CARDINAL NEWS
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CULTURE

The first integrated Little League team in the South was in Norton

On Saturday, a historical marker about the 1951 team will be unveiled.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**
June 10, 2022

The Norton All-Star team in 1951 gets ready to fly off to the regionals. Photo courtesy of Frank Kilgore.

On June 4, 1951, a bunch of little boys in Norton, Virginia, did an extraordinary thing. They played baseball.

They made history, too, although none of them knew it at the time. Norton, the small city in the heart of Southwest Virginia coal country, became the first place in the South to play integrated Little League baseball when teams that featured white and Black players on the rosters took the field 71 years ago this week.

Four years after Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball's "color barrier" in becoming the first African-American big-league baseball player when he took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, Norton, which had long been a mostly white city cradled in the coal-filled Appalachian Mountains, quietly broke its own color barrier.

The city's citizens and ballplayers further dignified themselves later that summer when they stood up to a team from Charlottesville that refused to play against Norton's integrated all-star squad for the state championship. The Norton folks held firm and the game was played. More about that later.

The story of Norton's groundbreaking integration, which happened only a few years before Virginia would launch its notorious "Massive Resistance" to public school desegregation, had been overlooked for decades until a fellow named Lann Malesky, who had played for the team sponsored by the local Lions Club in '51, wrote about that historic summer in an article for Virginia Cavalcade magazine in 1999.

"Today, when I view that summer in the context of the rigid racial segregation of the time and the turmoil that followed in the 1950s and 1960s, I marvel," Malesky wrote.

On Saturday June 11 at 2 p.m., a historical marker will be dedicated in Norton to honor the men and boys who made Little League — and racial — history.

The boys who played then are now men mostly in their 80s, with just a handful remaining who perhaps only within recent years have come to understand what a momentous feat they accomplished simply by playing a game they loved.

"This marker honors the passion and the vision of the people who decided to let any kid who wanted to play baseball play baseball," said Robert Raines, 82, a former long-time Norton mayor who was a member of the Kiwanis ball team in 1951.

Norton was an unlikely place to find itself at the vanguard of the American civil rights movement in 1951, even though the town had many Black residents and even though Black and white men worked side by side in the region's coal mines. All Virginia schools were segregated, however, and many Black

Norton residents lived on the south side of the city, blocks away from white neighborhoods. The local theater, the Koltown, made Black movie-goers sit in the balcony.

But the coal mines could be a great equalizer, where not only did Black and whites work together, but so did immigrants who came to the mountains where jobs were plentiful. The old Dante High School, located in the coal town that straddles the Russell and Dickenson county lines (and is pronounced like "daint"), fielded an integrated football team in 1939.

Southwest Virginia, union-friendly and welcoming to folks who wanted jobs, was a bastion of progressivism, said Frank Kilgore, a Wise County lawyer and longtime advocate for the region.

"You dig deep enough, you'll find that the coalfields started the roots of the progressive movement," Kilgore said. "Higher wages, public assistance for roads, schools and water … it was all here."

Into that post-war era of hope and prosperity in the Virginia coalfields stepped Charles Litton, a 27-year-old local optometrist and World War II Navy veteran. The story has been told many times by people who knew Dr. Litton that he was inspired to start Little League baseball in Norton after reading an article about the organization in The Saturday Evening Post. Little League had been around since 1939, founded in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, to allow boys to play in organized baseball. To this day, the Little League World Series played in Williamsport is a popular summer sports TV spectacle.

Litton started Norton's Little League with the help of other local men that included Gene Mullins, Jack Hatcher, Ralph Bradley and Reid Simmons. Like Litton, most of the men were young military veterans. Each of those four coached one of the teams.

With sponsorship from the local Lions, Kiwanis, Boosters and Junior Woman's clubs, the league had financial backing for uniforms and equipment. An ad ran in The Coalfield Progress, Norton's newspaper, inviting players to come to tryouts at the local softball field on May 21, 1951.

When two Black boys named Johnny Blair and Harold "Mitch" Mitchell showed up for tryouts among more than 90 white boys, the league fathers told the boys to go home — not because they were being banned from playing, but because they were ordered to bring at least two more Black boys with them so that each of the four teams would have at least one Black player.

According to Malesky's Cavalcade article, "[t]wo local politicians, sensitive to the traditional ways in Virginia, advised Litton and his youthful cohorts to exclude the black players and warned them that the state would not let them get away with integrating the teams."

The organizers could have drawn the league boundaries in a way that would have excluded the Black neighborhoods and kept the league as white as a new baseball. Litton, however, balked at such an option. The Norton Little League would allow any boy who wanted to play ball — Black or white — to be on a team.

Robert Strong, Blair, Mitchell and another Black youth whose name has been lost to history, joined a season-opening parade through downtown and took the field on June 4, 1951.

"As a result, the Norton Little League was integrated at its inception," Malesky wrote, adding that there was "tacit acceptance of the integration of our Little League."

"They never told anyone that they couldn't play because of the color of their skin," said Raines, a teammate of Blair's on the Kiwanis club.

The only real league controversy arose when some boys on the Junior Woman's Club team recoiled at wearing jerseys bearing the name "Junior Woman." The women of the club made it clear that they had paid for those jerseys, and that the boys would either wear them or have no team at all. The Junior Woman's Club team relented and played ball.

In recent years, several online articles and even a documentary film that was available on Netflix have stated that the first integrated Little League game was played in Orlando, Florida, in 1955, four years after the Norton league was formed. The historical marker commemorated on Saturday will publicly right this error in downtown Norton, but the mistake persists in Florida, where a monument was unveiled just three months ago erroneously purporting that the first interracial game was played there.

