

Where trees don't grow: Remembering Kirby Cole

Editor's Note: In the September issue of The Valley Star, Archivist Rebekah Davis shared the story of the 1921 Limestone County murder of Kirby Cole, a 22-year-old Athens man who had just come home from World War I, and the folk ballad that the case inspired. The story brought back memories for retired Athens attorney Jerry Barksdale, whose cousin, June Inman, was there that night. This week, Barksdale shares Inman's side of the story.

By Jerry Barksdale

When I read Rebekah Davis's story about the murder of Kirby Cole in 1921, it brought back memories of when I was a child. On cold, wet winter days, when farm work couldn't be done, Uncle Robert and Uncle Josh often dropped by to visit. They would sit in front of a crackling fire, roll smoke and tell stories, usually about favorite fox hounds, mad dogs on the prowl, or boll weevils big as June Bugs. My favorite was the murder of Kirby Cole.

The hair on the back of my neck tingled and I'd scoot closer to Daddy. Junis "June" Inman was Daddy's first cousin. He drove a taxi in Athens, and on the fatal day, he asked his friend Kirby Cole to accompany him while taking Tom Wilson and another fare to Clements Gin. Kirby Cole had survived WWI, but this would be his last ride, except in a hearse to the grave yard.

"They were head'n up Highway 31 toward Ardmore," Daddy said, "When Wilson shot Kirby Cole in the head and robbed him of 15 cents. Then they threw his body out on the side of the road next to some bushes. The bushes died and never come back. Nothing would grow there. June was scared to death. When they got to an Ardmore gas station, June jumped out and run behind the counter. He was slobbering like a mad dog – scared to death."

Later, on a trip to Athens, Daddy pointed out the treeless spot on the side of the highway.

"That's where Kirby Cole's body was dumped," he said.

Sure enough, there were no bushes. Each time we drove to Athens, I stared at the treeless spot until it passed out of sight. Over the years I never passed the location without looking to see if bushes had grown back. They hadn't.

When I moved back to Athens and hung out my shingle, cousin June Inman was residing on the south end of Estate Street and driving an 18-wheeler across country. And I'll bet a dollar he never picked up a hitchhiker along the way.

To learn more about the case, visit the Limestone County Archives, which has 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.

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