

THE LOST DIAMOND RING ON SOUTH TEMPLE AVENUE

By Robert W. Maddox

March 5, 1989:

“Bob, Get up here --right now dude! You won’t believe what I found in your newspaper lined closet. Please hurry, this ain’t got nothing to do with wiring this old house”. I said, “Mac, Let me alone, I don’t have any time for your foolishness-- I’m holding a floor joist six feet off the ground. I can’t turn loose anyway. Mac! Did you hear what I said? I’m back here in the sun room pit.” Mac said “I know where you are Bob. If you don’t get out of that spider nest back there I am taking this little treasure, straight away to my Ford pickup”. I threw down the 12-pound floor joist, climbed up my homemade ladder to the main eight-foot-wide hallway to see what Mac was so excited about.

The old Victorian style farmhouse was built less than 50 yards South of the Southern Railroad track about 1897 by George W. Coggins. It was one of the few structures that miraculously survived the disastrous downtown fire of 1911. The old Victorian was originally roofed with cedar shake planks. In 1912 George installed a lifetime gray slate roof. The reasoning for the roofing change was simple. The 1911 fire embers floated South and caught the Coggin’s northern cedar shake roof line on fire.

By the time I climbed my sawmill wood ladder to the main hall floor I was expecting some kind of practical joke from Mac. I cautiously turned the corner into the bedroom room on the left-- There Mac stood, a muscular 130 pounds, 5’7” in faded Liberty overalls, 14 heavily stained teeth left in his mouth from years of heavy tobacco use and poor dental care. A fresh Red Dog chew with light brown drooling was highly exposed between his thick lips and stained teeth. Mac reminded me of a kid on Christmas morning celebrating a brand-new Green Schwinn Bike and a Red Ryder BB gun that Santa Claus had left for him. Mac held it purposefully behind his back. “Well Mac, what is it that is so exciting that you

think I must quit my flooring job to come up here to see this special find?" Then Mac slowly turned his back to me, revealing a beautiful, dusty, extremely ornate child's antique child's rocker with a wicker seat. Mac said, "Bob there's got to be a story about this baby rocker-- It looks absolutely perfect to me. I found it above a trap door in that closet over there, didn't even know the trap door was there till I stumbled over the latch. I'll bet this rocker has been sitting there all these years, maybe 50 years, just gathering dust in that hidden ledge." Mac said, "I feel like I was led to find this little chair, just maybe". Bob, why on earth would anyone hide away something like this- It doesn't add up." It was from this time on that I was intrigued with the little baby rocker- It was only by accident that the little rocker had rebirth after all this time, leading to much deeper intrigue of family events on South Temple and Richards Street after the turn of the century.

The Coggin and Bogard families lived on South Temple Avenue, a few yards South of the new Railroad Station. The Coggin home was a simple Victorian farmhouse style with a huge front porch, a very large parlor with a bay window and three bedrooms, all with 12-foot ceilings. The home was divided by a 10' wide hall with unfinished pine flooring that swept back from the front porch to a wide sun room, ending with a huge kitchen on the right rear and finally a water well. This working water well was one of the few homes in the County fully covered, not exactly typical in the late 1890' s. The bath tub was extra-large cast iron, a high back with heavy white ceramic coating. Like most tubs of the day it was supported by very ornate eagle claw footing. Hot water was brought in from the wood fired kitchen stove to make bathing more enjoyable for the Coggin family.

Of course, cold water was first drawn from the indoor water well off the kitchen. The water well, even though located in the kitchen area was covered by a very small cedar shake roof for sanitation purposes. Initially, a outdoor privy was the order of the day. It was not until about 1930 that City sewer was available. In addition, it was about the same time before electricity was made available to Fayette County residents due to the TVA project at Wilson Dam in Muscle Shoals. Heat was provided by two separate back to back brick hearths for the front parlors and rear bedrooms. Coal was used extensively in the back to back hearths. A large pot belly wood stove was used in the kitchen to complement the oversize wood stove. The Sears Roebuck wood stove with warmer, a pot belly stove was jointly connected to a flue that pulled smoke through the attic and out the roof

line. To the South of the main lot was a garden space that the Coggin family grew vegetables, potatoes and other produce. They also had fig vines, apple and pear trees. They called this piece of ground, "the garden spot". Both homes being close to daily passing trains gave up a little foundation movement but that was common place as their way of life continued. It was this special "garden spot" that the Coggin family sold to Robert Wilson and his wife Evelyn in the middle 1940's.

