Our thoughts and prayers go out their family and to Charles Fussell and his family in wishing him a speedy and complete recovery.

This column is sponsored by Southern Habitat Services, Inc. If you need help in managing your property, Southern Habitat Services can assist you with a complete property management and food plot program. Call John Mastin at (478) 338-2547 for professional help with your wildlife management needs.