

## **The Grimsleys - Helping to build Fayette**

On the morning of August 1, 1900, the doors of the Fayette County Bank were opened for business. This was Fayette's first bank and was privately owned and operated by W. H. Terry who had moved to Fayette from Prescott, Arkansas. The bank which later became First National Bank and is now Regions Bank was located on the same site it is today. It was originally a one-story wooden building. The bank's capital stock was \$15,000.

The banking hours were from daylight until the day's work was finished. The only employee other than Mr. Terry was E.P. Goodwin. He worked there until the death of his father, Probate Judge Thomas Goodwin, in 1907, when he was appointed to fill his father's unexpired term. Mr. Terry sold the bank a year later to a group of investors from Birmingham, AL.

In 1909, thirty-four year old Alva McGriff Grimsley came to Fayette, Alabama for the first time. Mr. Grimsley was living in Columbia, Al. He and his brothers John Clifford "Cliff" and Everett M. were "turpentiners", running three naval stores operations in South Alabama and Florida near the Chattahoochee River.

Naval stores are products of tar, pitch, rosin and turpentine manufactured from the gum of virgin longleaf yellow pine trees. These products were used in the construction and maintenance of ships to seal and preserve the wood. The raw sap from the pines was placed in stills and distilled into spirits of turpentine. Spirits of turpentine was a staple in every home. A "turpentiner's work was demanding and reliable labor was important to any successful naval stores operation. Work was divided into a series of seasonal tasks.

A typical farm was divided into sections called "crops" and each crop contained about 10,000 trees. In the winter the trees were "boxed", which meant a triangular cavity about 12 inches wide and 3 inches deep was cut into the lower trunk of each tree. When warm weather arrived, chippers cut the bark above the box to allow the pine resin to flow into the box. During the spring and summer months, dippers removed the resin from the box with a trowel and the hardened gum was scraped from the chipped area above the box. Turpentine was distilled throughout the eight-month dipping season in large cooper kettles that would each hold five to eight barrels of dip. Each barrel of dip or resin produced six or seven gallons of spirits of turpentine. A good crop of trees might produce as much as 83,000 pounds of turpentine during the first two years of harvesting. Fires and explosions of stills were common occurrences. After two or three years the equipment was dismantled and moved to another crop of trees. The old trees were usually cut and sold for lumber. In the early 1900's Florida was the worlds leading producer of turpentine and resin.

The Grimsleys were tough men accustomed to hard work. They and their parents had lived in the Columbia area all their lives. Their father, Felix A. Grimsley, enlisted as a sergeant in the Army of the Confederacy in February, 1862, and fought with Co. F - Florida 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment until Oct. 31, 1864 serving under General Braxton Bragg and General John Bell Hood through some of the bloodiest Civil War battles throughout the North and South. He returned home from the war and married Dora McGriff in 1868. They soon began their family of 4 boys. No one today really knows why the Grimsley men uprooted from their home in Columbia, Alabama, and came to Fayette. Their roots were deeply planted in South Alabama.

Perhaps, the competition for productive trees and dependable labor became to steep. Perhaps, they were just looking for a healthier climate than the malaria ridden river area. Perhaps the brothers were just ready to change careers and were scouting for an opportunity. Somewhere in the recesses of the family's memories is a tale of a traveling salesman coming through Columbia who was talking about the need for a good bank in Fayette, Alabama. He said Fayette had a bank "but it wasn't much of one" and the owners were looking to sell. Whatever the cause, Fayette has surely been the beneficiary of their decision to relocate.

During A.M. Grimsley's trip to Fayette in 1909, he bought controlling stock in the Fayette County Bank. He returned to Columbia and he and his brothers sold their turpentine farms. A. M. moved to Fayette and took over

running the bank. His brothers soon followed and purchased the remaining stock from the Birmingham investors. Cliff Grimsley refused to sell his fine pair of mules so, instead of taking the train to Fayette, he chose to drive the mule team and wagon from Columbia, about 250 miles. Everet and his wife Essie arrived in 1910.

A.M. Grimsley became President of the Bank, E. E. Thomason was the cashier and R. P. Caine was assistant cashier. Cliff and Everett Grimsley were directors of the bank but chose not to participate in its running. Instead they open a horse and mule barn. Both men were known to have a good eye for mules and sold high quality mules which they purchased in St. Louis Mo. They would ship 2 to 3 train car loads of mules at a time to their barn located at the site of the Golden Eagle Syrup building. The barn was later moved to 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in the area between what is now the pool hall and Nichols Studio and Frame Shop. Mules in those days were the farm family's livelihood and means of transportation. High quality mules sold for as much as \$800 to \$1,000 each and were also a source of pride for their owners much like an expensive, sleek automobile is today.