The Bogard home, located on a corner lot directly across from the Coggins home was considerably larger, two story with gingerbread icon prevalent in abundance. The verandah porches on each story were strikingly evident on both the Temple Avenue and Richards Street to pedestrians as well as those using horse and buggy. The Bogard home downstairs had two large parlor rooms, a very large bedroom with kitchen. Like the Coggins home the bottom floor carried 12-foot ceilings. Unlike the Coggins home the water well was in the kitchen, close to a walk-in pantry but sealed off in a smaller room with cedar shake roof slightly above the well. Upstairs, there was three large bedrooms, also with 12-foot ceilings. Heat was available with two back to back hardwood or coal hearths that served both levels. The Bogard family had a large garden area to the North and East of their home. Like the Coggin neighbors they canned and gave away much of their produce to anyone that needed it. Snap green beans, peas, tomatoes, watermelon, cucumber, squash, rutabaga, sweet potatoes were typical garden vegetables. Fruit, such as muscadine, figs, pear and apple were typical, especially for canning, very tasty in the winter months. Without a doubt the Bogard home was one of the most beautiful homes in Fayette County at the turn of the Century.

The Bogard family in 1910 consisted of Bert Bogard, Sr., age 29, his wife-Nora, age 22, Evelyn Bogard, age 4 and two infant sons Bert Jr. and Fletcher Bogard. Bert Sr.s job description appeared from this census as a manufacturer foreman at Brown's. This meant he worked at the large mill referred to as Browns Sawmill and Lumber Company. This sawmill was partially located on the site of the former Arvin Muffler/Tailpipe plant. The Bogard family was considered upper middle class as it appeared Bert Bogard, Sr. had a good job at the lumber plant.

In 1910 the Coggins family consisted of George W. Coggins as Head of Household with Carrie Coggin his wife. There were children listed in order: Wildie Coggin, 10-23 1886--10-26-1915, Mary Lou Coggin, 1-15- 1890—5-31-1910, Daniel H. Coggin b. 1893, George A Coggin, 10-2-1895—2-28-1972 and Julia L. Coggin, 6-2-1898—12-3-1979. According to the Census records of 1900, 1910 and 1920 George W. Coggins Sr. was born in North Carolina 29 June, 1849. He died 3 January 1921 and is buried in the Fayette City Cemetery. Approximately 1900 George was elected as Tax Assessor in Fayette County for two terms. Wildie Coggin, the oldest child married Sam Cannon. Both are also buried in the Fayette City Cemetery.

Carrie Propst Coggin was born in Fayette County, Alabama to Allen H. and Fannie Brent Propst, a prominent name in the County. Her birth year was 1867. Carrie P. Coggin died 9 June 1947. She is buried in the Fayette City Cemetery next to her husband. Approximately 1939, Carrie built a small home on the same lot a few yards north of the old Victorian farmhouse. This newer home had better insulation and was less expensive to live in than the larger old home next door. The old Victorian by 1940 became rental property. The youngest child, Julia moved in to the new home with her mother, Carrie. After Carrie's death her daughter, Julia Coggins, a beloved elementary teacher lived in this house and rented the old Victorian to the Abbott, Bobo and Maddox families. In 1987 the Coggin Estate Executor offered both homes for sale. The old Victorian was placed on a short list for demolition by the City of Fayette as a nuisance, health and fire hazard. The roof and flooring were in terrible condition. Paint was practically non-existent. The home was practically hidden by "jungle and weed growth".

