

Sarver's ghost may still be opening door to past

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

When the doors to the basement open and shut on their own, employees at the Limestone County Commission Office shrug and say Mr. Sarver must be going postal again.

Workers in the Washington Street Courthouse Annex building, which first housed the Athens Post Office, say construction workers have reported strange noises in the attic, and two doors in particular, one in the lobby and one in a first-floor office, have a tendency to open and close by unseen forces. Both doors lead to the basement where, on a June morning one week after a probe was begun into alleged absentee ballot tampering, Postmaster and former Mayor Charles Wesley Sarver walked into work, sat down at a desk, and shot himself in the head.

"Athens Postmaster Dies of Self-Inflicted Wound," the Limestone Democrat announced on Thursday, June 11, 1942.

"Charles Wesley Sarver, Athens postmaster, died at Limestone County hospital at 9:10 a.m. this (Thursday) morning from a wound in the right temple, self-inflicted with a .45 caliber pistol two hours earlier, in the basement of the post office," the article began.

The Democrat reported that employees heard the shot at about 7:10 a.m., and two of them went far enough down the basement stairway to see Sarver, wounded, at the desk chair. He was taken to the hospital, where he died.

Sarver left behind two notes, one to his family and one to a post office employee, and the coroner came in to confirm that the wound was self-inflicted.

Sarver was somewhat of a local celebrity. He moved to Athens from Tennessee in the 1890s to work for the L&N Railroad, and he married Lavalla Fuller a few years later. He owned stores with W.H. Nelson and W.R. Hightower from 1904 until his appointment as postmaster in 1933, and in the meantime he was a successful three-term mayor.

First elected mayor in 1922, Sarver's administration saw the building of a new all-black Trinity High School, a new white junior high school – today the south end of Athens Elementary School – streets paved, a second water reservoir constructed, and the city contracting with Alabama Power for electricity. Appointed acting postmaster in 1933, Sarver was expected to be appointed to a permanent position as postmaster later that month. However, the June 2 primary election had raised a cloud of suspicion over Sarver. The Democrat had reported the week before Sarver died that absentee ballots showed evidence of having been tampered with, and the Limestone County Democratic Executive Committee was calling for a probe.

Sarver's body was laid to rest in the Athens City Cemetery, and in 1979, the Limestone County Commission moved its administrative offices to the former post office. The Limestone County Archives was established in 1980 in the basement where Sarver died, and from 2016 to 2017, returned to the basement while the Archives was being renovated.

While we were there, I admit that we saw and heard things that we just can't explain either, and at least once, when I was in front of the lobby door to the basement talking about Sarver, the door behind me knocked twice and swung open... and there was no one there.

Maybe it was just a breeze, but perhaps it was Charles W. Sarver, going postal once more.

About the Archives:

Limestone County Department of History and Archives

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