A stately one-story brick bank was built shortly after A.M. Grimsley bought the Fayette County Bank. This building was completely destroyed one year later by the fire of 1911 and the bank operated from a wooden shack until a new bank was completed. The beautiful building that stands today was completed in 1912. In 1913 the name was changed to The First National Bank and capital stock had increased to \$50,000. One of the first acts of the new bank was to issue currency. Mr. A. M. Grimsley and his cashier Mr. Thomason spent an entire day signing greenbacks which were put into circulation the next morning.

In 1916, A.M. Grimsley married Adylise Sherrod from Lawrence Co., AL. He was 41 years of age. She was a 24 year-old high school teacher. Their only child A. M. Grimsley, Jr. (Buster) was born in 1919. A. M. Grimsley died in 1948 having served 39 years as president of the bank. After his death, 28 year old Buster became the president of First National Bank with his mother, Mrs. A. M. Grimsley, serving as chairman of the board of directors. Under Buster's guidance the bank continued to grow and prosper. At one point, the Grimsleys owned seven banks in Fayette, Lamar, Walker and Chilton Counties. They established and then sold twenty-seven banks in Alabama.

In 1949, Buster married Etta Dodson who worked at the bank as A.M. Grimsley, Sr.'s secretary. This union produced two sons, Alva M. Grimsley, III and Charley Grimsley. After graduating from the University of Alabama, both sons entered the banking business and served as Vice Presidents. An extensive study done by the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond in 1989 named the highest performing small banks in the U.S. The First National Bank of Fayette along with the Citizen's Bank of Fayette, were listed as two of only five top small banks in the state of Alabama. In 1994 after 85 years of ownership, the Grimsley family sold the bank to First Alabama Bank which later became Region's Bank.

Upon arriving in Fayette, Cliff Grimsley and his wife, Emily, lived in the Turner Hotel. When the hotel burned in the fire that destroyed Fayette, Cliff rebuilt the building that houses the storefronts from the corner of Temple Avenue and Columbus St. (Central Drug Store) and extends past Standard Furniture today. This building included the Turner Hotel located above these businesses. Mrs. Kate Turner (Jimmy Gullett's aunt) ran the hotel. Emily had not wanted to move from South Alabama to Fayette. After living in the hotel for five years she issued Cliff an ultimatum. Either he built her a house or she would be moving back to South Alabama. And build her a house he did. Cliff bought the land that the family still calls the farm (located across from the Fayette Square shopping center). The beautiful Grimsley home that sits at the east end of 10<sup>th</sup> street was the result of that ultimatum. Emily Grimsley planted the crepe myrtles which surround the drive. She died in 1977, just 12 days before her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Their only living child, Mrs. Emily Grimsley Roper, was born and reared in that home and still owns it today.

The large Victorian home of Donna and Kerry Kerr on the right of the sharp curve on West Columbus Street was built by Everett Grimsley for his wife, Essie, in 1912. They had no children.

The stately home of Pete and Marcell Matthews across from and located to the right (facing) of the Rose House Inn was the original home of Mr. and Mrs. A. M. Grimsley Sr.

In 1923 Cliff and Everett purchased the Fayette Mill, Gin and Ice Co. The Fayette Mill, Gin and Ice Co. had been organized as the Sipsey Valley Oil and Fertilizer Co. by a group of Fayette citizens in 1903/04. The company went through 3 ownerships before the Grimsley's purchased it. Under the direction of the Grimsley brothers the business grew and expanded. The company contained a corn and flour mill, a large cotton gin, and an ice house which sold ice in 100 pound blocks. The blocks were delivered to businesses in the back of a wagon. They also delivered to homes and the driver would saw the ice to the size ordered by the family while little children followed the wagon and gathered around to catch and eat the ice shavings. What a treat on a hot summer day! A creamery was soon built and ice cream was sold to retail outlets throughout West Alabama. As dairy and cattle farming increased in the county the Grimsley brother added a mixed feed mill and in 1945 started a wholesale grocery department in the building that houses Golden Eagle Syrup today. They sold the plant to A.M. Grimsley and until it closed in 1959 it was managed by Adylise Grimsley, wife of A.M. Grimsley.

