

Box Alley: Getting to know the story behind the street

By Rebekah Davis

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“Box Alley.”

Ask folks around Athens and Limestone County how this nickname came to denote Plato Jones Street and some of the streets that connect to it, and you’ll hear more than one theory.

Some people say it’s because the streets are laid out in a square, making a box. Others say it has something to do with the area’s reputation: It’s easy to get “boxed in” to the side streets when a drug deal or drug raid goes down.

After sharing the story a couple of months ago about Plato Jones, the African-American community leader in Athens after whom the street is named, I learned that the name “Box Alley” has less to do with geography and illegal activity than it does with literal boxes and good old-fashioned Southern resourcefulness.

To be more specific, the name came from wooden bomb boxes and the people who used them to construct “bomb box houses” after World War II was over.

According to the AMCOM Military History Office at Redstone Arsenal, the M-54 thermate incendiary, a 4-pound bomb, was manufactured at Huntsville Arsenal for less than two months. The main processing building, activated for production on March 12, 1942, burned down on April 21, 1942, and was not rebuilt. Pine Bluff Arsenal and National Fireworks manufactured the munition after that.

Once the war ended, unused M-54s were sent to Huntsville to be burned in an isolated section of Huntsville Arsenal. By Nov. 5, 1945, the M-54 incendiary destruction program was completed, and the empty wooden boxes were sold to the public as salvage, with container sales paying most of the cost of the destruction program.

The extreme shortage of building lumber created a high demand for these boxes. As a result, many postwar houses in the Huntsville area were floored and sheeted with former M-54 boxes. People flattened the boxes’ tin lining and nails for reuse, and used hinges from larger boxes for cabinet doors.

According to Russ Rodgers, Command Historian at the AMCOM Military History Office, not only were the boxes cheap at 25 cents apiece, they were made of good quality lumber.

Winona “Teensie” Stroupe, worked in administration at the Arsenal during and after the war. On the AMCOM history site, she tells about how her husband Burton purchased bomb boxes and built much of their home with it.

“It was the finest lumber and you couldn’t get supplies after the war,” she said. In their basement, the walls made of bomb box lumber were never painted or papered. “After all these years, you can still see the stencils that were put on the crates.”

In Athens, many people living on Plato Jones Street and surrounding streets built “bomb box houses,” and that’s how the area came to be known as “Box Alley.” I asked several older people if they knew of any bomb box houses still standing, and they said as far as they know, none

remain. However, it is possible that some of the walls and floors in existing houses do have bomb box lumber that has been covered in paint, wallpaper or flooring materials.

It would be likely that some remnant of the bomb box houses remain in Box Alley. Retired Athens Attorney Jerry Barksdale recalled that his aunt had what she always called, in her Southern accent a “bum-box shed” behind her Limestone County home, and according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, many bomb box houses have been preserved and restored in Huntsville’s Lowe Mill area.

If you recall bomb box houses in Limestone County, or know of any that would still be standing, I would love to hear about it. We would like to save those photos and stories in the Limestone County Archives.

About the Archives:

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