The people of Norton want the world to know they were ahead of the curve.

Bill Kanto, a longtime physician in Norton, also played with Blair in that summer of 1951, and he admitted that kids were perhaps a bit more "oblivious to a lot of things" when it came to integration, civil rights and politics.

"Jim Crow-ism was not as rampant [in the coalfields] as it was in the rest of the South," Kanto said. "I'm not saying we lived in a little glass bubble, because schools were still segregated. But there was less animosity [in Norton], we loved baseball and the times they were a-changing."

He recalled a road trip when Hatcher, the Kiwanis coach, took the team to play a game in Harlan, Kentucky. After the game, which was played without incident, Hatcher stopped at a drugstore for lunch.

The coach sent in one of his players to find out if the drugstore would serve all the players, including Blair, the fine Black outfielder.

"The owner said, 'Yes, it's OK,'" Kanto said. "He knew about Norton, because he said he used to go to bordellos there."

Times were not changing in other parts of the commonwealth, however. At midseason that summer, the Norton coaches selected an all-star team to represent Norton in a state Little League tournament. Because Norton had the only sanctioned Little League in all of western Virginia, the team set out to represent the region against squads from the eastern part of the state.

Coaches Simmons and Bradley selected the 14-player all-star team, which included two Black players, Blair and Mitchell. Some parents objected about the picks of the Black players over white boys, Malesky wrote, but Litton ignored the complaints and kept the team together. Then, more objections arose from across the state.

Charlottesville was the site of the state championship, but that city's league officials refused to let Norton's integrated team play in its segregated facilities. The national league office backed the Norton club and said they must be allowed to play. So, Norton officials made an offer: if Charlottesville wouldn't let our team play there, then the Charlottesville squad was welcome to play here.

Charlottesville was crowned Eastern division champ after winning a playoff that included teams from Danville, Front Royal and Timberville. The eastern champ would travel to the coalfields to play Norton, the only Little League representative in the west.

Norton, its team spurned by Charlottesville, welcomed its guests with a city-wide parade led by the high school band. Players rolled down the street in convertibles to the softball field, where 1,500 fans "packed the stands … and yelled and screamed themselves hoarse," Malesky wrote, quoting The Coalfield Progress's coverage of the game.

The Norton team blew the game open in the fifth inning on the way to a 12-3 victory in the one-game state championship playoff. Virginia, where legal segregation ruled the day, would be represented by an integrated Little League team when the national tournament began.

The team played the West Virginia champs in a regional match-up, with the Norton squad flying on a DC-3 to Fairmont, West Virginia. The Norton boys were overmatched, losing 9-0 as the West Virginia pitcher hurled a no-hitter. Seventy-one years later, though, winning or losing that game matters little.

"For one magic moment, that little town was the champ of the whole state of Virginia," Malesky wrote.

Few players remain from that 1951 history-making league. None of the Black players are alive. Litton and the other coaches are gone.

"I was talking to Johnny Blair's sister, telling her I was so sad none of the Black players were still with us," Raines said. "And she said, 'Black folks don't live as long as white folks.'"

Malesky showered Litton and the other coaches with credit for staying the course and letting Black players on the field with whites. Raines and Kanto believe that the men's war experiences shaped them into leaders who wanted to take their fight for freedom from the battlefield to the ballfield.

"These were five real young men living in a post-World War II environment," Kanto said. "Like I said, things were changing."

The push for the historic marker began after **an editorial in The Roanoke Times** appeared last year, written by then-editorial page editor and current Cardinal News editor Dwayne Yancey, urging that the Norton Little League receive a public honor. Two men who had played on the team, Charlie Henderson and P.D. Miller, both physicians, joined with Raines, Kanto, Norton mayor Joe Fawbush and others to get the marker erected. The historical marker was paid for by individual donations that were funneled through the city, which also provided the spot for the monument. A campaign to erect the marker raised more than $2,000 according to Raines.

One final footnote about Norton and Little League. In the years when other Southern leagues began allowing Blacks to play with and against whites, resistance to youth baseball integration took root when 61 teams in South Carolina left Little League in 1955 to form their own organization. That league grew and a decade later became known as Dixie Youth Baseball, a segregated league that spread across the South like kudzu, with a Confederate battle flag as its logo. Dixie Youth was forced to integrate in the 1960s and it dropped the Confederate logo in 1994. The league has long tried to shake its racist beginnings to become more inclusive, and the league still thrives in many Southern states, including Virginia, where Dixie Youth is played from Appomattox to the New River Valley, from Roanoke County to Prince George.

Not in Norton, though. Little League is still the name of the game. Today, the city marks when it all began, seventy-one years ago, when Black and white boys played baseball together.

"We're not a perfect Nirvana," Kanto said. "But we had our bright, shining moment."

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Mary Anne Hall and other public healthcare nurses work to save their communities

Carroll County has the lowest COVID vaccination rate in Virginia. The health department is trying to change that.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**
February 9, 2022

Emily Smith (right) of Hillsville receives a COVID-19 booster shot from nurse Marcial Baki at Hillsville Pentecostal Holiness Church. Smith said many of her young friends have refused to get their shots "as an act of rebellion." Photo by Ralph Berrier.

HILLSVILLE — Mary Anne Hall wheeled her 2009 Ford Edge sports utility vehicle down Hillsville's Main Street, where frozen piles of plowed, packed snow lined the roadsides on a cold, gray late-January day.

