
CHILTONIAN

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QUARTERLY MEETING

The Chilton County Historical Society will hold its summer meeting on Sunday, July 16th, at 2:00 PM at the Senior Connection building. The speaker will be Alabama historian Jim Phillips. His talk will focus on Alabama antebellum history with extra information on "Old Maplesville."

The meeting is free and open to the public. Mr. Phillips will bring a portable museum with him consisting of artifacts and relics from Antebellum and Civil War Alabama.

Mr. Phillips is known for his presentations and videography on such topics as Alabama antebellum history, southern aviation, Sloss Furnaces, Birmingham-Southern, county histories, D-Day, and even ghost stories.

He is a historian, videographer, and collector of old bottles, coins, and more. If you have any old bottles (pre-1920), feel free to bring them for examination, evaluation, and possible trade for old coins and/or Civil War buttons.

You might be familiar with his brother, Dr. Doug Phillips, a naturalist who hosts *Discovering Alabama* on Alabama Public Television.

CREDITS:

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article is excerpted from a compilation of stories written by people who grew up and lived in the old Lay Dam Village, the residential community built by and for employees of Alabama Power Company's first hydroelectric power plant. Many thanks to Mrs. Barbara Petty for providing the material.

The Beginning

Barbara Greene Perry sent us this article on the beginning of Lay Dam, written by Madge Wilbanks of The Clanton Advertiser. It sets the stage and explains the critical role the Bates family had in making Lay Dam possible. The personal family vignettes in the article are as remembered by Belle, one of Roliffee & Oda Bates' daughters who married Edwin Petty. Belle and Edwin had two children—Joyce and Billy. Barbara Greene married Billy. He was a grandchild of Roliffee and Oda Bates, as are Bill and Downie O'Neal who also contributed to the memories in this book.

First Hydroelectric Plant Was Built Here

Saturday, April 15, 1989 was a most extraordinary day of celebration of Lay Dam and Alabama Power Company as 75 years of service to the people of central Alabama was recognized. It was the 75th anniversary of Lay Dam, the first dam built by the young Alabama Power Company.

The construction of this dam was the culmination of a dream by a former riverboat captain, William Patrick Lay. As he travelled the river, he envisioned great potential for the waterway. He had previously built and operated a successful, small hydroelectric generating plant near Gadsden and had worked for the development of the river by building locks and dams for commercial travel.

In 1906, Captain Lay decided to organize the Alabama Power Company to finance his plans for a dam on the Coosa River. Lay's oldest son, Earl, and his attorney, Oliver Hood, joined him in incorporating the company on December 4, 1906 and in 1907, Lay secured approval from the U. S. Congress to build a dam on the Coosa. However, he lacked the necessary finances to make his dream a reality.

On May 1, 1912, Lay turned his holdings over to Thomas Martin, a legal expert on water rights, and to James Mitchell, a Canadian engineer and

financier. These two men also envisioned greater power on Alabama's rivers.

In 1912, according to Belle Bates Petty Hendrix, daughter of Roliffee and Oda Robinson Bates, Captain Lay drove from Clanton in a buggy to find her father who was clearing some new ground. She remembers that Captain Lay was a thin little man when he got out of the buggy and walked over to her father. Belle's father took Lay to the Bates' home, approximately 11 miles north of Clanton near the Coosa River, and the two men began talking. Apparently, Lay had been camping out on the banks of the river, looking at land around the area that he needed for the proposed dam. He had accidentally come upon the Bates' home and returned to Clanton to learn who lived there. Belle Bates also recalls that her father, Roliffee, just laughed at the Captain and told him he was crazy when Lay told him of his dream of putting a dam on the Coosa. Although the river was just a big creek, Bates did not think anything big enough to stop the water from running could be built. Besides thinking Captain Lay's dream impossible, Belle remembers that her father really did not want to sell the land anyway.

However, after sitting on the Bates' front porch and talking a long time about the dam and electricity for the area, Lay must have convinced Bates that his dream could come true because Roliffee sold him 40 acres of land for a \$50 gold piece. It seems the Captain carried a bag full of these gold pieces with him for just such purchases. At that time, Bates owned 1,500 acres around the Coosa River.