In 1988 I became the sole owner of the Coggin's Victorian home. The old home had been essentially vacant and non-habitable since approximately 1972, the last occupants being the Abbott families. My mother, Winnie Maddox wanted to buy the small home formerly occupied by Carrie and Miss Julia Coggin. She had no interest at all in the old home but had been renting it from the Coggin Estate for several years. When the Estate decided to sell both properties, Winnie called to see if I would buy the old house. My initial intention was not to buy the property since I owned a lovely home, had a growing family in Tuscaloosa and a very time consuming professional position.

In order for my mother, Winnie Maddox to purchase the smaller home next door, the Coggins Estate Executor required that both properties be sold. I reluctantly agreed to buy the Victorian property. I allowed my heart and my mother's interests to guide my decision-- My choices were to let the City of Fayette demolish the old home, refuse to buy the property, keep the vacant lot or improve it myself for commercial or residential rental usage. This decision took hundreds of hours of back breaking, blistered hands, painstaking hard sweat labor, bank debt plus a personal address change to make something out of the place. Initially, I spent the best part of 1988 converting the old house into a storage facility with 8 rooms to rent. At that time I could not think of anything else to do with it to pay my mortgage, electrical upgrades, massive flooring work, lighting, commercial insurance and security installments for my storage customers. This lasted about 18 months, paid the bills but offered little profit. Inside my soul and heart this decision contained more meaning or purpose than simple ownership of another piece of blighted property. Why would I think such a thing?

As an infant I lived in the old home in late 1943 until Spring 1944 with the Abbotts, my mother and maternal grandparents, Hugh and Mertie Bobo. My father was employed in Jasper as a mortician and funeral home manager for the Jones-Spiegner Funeral Company in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He would visit my mother and I during the week depending on funerals he was conducting in Walker, Fayette or Marion Counties-- Later in my adult life, my mother, Winnie Bobo Maddox admitted that I had been conceived in the same bedroom where the child's rocker chair was found by Mac. Seriously, think of the odds or chances of being conceived in this same bedroom, while in the meantime a child's rocker had been sitting above bedroom closet for 40 years or more This, in itself was part of my life's journey- a circle of life, not an incident. I always felt that God's ways had a hand in this rare and unnatural event!!

JANUARY 5, 1991: THE BIG MOVE

My wife and I rented our Tuscaloosa home and moved into the old house for the purpose of repairing each room and the exterior to make it habitable again for residential rental. We moved in on one of the coldest days of the year and got all

of our personal belongings, furniture inside the structure. Earlier in December, I had contracted with the Fayette Gas Board to install wall gas heaters in each room except the main parlor which we used for storage. I had a Kenmore gas stove installed, white metal cabinets, a hot water heater and a old fashioned large ceramic sink. I tried to make the kitchen as typical to the 30's and 40's era as possible. In the main bath I added a large soaking tub, set up toilet to the old cast iron sewer pipe. The first night we boarded up our three muts- Big Shot, Coco and Blondie with plenty of older, warm bedding in the room across the hall. About 3:00 am that first night we heard a thunderous crash in the hallway. Big Shot and Coco jumped through the huge window without a single scratch on either of them. Thank goodness, no burglar, just two mutts panting away at our door wanting to jump in bed with us. Before Christmas, I erected a permanent dog fence in the back yard using a come- a- long to stretch the heavy-duty wire.

JUNE 12, 1992

THE DISCUSSIONS

Standing on a 16' extension ladder at the rear of the house today was not always safe because the window needing repair is 12 feet high. This was an old window with 4x4 panes, each pane very large with the natural distorted glass. The process starts with scraping off the old dried caulk, sanding, re-caulking, molding the new caulk and painting. If the window pane is cracked it must be replaced with similar glass and metal pointed inserts put in to stabilize the glass before caulking. This window was at least 50 years old and was added to the rear of the home when the City of Fayette installed new sewer lines to South Temple Avenue approximately 1930.