She's put more than 253,000 miles on her vehicle, most of them from driving over the mountain every day from her home to her job at the Carroll County Health Department, where she works as a senior public health nurse. She's driven thousands more across the six-county Mount Rogers Health District, working with new mothers and their babies, visiting elderly shut-in people, conducting health clinics and, for the past year, driving to COVID-19 vaccine clinics.

"My family drives 'em till they wear out," said Vernon, joking about the miles on the SUV's odometer.

She pulled into the spacious parking lot of the Hillsville Pentecostal Holiness Church on the south side of town, where a mobile vaccine clinic was taking place for county residents. A couple of clinic workers played one-on-one inside the church's cavernous, new basketball gymnasium, while they waited for people to show up for shots.

Two hours into the clinic, more clinic employees had taken shots at the hoop than residents had received shots in the arm.

"Only about a half-dozen people so far," one of the clinic staffers said.

Hall remained positive. She has faith that people will show up. The weather has been cold, folks are itching to get out and they'll show up to get their shots – she hopes.

Carroll County has the lowest vaccination rate in Virginia. About 46 percent of adult county residents are considered fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to data gathered by the Virginia Department of Health. Neighboring Patrick County has the next lowest rate, with about 48 percent of adults fully vaccinated against coronavirus. Statewide, 80.3 percent of adults 18 and older are considered fully vaccinated, according to the department of health.

Although Carroll County's vaccination rate remains the state's lowest, some people have started receiving their first doses during the winter surge of the virus' Omicron variant, which caused COVID-19 cases to explode ten-fold in the county between Christmas and mid-January. Even as omicron dissipates across the state, cases in Carroll County are not decreasing as quickly as the rest of the commonwealth. Test positivity rates remain high, and the number of county residents dying has been on the rise.

As more people have seen COVID-19 affect their closest relatives and neighbors, some are finally turning to the vaccines for protection.

Simply put, in a rural area where residents like to say everybody knows everyone, everybody these days seems to know somebody who has died of COVID-19.

"It's everywhere here," Hall said during a late-January interview.

* * *

Mary Anne Vernon Hall and other staffers at the Carroll County Health Department have worked tirelessly to encourage county citizens to receive COVID-19 vaccines. Carroll County has the lowest vaccination rate in the state. Photo by Ralph Berrier.

The days before vaccine hesitancy

Hall and many other public healthcare workers across Southwest Virginia have spent nearly two years battling a pandemic, first by helping protect people from the virus by encouraging social distancing and masking, ensuring sick citizens (especially low-income people) received care and, ultimately, making sure Carroll County residents had access to vaccines.

Back in her office at the health department, housed inside the sprawling government center that is home to all county offices and courts, Hall talked about the dedication that the department's 15 staffers have shown during the pandemic.

"There were only one or two of us who worked in epidemiology, then when COVID hit, we all became epidemiology nurses," she said.

Hall has lived all her 56 years in Carroll County, and she and her husband still live "up in the hollow" behind the house where she grew up in Lambsburg, a small community where the flat Piedmont of North Carolina washes into the foothills of Virginia. This area of southern Carroll is commonly called "below the mountain," because of its location at the foot of Sugarloaf Mountain. (As a side note, locals call Fancy Gap "on the mountain" and Hillsville, the county seat where most governmental services exist, is "over the mountain.") The adjoining southern Carroll communities of Cana and Wards Gap are likewise cut off from the rest of the county by the ridge folks call Fancy Gap Mountain, which is crossed by the winding, often foggy U.S. 52.

Hall's eyes become watery when she talks about the people and place she loves.

"I feel drawn to the whole county," she said. "I think we have a good team here. We don't want our county to die. We have seen too much death in our county."

A deeply religious person, Hall believed the vaccines to be a godsend for her community. As a healthcare worker, she was at the front of the line when vaccines became available, and she remembers the date she received her first shot: Dec. 23, 2020.

"And I was thankful to get it," she said.

Many Carroll County residents were thankful, too, or so it seemed in the early days of the vaccine program. The department sent mobile clinics across the county to schools, community centers, churches and even apartment complexes to make access easy for all citizens. More than 400 people showed up during an early vaccine clinic, and dozens of others put their names on waiting lists for shots.

"There was a lot of demand," said Breanne Forbes Hubbard, population health manager for the Mount Rogers Health District. "When we had doses left over, we had a list 50-people long of people to call. So many people wanted the vaccines early. From April to early summer, we didn't know that there would be people who were vaccine-hesitant."

Then, by midsummer, demand evaporated. To this day, the health department has hundreds of refrigerated vaccine doses. Hall gave a quick tour of the room where vials of potential life-saving vaccines are stored.

Even though she seems naturally predisposed to positivity, Hall admits that some county residents will never get shots regardless of the decimation coronavirus wreaks across the county.

"A lot of people have made up their mind," she said. "A human disaster of any shape wouldn't change their mind."

* * *

Politics, mandates and 'rebellion'

In addition to state-low vaccine rates, Carroll and Patrick counties share other similarities, some of which might be reasons why fewer than half of the adult residents have gotten their shots.

Both counties sit along the border with North Carolina and each is bisected by the Blue Ridge Mountains, which, as noted earlier, cut off many residents in the southern areas from many county services. People wedged between the mountains to the north and the state line to the south often travel out of state for essentials – groceries, medications, clothes and healthcare among them.