Cliff Grimsley was the most colorful character of the three. Although Cliff died in 1959, one month shy of his 86<sup>th</sup> birthday, stories still surface occasionally around Fayette about him. According to Emily Roper of Hickory, North Carolina, 91 year old daughter of Mr. Cliff, he arose early every morning and went to the mill at 4:00 a.m. He would come home for breakfast at 8:00 and return home for lunch at precisely 12:00. Except on Sundays, he was rarely seen in anything but his "mill clothes". When the dignified and always immaculately dressed A. M. Grimsley would call a meeting of the bank's board, Mr. Everett would always go home and dress for the meeting, Cliff, however would go in his rumpled and stained clothes looking just like a mill hand. Each time he would get a lecture from his brother on his appearance.

One day following a board meeting Cliff walked into his home chuckling. When Emily remarked about the cause of that smile, Cliff replied, "I finally got Alva's goat. He got on to me again about my clothes and I told him I've got enough money that I don't have to dress up. I told him I work in the mill. I don't sit behind desk and I don't have to look pretty."

As people purchased the new automobile machines it became necessary to improve the streets. Fayette's first street to be paved was Temple Avenue, paved in 1925. It would be several years before other streets in town were finally paved. Once Temple Avenue was completed, parking places for cars were marked and the speed limit was set at 4 miles per hour. The parking lines meant nothing to Cliff Grimsley who was notorious for stopping his car wherever he wanted or even getting out in the middle of the street and leaving it running. One day, Cliff pulled up haphazardly in front of the bank leaving parts of his car crossing over the lines. Mr. Walt Simpson, Fayette's policeman walked by and wrote Cliff a note about his parking. As Cliff came out of the bank and saw the note, he called out to Mr. Simpson who was strolling down the sidewalk. Cliff put on his humble face and thanked Simpson for the note. "I can't ever get in these lines but the key is always right here on the floor, so anytime you see my car parked wrong just crank her up and park her anyway you want to", he said.

Another time, Cliff was headed home to 12 o'clock lunch and decided to stop for his mail at the post office, which was located where Nichol's Studio is today. No parking was available so, being in a hurry, he left the car in the middle of the street and went inside. When he came out Mr. Simpson was standing by the car and told Cliff he was going to have to go to the Mayor's office and pay a fine for illegal parking and blocking the street. Cliff hurried to the Mayor's office and asked the Mayor how much he owed. "Well, Cliff, I don't really know." Well, the police said I had to pay a fine and I'm in a really big hurry, so, just tell me what to pay and let me get out of here," Cliff replied. Well, I don't know. What about five dollars?" said the mayor. Cliff handed him a ten dollar bill and said, "Just keep this because I'm probably going to do it again."

Emily said her father was a good man who was very fond of young people. He had a temper but was fair and always in control of any situation. "Mother and I never knew of many of the things he did to help people until

after he died and people would come up to us and tell us about his help. We were thanking the nurse who stayed with daddy and mother while he was so ill”, Emily said. The nurse told mother and me that she was the one who should be thanking us. She said her father had died when she was a young girl in her teens. “I didn’t know what we were going to do, we had no money and I didn’t know anything about putting in a crop”, she said. “Mr. Cliff came to me and said he would give me the money to plant a crop and he would come out every so often and show me what to do next. We had a fine crop and I paid Mr. Cliff back and we had enough money to live on and plant the next crop too.”

This character trait is embedded in all the Grimsleys; always willing to help someone who would help themselves but keeping the gratification they received from this generosity to themselves.

The Grimsley’s have always been devout Baptist and have until this day been generous supporters and leaders of the Baptist Church, with the exception of Everett. Everett attended the Methodist church since his wife was a Methodist. When both the Baptist Church and the Methodist Church were building the new church buildings in 1922/23, Cliff Grimsley served on the building committee for the Baptist Church and Everette Grimsley was on the building committee of the Methodist Church.

The Grimsleys have established a long legacy of community commitment. In addition to being a business woman, Mrs. A.M. Grimsley, Sr. organized the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1917. She was a charter member and president of the Progress Club established in 1921 for the purpose of starting a library in Fayette. She also organized the Luxapilla Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution at her home in 1952.

Buster Grimsley is the only living charter member of the Fayette Chamber of Commerce. He served on the Fayette Industrial Development Board and his son, Alva, remembers him spending long hours in the evening and night on the phone trying to sell bonds and secure financing for the city to acquire the land and build the building for Arvin Industries and expansions of the Fayette Cotton Mill. The Grimsleys also purchased the land on Highway 43 and donated it to the new Fayette County High so the school could have frontage and an entrance along the highway. Both Alva and Charlie have worked diligently over the years for the Fayette School System

Since arriving in Fayette more than 100 years ago, three generations of Grimsleys have contributed much to the city’s growth and the community life its citizens enjoy today. Because of that character trait that keeps them from tooting their own horn, we may never know all the successful endeavors to which the Grimsleys have lent a helping hand along the way.