Evelyn Bogard Wilson was my neighbor before and after we moved in. She would watch repair work I would do to the property from her little sunroom at the rear of her home. Evelyn was now in her late 70 s , still active for her age. I always felt she loved my old home almost as much as I did. I gave Evelyn my home phone number in Tuscaloosa if she saw anything unusual while I was away. Evelyn loved

my three dogs. It was quite common for her to walk to my wire fence or wooden gate and feed scraps to the dogs. She was a sweet grandmotherly type, jolly and very easy to talk with on almost any subject. Since many of my family members lived in the old Victorian in the past she would tell stories about each one, some I knew were correct being a family member. We would often swap stories about these family members which were usually related to Miles, Maude, Mable Abbott and Mertie Abbott Bobo.

This storytelling led to the first and very different type of discussion Evelyn wanted me to hear. “Bobby, get off that ladder and come over here and let me fix you up with some tea, iced sweet tea, the only kind I know anything about. Hey, now this won’t be high tea like when the ladies come over.” I said, “Evelyn, let me wash my hands and wipe a little sweat off my face first”. I washed up from the outside faucet and walked a few steps over to her back door. We had several sips of tea. I felt or sensed that this story time was much different.

“Mr. Bobby-- Now listen real good to what I am going to tell you because I have never told anyone, not even Robert. I am telling you this because it has been on my heart for most of my adult life: I played games with Mary Lou underneath that old house of yours, played with our little baby dolls-- liked to do grown up things like tea parties. Mary Lou and I would dress up like Miss Carrie and my Mama Nora, even get into their jewelry boxes when they were not watching”. As I was hearing this very unusual story from Evelyn I noticed small tear drops forming from the corners of her eyes. I said, “Evelyn, are you alright telling this, I am beginning to feel a little uneasy with your storyline so far”. Evelyn said, “Mister Bobby, I have held this inside for over 60 years and I will trust you to take care of what I have to say” – I nodded approvingly for her to continue and I think she understood this was alright with me.

“Go ahead Mrs. Wilson-- I believe I can handle most anything short of murder.” Evelyn laughed at that remark and said – “since you have lived in that old house over there have you seen anything or heard anything that might seem unnatural?” I laughed and told her that other than loud creaks or pops that older homes make is about it. I said, “An exception might be when my great grandfather Pap Abbott died in the same bedroom where my wife and I sleep-- All I remember about that was at Pap’s family wake, poor man laying in bed

yellow as a gourd, starring at the ceiling with his mouth wide open-- All the Abbotts and Bobos were there watching him pass on over. He died right there in that bedroom." I pointed over to our bedroom windows where Pap died. Ever since then I told her that Pap's death event and the earlier closet find of the antique child's rocker by Mac were the only things that seemed very inordinary.

"Bobby, did you say you found a child's rocker over there and you say it was very old"? -- "Yes Evelyn, it is very old and I would estimate it 70 years old and in very good condition. The only thing I have done in repairs is re-cane part of the seat that needed repair". I said, "the child's rocker is in storage but I do have a picture of it after I cleaned the dust off—if I remember, there is a picture I made before we wrapped it real well and put it in storage. Would you like to see the picture?" "You bet I would, but if it is what I remember from seeing it many years ago in Mary's room, I am not really sure if I can do this". I said, "why don't we wait a few days. Evelyn said," Bobby, when you brought up the rocker it brought back other memories of those girlie play days Mary and I had before it happened".

I said, "what happened Evelyn-- is this what has been bothering you for so many years?" Then with her quivering, soft voice tone, "Mister Bobby, there is more to this than a child's rocker". Evelyn began to tear up again. I said, "Evelyn, before I leave to finish my work over there do you want to tell me what happened?" Her sobbing increasing, she tenderly looked over to me and said, "Bobby, Mary died over there! She just died and my heart broke." What could I say then to my sweet neighbor? Evelyn broke her tears slightly and said, "Mr. Bobby, there is still more to this if you are willing to talk later". I said, "certainly Evelyn, I told her this matter was between us, agreed and bound.