Neither county has a hospital, although the General Assembly is considering a feasibility study into re-opening Patrick's hospital in the county seat a Stuart, a facility that closed in 2017. The nearest hospital to Carroll is in Galax, which is a half-hour drive over the mountain for thousands of county residents. The hospital in Mount Airy, North Carolina is considerably closer.

Other reasons abound for the counties' low vaccination rates, according to citizens and health experts. The speed at which the vaccines were developed worried some people (although the science behind creating the coronavirus vaccines had been well-established for years before the pandemic started). Misinformation passed along the internet, political preferences and distrust of authority are other commonly cited reasons for vaccine resistance. One Carroll County minister said that potential vaccine mandates emboldened many people to oppose receiving shots out of "stubbornness."

And it's remotely possible – although not likely – that some county citizens who received shots out of state due to shorter drives to North Carolina facilities have not been completely accounted for in Virginia's statistics, which would mean the border counties such as Carroll and Patrick might have higher vaccination rates than the numbers show. An undercount could also affect Lee County, lodged in the western toe of Virginia bordered by two states, Tennessee and Kentucky, where the adult vaccination rate is just above 50 percent.

Last fall, Mount Rogers Health District officials assumed that perhaps as much as 10 percent of Carroll residents who received shots were not being counted in statewide vaccination data because they received the shots out of state. But when the North Carolina Department of Health shared its data with Virginia, Carroll County saw a disappointing increase in the vaccine rate of less than 2 percent.

"We thought they'd give us a big bump in the numbers," said Forbes Hubbard, the health district's population health manager. "It wasn't the monumental increase we'd been expecting."

Hall still thinks that the state might still be undercounting Carroll County's vaccine totals based on anecdotal evidence she sees and hears in the community. ("I think they still might be missing some," she said.) However, other grim statistics seem to validate the low vaccine rates.

According to the Virginia Department of Health, Carroll County has experienced about 120 deaths due to COVID-19. That ratio for a county of just over 28,000 people works out to nearly 400 deaths per 100,000 people. That ratio is more about 33 percent higher than Roanoke, population right around 100,000, which has experienced about 300 deaths per 100,000.

Simply put, a person in Carroll County – or just about anywhere in Virginia west of Montgomery County – has a significantly higher chance of dying from COVID-19 than a person in Roanoke, even though Roanoke's urban population is more densely packed together than the population of rural Carroll County.

Also, the 2020 census revealed that Carroll County's population dropped by 3 percent in the last 10 years, which, remarkably, was one of the lower decreases in Southwest Virginia, where some counties, Buchanan County, for example, lost as much as 15 percent of its population. Aside from the human tragedy of the pandemic, Southwest Virginia cannot afford to lose more people to COVID-19.

Some research has shown that the country's vast political divide has played a role in whether people decide to get vaccinated. Polls and studies have shown that regions that voted heavily for former President Donald Trump have considerably lower vaccination rates and higher death rates than regions that voted for President Joe Biden.

A poll by Fox News in August found that "Americans who voted for former President Trump last year are 10 times more likely than those who cast their ballot for President Biden to say they don't ever plan to get vaccinated against COVID-19," according to a report in The Hill, which covers Washington politics. The Kaiser Family Foundation made similar findings in a study last summer. A project by National Public Radio released in December reported that people living in Trump-heavy counties were nearly three times as likely to die from COVID-19 as Biden-supporting counties.

In Carroll County, Trump received 81 percent of the vote, which wasn't even the highest percentage he received in Southwest Virginia, where he dominated Biden by massive margins.

A possible connection between politics and vaccine hesitancy does not surprise Ann Hawks, an 80-year-old former school bus driver, community advocate in Lambsburg and one of the few Democrats around. Hawks has helped spread word about vaccine clinics at the community center housed in the former Lambsburg Elementary School just behind her house, in a picturesque spot where Sugarloaf Mountain rises majestically in the background. The community center's playground bears the name of her late husband, Frank, a longtime educator.

"In Carroll County, I'd say it's become political," Hawks said of the county's high rate of vaccine hesitancy. "That's caused people to not get the vaccine. It seems like families are split over it."

A number of community members have died from COVID-19 in recent months, she said, especially during the recent surge.

Some community leaders think politics only partly plays a role when it comes to people's decisions regarding coronavirus vaccines. After all, several counties voted more heavily for Trump than Carroll County, yet also have higher vaccination rates.

"I know people who voted for Trump who took the shot, and I know people who did [vote for Trump] who didn't take it," said Jeff Pickett, pastor at Hillsville Pentecostal Holiness Church, which has hosted several community vaccine clinics.

Pickett, who received the first two shots in order to minister to church members who live in nursing homes, said that the possibility of COVID-19 vaccines being mandated by either the federal or state governments was a bigger vaccine deterrent for many citizens.

"When you make it mandated, it brings rebellion," Pickett said. "You can say, 'we encourage you, this is proven to help save lives,' and let people decide for themselves. But when you say, 'you can't do this' or 'you can't do that' that gets people saying, 'you're not gonna tell me what to do.' There's a stubbornness we've got."

Pickett's own belief is to "leave the decision up to the individuals. Let people make their own choice. If they'd do away with mandates, you'd get more people" to get vaccinated, he said.

In short, pro-vaccine advocates won't be able to browbeat or shame vaccine resisters into getting their shots.

As Carroll County nurse Rita Childress put it: "Sometimes you get further with a little bit of honey."

"Rita's real persuasive," Hall said with a smile.

"You could save a whole family!" Childress said.

