

Athens murder of WWI veteran inspired folk ballad

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

*“Come all you reckless boys
Where ever you may dwell
And listen to the story
That Tommy Wilson tells.*

*One cold November evening
When three of us young men
We left the city of Athens
Hard bound for Clements gin.*

*We started on our journey
We all were very bold
When about three miles from Athens
We murdered Kirby Cole.”*

So begins “The Ballad of Kirby Cole,” a folk song about the 1921 Limestone County murder of a 22-year-old Athens man who had just come home from World War I.

In 1977, a man named Charles Wolfe recorded a blind singer from Athens, Aaron Sims, singing his version of the song, and in 1983, the Tennessee Folklore Society included the song on the album “Historical Ballads of the Tennessee Valley.” Although the album and accompanying booklet are now out of publication, the TFS shared the lyrics and recording with the Limestone County Archives.

The story itself was big news in a small town. “KIRBY COLE FOULY MURDERED, MEN ESCAPE,” the headline proclaimed on Page 1 of the Nov. 9, 1921 issue of *The Alabama Courier*.

The paper called the murder of Kirby Cole, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Cole, “one of the most unprovoked, cruel and cowardly murders ever committed in this county.” It detailed how Cole’s friend Junius Inman was taking two strangers to Clements gin in his taxi and had picked up Cole along for the ride, when, for no apparent reason, one of the men shot Cole in the head. The men took all Cole’s money from his pockets – 15 cents – before dumping his body and demanding Inman take them to Ardmore. When Inman stopped for gas, he made a run for it, and the strangers fled too.

Seven months later, the chief detective for L&N Railroad tracked down one of the fugitives, Tom Wilson, and returned him to Alabama, where he was tried and found guilty of murder. The other man, Grady Christopher, had died in a gunfight, Wilson said.

Wilson was sentenced to hang, and a gallows was built, but the governor first stayed his execution, and then commuted his sentence, as *The Alabama Courier* reported on July 4, 1923, in a glum article titled “A USELESS GALLOWS.” Wilson died on a prison farm in 1947.

To learn more about the case, visit the Limestone County Archives, where we have local newspapers on microfilm from the 1860s to today. You can view, save and print copies of the newspapers.

If you are interested in reading the rest of the lyrics of “The Ballad of Kirby Cole,” or hearing the song, you can contact the Tennessee Folklore Society at info@tennesseefolklore.org. For more information, visit www.tennesseefolklore.org.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

Established: 1980

Staff: Archivist Rebekah Davis and Assistant Archivist April Davis

Location: 102 W. Washington St., in the 1905 L&N Passenger Depot

Hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

Phone: 256-233-6404

E-mail: Rebekah.Davis@limestonecounty-al.gov or April.Davis@limestonecounty-al.gov

Web: www.limestonearchives.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/limestonecountyarchives