Between my day job and family home rental restoration job I saw Evelyn briefly through the sunroom windows of the long hallway. She fed Big Shot what I called "light bread" while sister "Coco" preferred Mrs. Wilson's corn bread-- Not only did Coco like her cornbread but I did too. Evelyn seemed to have an extra pan ready for us, especially on the weekend. Her corn bread came out of the oven with a moderately light texture, obviously a terrific blend of cooking oil I suspect was superior grade olive oil. In addition, I think Evelyn added in small amounts of regular or brown sugar to give it that special palate perfection. I know because I

craved a large glass of milk and cornbread. I also liked to mix it in with black eyed peas and onion.

June 26, 1992

When a family restores a 100-year-old home with pecan trees nearby, squirrels prowl and fly through holes near the roof line and soffit. It rained hard last night. Since this Saturday morning was pleasant in temperature with a Southwest wind to my back, I set out to repair a hole on the roof line above our second small bath. I had been working on this bath since March and it was a welcome addition since it was off our bedroom. That meant no more long walks down the hall at night or early morning for me or my wife.

I lined up my extension ladder always with safety in mind, leaned over the roof edge, crawling over to the spot I saw earlier where the squirrels were entering under the soffit. After taking a good look, I saw more problems than I had bargained for because of several holes not visible from the ground-- I knew then that I had to hire a roofer and carpenter. This would require a L shape wooden frame from the main slate roof to the lower metal roof. While on the roof I saw Evelyn next to her fig trees with a bucket in hand. I shouted, "Hey Evelyn", finally getting her attention. She waved back and pointed to her bucket-- It was a neighborly exhibition of friendship and kindness with me on a dangerous steep roof with Evelyn standing on good black soil-- decades earlier called, "the garden spot".

July 7, 1992, 4:45pm

When I got home from work this evening my wife Diane said, "Mrs. Wilson said she needed to talk with you. I saw her out back feeding the dogs so call or go over there. I don't think it is anything urgent". For some reason during the day I had been thinking about that day last month when she seemed so eager to talk with me about something troublesome. I told Diane that I might be with Evelyn an hour or so and we would think about going out to eat later so don't think about cooking tonight. I walked down the huge hallway and left from the rear sunroom door, walked down 8 flights of concrete steps, stepping over tiny remnant pieces of coal that the Abbott and Bobo family used for heat years ago.

Earlier in the Spring I took my shovel and dug down about a foot and the coal pile remnants of the past were still present. Actually, it reminded me of very cold January days of my youth when my grandmother Mertie Bobo asked me to grab the coal bucket and fetch coal for her.

APPARITION

Evelyn was in the kitchen when I opened the side door to her little sunroom. She immediately saw me and said, “didn’t know you were coming over this soon but that is good because Robert has left for the lake to do a little fishing”. I felt apprehensive about this visit because I figured she had something very sensitive to tell and for some reason I was the one to receive the message—We both took our usual seats in her cushioned metal chairs when she said, “ wait a minute, lets enjoy some fresh coconut cookies I have finished with this evening and how about a glass of sweet tea to go with them”. Not being one to pass on good sweets I took two large coconut cookies and Evelyn poured a full glass of tea.

“Now Bobby, I told you a couple weeks ago that my little friend Mary Lou died but I didn’t tell you the rest of the story.” I told her that is what I remember so I asked her where do we go from here. She began to tell me about one particular day she and Mary Lou were playing in the front parlor. She said, “Mary Lou showed me a ring that she found on her mother’s dresser. Bobby, it was a gold ring with a beautiful stone setting from what I remember—Mary Lou began parading around in her lady like make up clothes just like me and told me to follow her down the hall to the bathroom. Well Mr. Bobby, I remember it just like yesterday when it happened”.