For her part, Hall steers away from politics when discussing COVID-19 vaccines with visitors to the health department. She encourages people to receive shots, she provides accurate information and she answers questions. She doesn't pressure people.

"I don't argue," she said. "The more people I talk to who haven't taken the vaccine tell me, 'I'm just not there, yet.'"

She has learned that many people who resist the vaccines are often hesitant because of something they've read on the internet. Misinformation is a pandemic unto itself these days, so she tries to steer them toward better sources of information.

"I try to show them what the factual information is," Hall said. "I always ask, 'where's your source?' People will say, 'well, I'm not sure who to trust anymore.'"

Many times, people have shown they trust Mary Anne Hall.

"This community has always been very respectful of this health department," she said.

* * *

Mary Anne Hall shows where refrigerated COVID-19 vaccines are kept at the Carroll County Health Department. Photo by Ralph Berrier.

A call to help others

Mary Anne Hall didn't always want to be a nurse. Then, an unspeakable tragedy changed her life.

Hall, who was born Mary Anne Vernon, was just 10 years old when her mother died of cancer, a heartbreak that would only presage an even worse loss years later. She was left to grow up as the baby girl in a household of men, raised by her father who ran a sawmill and three older brothers. Even she admits that she might've been spoiled by the boys.

She was an excellent student through high school who married her husband, Michael Hall, in 1985, a year after graduation. She had a good job as a secretary at the Renfro manufacturing corporation in Mount Airy, North Carolina. Ready to start a family, she suffered a miscarriage, then became pregnant again in 1989.

Her baby boy was born at just 26 weeks – more than two and a half months prematurely. The baby, named John Michael, lived for three months and three weeks.

Following the death of her son, "my immediate concern was to survive," she said.

Grieving the loss of her child and despairing that she might not bear another, she was diagnosed with an incompetent cervix, a weakening of cervical tissue that could lead to premature births. In 1991, she became pregnant and underwent a cervical cerglage, a procedure that stitches the cervix to strengthen it, and she went on bedrest. That November, her son, Matthew, was born.

Soon, having seen firsthand the care and compassion from the neonatal intensive care unit nurses and staff at Brenner Children's Hospital in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where John Michael had lived his entire brief life, Hall found a new purpose soon.

"That got me into healthcare," she said.

She took classes at Surry Community College in Dobson, North Carolina, then received a bachelor of science degree in nursing from Western Governors University, an online college that offers career training. After working for several years at the hospital in Mount Airy, she joined the health department in 2001, where she specialized in working with mothers and babies. Some of her most serious cases had involved substance abuse among expectant mothers in the health district that has seen massive increases in addiction.

Then came the pandemic.

The stories are legion of healthcare workers finding themselves on the frontline against a deadly virus, skeptical patients and a polarized public. Across the Mount Rogers Health District, doctors, county nurses and other staffers worked to keep their communities safe, as cases, hospitalizations and deaths mounted.

Even among the scores of public healthcare workers in Southwest Virginia, Hall stood out for her dedication to getting vaccines to people, and getting the people to the vaccines. She arranged for rides for folks without transportation. During a mobile clinic at an apartment complex, she made sure shots got to people who were too infirm to leave their apartment.

“Mary Anne put the team on her back,” Forbes Hubbard said.

She worked diligently to get vaccines to people in the community where she grew up and still lives.

“Mary Anne is a good advocate for anything,” said Hawks, who has also lived in Lambsburg her whole life and helped promote the vaccine clinics in the community. “Everybody loves her. She’s so outgoing. She was going to make sure everybody knew where to get their shots.”

The work, hard as it is, can be fulfilling, even during a pandemic.

“I won’t work at a job where I am not happy,” she said, tearing up again. “I couldn’t be happier. I like helping people. I’m just one of many team members who couldn’t have done it and survived it without everybody.”

* * *

Ryan Lintecum (seated, facing forward) receives a COVID-19 shot from nurse vaccinator Marcial Baki (left) during a mobile clinic inside Hillsville Pentecostal Holiness Church’s mostly empty gymnasium in Hillsville on January 21, 2020. Lintecum’s wife, Lily, (seated, center) awaits her shot as

egistered nurse Akinwumi Cecilia (right) completes paperwork. Carroll County has the lowest vaccination rate in Virginia, as public healthcare

Inoculated with hope

Back in the gymnasium at the Pentecostal Holiness church, Ryan Lintecum received a shot in his right arm, the one with the Chevrolet symbol tattooed on his forearm.

Lintecum, 20 years old and recently married, was dead-set against receiving a COVID-19 shot. Then, he considered his mother, who has health problems. Other family members have had cancer. What if he caught COVID and passed it to one of them?

"At first, I was totally, completely against it," Lintecum said. But then "I worried about my family. My mother has a weakened immune system. If I get COVID and bring it to them, it'd always be on my mind if something happened to them. I got it more to protect them than me."

Lily Lintecum, 20 who's married to Ryan, admitted to being afraid of the vaccine at first because she feared she might contract the disease from the shot. Her mother got COVID-19 last year and suffered bad symptoms.

Echoing what Rev. Pickett said about people refusing to abide by mandates, Lily added that she and her husband also avoided vaccinations "because we're stubborn. We don't really like to be told what to do."

Now, both she and her husband have received their second doses.

Emily Smith, 23, agreed that younger people in Carroll County – and in a lot of other places – are refusing to be vaccinated because of that sort of youthful obstinance.

"It's an act of rebellion not to do it," said Smith, who received her booster at the church.