There were eight daughters in the family of Roliffee and Oda (Robinson) Bates, one of which was Belle. She was about six years old when she first remembered Captain Lay coming to talk with her father about acquiring land for the dam. When she was 16, Belle went to a Church of Christ tent meeting "that Mama let us attend." She remembered, "I liked the preacher, Brother Cornelius Petty, and a year later, married his son, Edwin, a linemen for the Alabama Power Company." Edwin was tragically electrocuted while working on a 60-foot pole at Martin Dam in

1930. He was only 29 years old at the time of his death.

After the actual construction of the dam began, Rolifee and Oda bates kept between 45 and 50 workers as boarders in their home. Belle remembered: “My mother’s wood stove never got cold for three full years! Captain Lay, who had brought his own utensils with him when he travelled alone, added these to the large assortment of china, glasses and cooking utensils that Mother already had... so there was plenty of china on which to feed the working men.”

Rolifee added three rooms to his family home to house the men. Oda Bates worked hard to feed all the men helping to build the dam but she had help from her older daughters as well as assistance of a young black woman who helped with washing all the dishes for that many hungry men. Can you imagine washing all the dishes for than many men?! The men ate on the L-shaped back porch where the tables were set up. The wash basins were placed on shelves along the wall for the men to wash their face and hands before eating. Also on the wall were towel racks with hanging towels which the men never seemed to mind using one after the other. Two men slept in each bed and there were four beds in each room. As with the towels, they never seemed to mind sharing the beds. They were just glad to have a place to eat and sleep. In order to feed that many men, Oda Bates ordered huge amounts of groceries once a week from a salesman who came out from Clanton. Captain Lay also lived with the Bates family whenever he came out to check on the construction of the dam. He and Rolifee used to sit on the front porch and tell tall tale after tall tale.

By 1914, the capacity of the dam was 54,000 kilowatts. Unit 5 was added in 1916 and Unit 6 was completed in 1921, giving the dam a total capacity of 81,000 kilowatts. In 1929, old Lock 12 was renamed in honor of the first president of the Alabama Power Company, Captain William Patrick Lay, whose dream had finally come true.

(To be continued?)

With Thanks...

It has been many years (two decades?) since I first began serving as your editor of *The Chiltonian*, but Volume 37, Number 3, is my last issue.

To put it as simply as I know how, I’m now in my seventies and the advancing years (with their attendant health issues) are making it very difficult for me to maintain the level of multi-tasking excellence to which I aspire and which I feel obligated to provide to you, the readers.

To be perfectly honest, I probably should have made this decision a couple years ago. For example, my steadily weakening eyesight combined with the arthritis in my fingers make typing a very time-consuming and difficult process. Editing alone has become an interminable procedure that drags on and on. You deserve better, more effective editorial effort.

I urge you to steadfastly support the new editor, who probably will be named over the next few months. Given the Society’s demographics, it’s unlikely that your next editor will be a teenybopper, but that’s okay. The wisdom and experience that come with being 50-something or 60-something mean there’s a good pool of dedicated Society members to choose from. Certainly, I pledge my support to the new editor.

In closing, I am mindful of the words of Moses as he admonished the children of Israel in his last days: “Consider the days of the past, which were once before you.” What a great slogan that would be for a historical/genealogical society!

As local historians, we are the “keepers of the keys” for the generations ahead of us. If the so-called “millennials” are to have any chance at surviving their egocentric, myopic, and self-indulgent view of the world, we who have gone before must point them toward the truth of

history—history the way it is, not history the way they might wish it to be. After all, changed or buried history is not a reliable guide for useful learning and application in a hostile world.

Before I ramble too far afield, I appreciate all the help and support you have given me over these past years. It has been my privilege and honor to be editor of *The Chiltonian*, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to serve you in that capacity.

And remember, I'm not resigning from life, I'm just withdrawing as newsletter editor. So, "Keep 'em flying!" And, I'll be seein' you around the campus.

Thanks again, and God bless you,
Colyn Moatts

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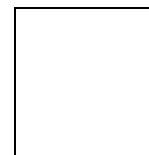
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