I said, "Evelyn what in the world could be so earth shaking about two little girls playing in a nice house and for God's sake how and what happened to the ring you are talking about. Evelyn said "that's what this is all about Bobby. I saw it all—she took the ring off her finger to show me how pretty it was and wanted me to put it on my finger—that is when it slipped, bounced a couple times on the wooden well cover and fell in the well. Bobby, I never touched the ring, Mary Lou lost control taking it off her finger and that ring is still in the well, your well over there.!" I said, "Evelyn are you telling me that a diamond ring is laying at the bottom of that old well in my bathroom and no one knows about this but us". She said, "that's right Bobby, but that is not all because you have just heard the first of what happened later". I said, "alright Evelyn, would you like to see a picture of the little child's rocker we found over there".

Evelyn said, "sure I would Bobby". I walked back to the old house and pulled the photo off the top of the refrigerator. Several days earlier I took several camera shots of the chair at the Airport Storage, first unraveling the protective quilts around it. I had three good pictures I brought immediately for Evelyn to see. In doing so, I questioned whether Evelyn could possibly recall anything about the chair from so long ago. I suspected that George and Carrie Coggin were so grieved about their daughter's death they never wanted to see the child's rocker again. Surely that was the reason it was placed in a special closet cubicle that it would be found only by accident. I decided not to ask Evelyn about that but I am sure she would probably agree with me.

I walked into her sunroom, laid three photos on the little round metal table covered with decorative vinyl fruit prints. She came out of the

kitchen and picked up the photos and looked at them very closely, then cleaning her bifocals. “Bobby, you have found Mary Lou’s little rocker. There is no doubt to me this rocker is the one I saw many times sitting in the corner of her room.” She said, “someday Bobby, would you bring the little rocker over here so I can look and touch it, feel the wood that is so old, yet still so beautiful.” Now I am ready to tell you something else that you will not believe-- Remember what I told you about the ring that fell in the water well when Mary Lou and I were playing. For many years while your old house was vacant I had a very strange and disturbing experience over there.” The following is how the discussion went.

Evelyn said, “This is what I remember Mr. Bobby. I saw a young woman entering the sunroom hallway with a flowing, vivid, dazzling white gown with long bright diamond white hair with glorious, radiated and illuminated bare feet. She was not walking like we do Bobby, she was floating above the floor. I remember this occurred about 7:00 pm just before dark. Her face was unrecognizable due to the extremely intense, saturated light that surrounded her figure. I watched her float further down the hallway to the bath, then a direct move to the well— Bobby, are you really following me about this or is this uncomfortable for you to hear this account?” I told her to continue with the story with what had been troubling her for so long. She said, “are you sure because I do not want to disturb you or make you think I have a loose screw.” I said, “listen now Evelyn, I have got a true story I could tell you or anyone else about direct eye to eye, face to face contact with my father after my father died in 1978. This happened over in Lamar County a few years back so guess what, we have got something in common, right.” She said, “thanks Bobby, that makes me feel better about this thing that has hung over me for so long”.

Evelyn continued, "I want to get this over with right now". I said "well let's get on with it". – She said, "when she reached the well, she slowly floated over what looked to be where the well was located, turned her body upside down and began looking directly into the deepest contents of the well—Bobby, that is when I realized this was my little friend of many years ago, still looking for her mother's diamond wedding ring". Evelyn continued, "She stayed upside down for a few moments, gently rotating her body, then turning her face to the hallway, slowly flipping over, floating back through the sunroom. From the sunroom hallway I could see Mary Lou's bright light movements through your and Diane's bedroom window but that stopped when it reached the front parlor. The front parlor is where we played most of the time." She said, "Mr. Bobby could anyone believe what I have held back so long." I told her that I believed this event happened and certainly they are reported all the time worldwide.

I told her that with God all things are possible and sometimes God's children are chosen for spiritual reasons or other causes unknown only to him. I told Evelyn to take her story and let it be a sign of love between her and her friend, Mary Lou. I could not have known a finer, responsible and more loving woman than Evelyn Wilson. As one of the owners of the property, I admit that I never saw any apparitions. Yet, I have heard other neighbors who have seen unfamiliar faces appear in bedroom or bath windows that did not belong with the home.



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The author is a native of Fayette County and a long term resident of the City of Tuscaloosa.

This is the antique child rocker that was found at the home of the author in 1989.