Her mother, Christina Simone, 47, also got her booster shot during the clinic. When asked if she knew anyone who had died from COVID-19, she replied, "Not until about a month ago."

Now, she knows of at least four people who had died from COVID-19, including her husband's uncle, who was just 56. Several people at her church have contracted COVID, including some who are hospitalized on ventilators, she said.

The increase in COVID-19 cases since December prompted more people to get vaccinated, said Simone, who works cleaning houses. Her husband does home maintenance work. Even she put off receiving a shot for most of 2021.

"I waited for a long time," she said.

"I prayed about it. I figured if the Lord is going to protect me without the shot, he's going to protect me with it."

By the end of the clinic, 20 people had received shots, which included three people getting their first doses and several children who got their second doses. That's not a super-high number over a five-hour period, but Lauralyn Purchase, the registered-nurse manager for Mobile Health, the New York-based company that handles Virginia's rural vaccination clinics, said she has been at other clinics in Southwest Virginia where only one person showed up.

She thinks more Southwest Virginians are realizing the benefits of vaccines.

"Decisions are made through multiple factors, such as political, family or generational reasons," Purchase said. "Now, there appears to be more family pressure [to get people vaccinated], bosses' pressure, schools' requirements … They're seeing the results of people who were not vaccinated in this community."

That's why Mary Anne Hall and other public health nurses keep pushing. Gently.

As she said: "My ending statement is always, 'We keep all three brands of vaccines in the health department, and we'll be happy to help you if you decide to get it.'"

She just wants to help.

* * *

[Full disclosure: I have known Mary Anne Vernon Hall since we were both six years old and enrolled in Savada Bedsaul's first-grade class at Lambsburg Elementary School. She is perhaps the kindest, nicest and most caring person I have ever known. For example, a few years ago at a reunion of the Carroll County High School graduating class of 1984, Mary Anne attended and brought her personal scrapbook she had saved from her senior year. I flipped through the pages, looking at newspaper clippings and photographs of the football team and cheerleaders, pictures of class officers, stories about the band and the cast of the high school play, pictures of the homecoming court – and I realized that she hadn't saved clips of just her own name and face appearing in the paper (the way other self-absorbed teenagers – hand raised – would have done), but she clipped out stories about all her friends and classmates who had been written up in the newspaper. Who does that? Especially at 18 years old? Mary Anne did.]

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CULTURE

Lost documents from 1912 Carroll County courthouse shoot-out found

The documents were found in the basement of the Wythe County Courthouse and have now been returned to Carroll County.

by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**
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Carroll County Clerk of the Circuit Court Gerald Goad sits behind the drawer that holds long-lost documents from the murder trials that followed the infamous "Courthouse Massacre" in 1912. The exhibits were discovered in 2016 in Wythe County's courthouse. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

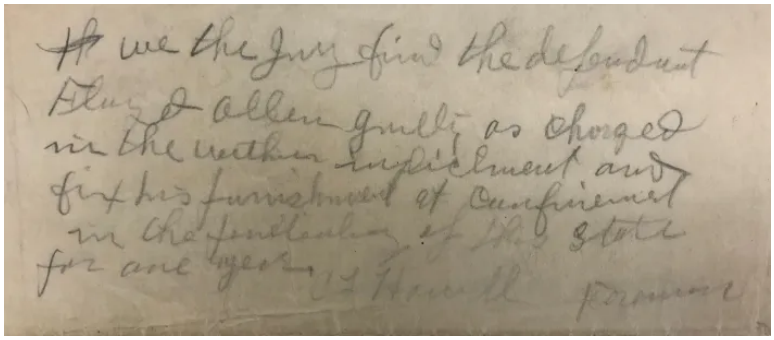
HILLSVILLE — Howard Sadler held the last words of a dead man in his hands.

The handwritten note, scribbled hastily in pencil on a folded piece of paper, read:

"We the jury find the defendant Floyd Allen guilty as charged in the within indictment and fix his punishment at confinement in the penitentiary of this state for one year."

Sadler knew that William Foster, the chief prosecutor in Carroll County, had written those words at the behest of a judge. Sadler also knew that, minutes after Foster laid down his pencil, he was dead. So was the judge. The men were gunned down during one of the most notorious events in Southwest Virginia

history. That day was March 14, 1912, the day five people were killed in a shootout between members of the Allen family and court officials on the floor of a small-town courtroom, an event forever known as "The Courthouse Massacre."



This detail from the 1912 indictment of Floyd Allen, shows commonwealth's attorney William Foster's handwritten jury verdict" "We the jury find the defendant Floyd Allen guilty as charged …" Minutes after he wrote these words, Foster was dead. Courtesy Carroll County Heritage Digitizing Organization.

Sadler knew that tragic story, and he understood his family's connection to it. His grandfather, Howard Gilmer, was a young attorney who had been in Hillsville that day, and he was one of the last people to comfort the mortally wounded judge, Thornton Massie, Gilmer's neighbor and mentor back home in Pulaski. Most significantly, Sadler knew that he was reading a document that had been missing for more than 100 years.

Most of the documents from the subsequent murder trials that followed the shootout had been lost — or were thought to have been lost or stolen. But there they were, hidden in a drawer in the basement of the Wythe County Courthouse, where a longtime clerk discovered them in the fall of 2016. Most likely, someone had intentionally hidden the drawer to keep people from pawing through and perhaps removing the papers.

Sadler looked at Foster's cursive handwriting of Floyd Allen's conviction and understood the document's gravity. Allen had been convicted of a serious offense — interfering with a deputy (beating up a deputy was closer to the truth) to release his nephews from custody — but nothing so serious that rose to the level of instigating a deadly shootout.

That verdict, those words uttered by a jury foreman and re-written by Foster, were what prompted the freshly convicted the defiant Allen to stand up and pronounce, "Gentlemen, I just ain't a-goin'," or words to that effect, right before the courtroom filled with smoke and lead.

"To see this handwritten verdict, I knew it was the Holy Grail and Exhibit One in the commonwealth's case against Floyd Allen," Sadler said. "There's Foster's handwriting … and then you realize that within five or six minutes, he was dead. He was shot dead in the courtroom."

A few weeks ago, that trove of documents related to the shootout and subsequent trials made its way back to Carroll County, where the whole mess started. Gerald Goad, Carroll County Clerk of the Circuit Court, engineered the transfer of the documents from Wytheville to Hillsville. Those documents include indictments, judge's instructions, grand jury indictments, trial transcripts, letters and other courtroom exhibits — all words left by ghosts.

"This is the actual foundation of all of the story," said Goad, whose own great-great-uncle, Dexter Goad, was a Carroll clerk of court who traded bullets with the Allens on that tragic day. Gerald Goad said the documents needed to be back in Carroll County.

"We are the court of record. It was a huge goal to get this back in Carroll. It lays the foundation of the events of that tragic story from March 1912."

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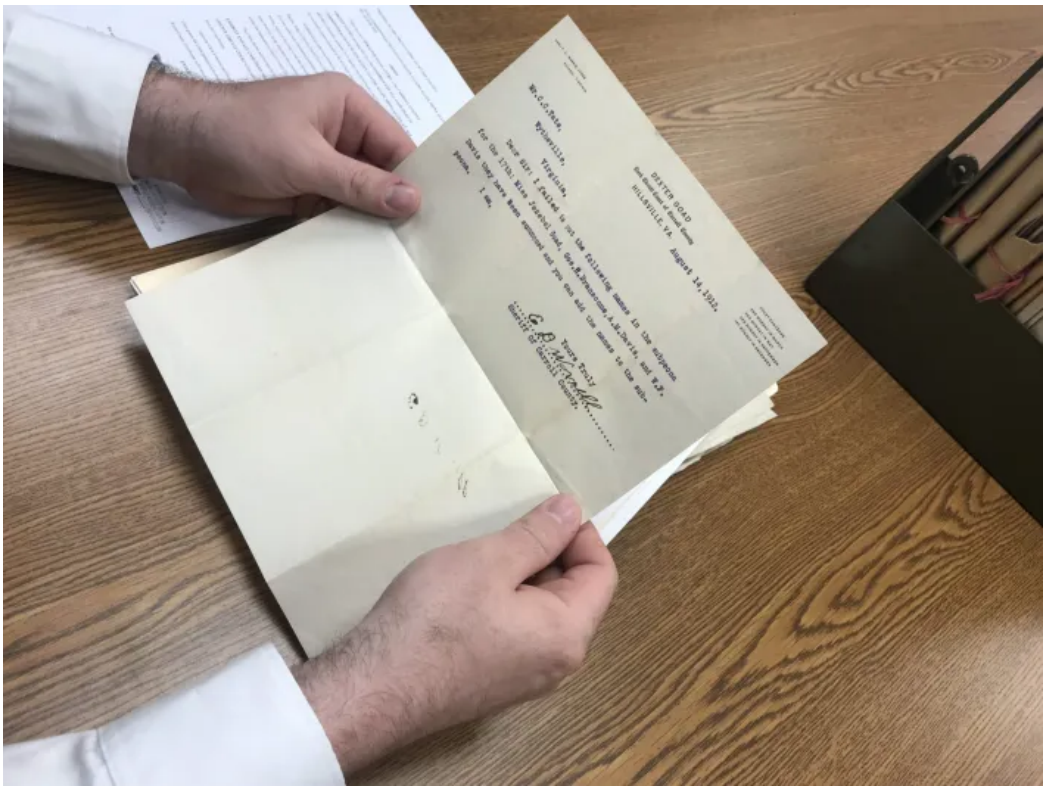

Gerald Goad holds a letter showing the letterhead of his great-great-uncle Dexter Goad, who was shot and wounded during the 1912 courtroom shootout in Hillsville. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

An unexpected discovery

To be honest, nothing in the more than 180 pages of court papers adds any new information to the well-researched story of the shootout and its equally tragic aftermath. The documents don't answer the seemingly unsolvable questions that have lingered in the air like gun smoke for 110 years. Who fired their pistol first? An Allen or a member of the court? Who shot whom? Autopsies were not conducted on the dead nor was any meaningful forensic investigation of the crime scene undertaken — even though the science such studies existed in 1912 — which only generated more questions, arguments, fights and conspiracy theories over the decades. Generations of Carroll Countians would grow up and grow old hearing about the shootout, arguing over who the true perpetrators were, creating and dismissing wild theories and resolving nothing. The discovered papers do little to shed new light in the darkended corners of the tragedy.

But the documents do bring humanity to a story often told through tintype pictures, brittle newspaper clippings, hazy memories and fables passed down through generations. Sadler said that reading Foster's handwriting gave him chills. There it was, the script of a doomed man, written in the final minutes of his life. The flood of indictments that came just days after the shootout wail with pain, the typewritten words seething on the page while claiming that the Allens "unlawfully, feloniously, wickedly and maliciously" killed the sheriff and others. A jury foreman's handwritten verdict in blotchy ink condemns Claude Allen to death.

The documents found their way to Wytheville because that was the site of the ensuing trials that followed the shootout, the venue having been moved from Hillsville where anger against the defendants boiled. The trials happened quickly in 1912 and early 1913. Barely one year after the courthouse shootout, Floyd Allen and his son Claude were executed minutes apart at the Virginia State Penitentiary in Richmond.

Sadler, a real estate broker in Blacksburg who lives on a family farm in Pulaski County, had taken an interest in the shootout story after looking at old scrapbooks kept by his grandmother, Howard Gilmer's daughter. Sadler knew the family lore that Judge Massie had died in his grandfather's arms, and that Gilmer had helped transport the judge's remains back to Pulaski, and he even helped a mortician examine the corpse.

In 2015 or so, Sadler also found a .38 caliber bullet among the keepsakes. His grandfather had taken the round from the courthouse the day of the killings. Again, no thorough investigation of the courtroom happened, and the scene was almost immediately compromised by people who dug bullets out of the walls with pocketknives to keep as souvenirs.

Sadler's research took him to the Wythe County Courthouse, where he befriended Hayden H. Horney, the longtime circuit court clerk. Sadler pored over available documents from the murder trials, but he lamented that many original 1912 exhibits were lost. He teased Horney about Wythe County losing such valuable historical artifacts.

"How can you have seven murder trials in Wythe County and not have any exhibits whatsoever?" Sadler often asked.

Those old papers were lost or stolen, Horney replied.

One day in the fall of 2016, when Sadler was in Wytheville doing more research on a Friday afternoon, Horney called him into his office. He pointed toward what appeared to Sadler to be a metal file.

"What the hell is that?" Sadler asked.

Horney told Sadler he decided to take one more look in the basement for the lost documents, moving more than 700 boxes. Atop a shelf, he saw what looked like a drawer among the boxes. The identification label on the drawer bore a large "A" and an "X." Horney pulled the label out from its slot, flipped it over and read the typed words on the other side:

COMMONWEALTH

VS

FLOYD ALLEN CLAUD ALLEN

SIDNA ALLEN ET ALS.

(Claude's name was frequently spelled with and without an E.)

Below the words was scrawled "1912."

"Howard, I believe that's what you've been looking for," Horney said.

Sadler took the file drawer to a vault in the courthouse and dove into the trove. He found the murder indictment against Sidna Allen, Floyd's brother who would be convicted and serve more than 13 years in prison. He found trial transcripts. Then he found the original Floyd Allen indictment that bore William Foster's final written words.

People who have researched the shootout long knew that Judge Massie had instructed Foster to re-write the jury verdict in proper legal language just minutes after it had been handed down, but no one knew precisely what Foster had actually written until the discovery of the Allen documents.

Ron Hall, a local historian who has written a book about the shootout and is considered one of the best sources for factual information about the story, told Sadler that he was probably the first person to see those documents in 100 years. Hall himself had asked Horney, who died in 2020, about the whereabouts of the trial exhibits while doing his own research.

"Maybe he didn't want anybody else rifling through those things," Hall said.

Maybe so, but people just keep coming back to this story.

* * *

Floyd Allen was photographed just before his murder trial in 1912, barely two months after the shootout. Photo courtesy of the Carroll County Historical Society and Museum

Seeds of a shootout

The tale of the courthouse massacre is lengthy and complicated, covering more than two years beginning with a fight in 1910, followed by Floyd Allen's trial and the shootout and culminating in Floyd and Claude Allen's executions in 1913. But the story's roots go further back and involve politics, rivalries, clannishness, thuggery, vengeance and even a little geography. And the story's controversies, conspiracies, debates over justice and moral lessons have long outlived the verdicts and punishments that sought to settle matters more than a century ago.

What follows is a genuine effort to accurately summarize the tragedy and the events that led to the bloodshed. Much of the information was gleaned from Hall's book, "The Carroll County Courthouse Tragedy," and other sources.

Floyd Allen grew up in a large family in southern Carroll County, raised on a farm wedged between the North Carolina border and the front wall of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Being from "below the mountain," as Carroll Countians described the community, the Allens and neighbors were cut off from the county seat in Hillsville, which in the late 1800s and early 1900s was a two-day horse ride over the peak through Fancy Gap. This sort of isolation probably meant that Floyd and his siblings grew up independent, resourceful and perhaps overly prideful and defiant.

Far from the backward, murderous mob of hillbillies as they would later be portrayed in sensational news accounts, Floyd and his brothers were farmers, business people and even occasional lawmen — who sometimes had their own run-ins with the law, usually stemming from their participation in the illegal liquor trade. The Allens could be a rough bunch, who fought with and shot at enemies — which they had no shortage of, apparently — and even each other. Floyd once got in a tangle over a business deal with his younger brother Jasper "Jack" Allen, who might have been the toughest Allen of them all, and the two men shot and wounded each other. Another younger brother, Sidna, was a successful businessman who had prospected for gold in Alaska, operated a store, owned a considerable amount of land and built a lovely Queen Anne-style home in Fancy Gap, and yet he was accused of being a counterfeiter who barely avoided jail time even though one of his associates was sent up the river.

As the late Roanoke writer and broadcaster Seth Williamson wrote in The Roanoker magazine in 1982, the Allen men "were not a race of mild country squires."

They were proud men, perhaps none more so than Floyd, who it could be said carried a log-sized chip on his shoulder. A handsome man who sported a whisk-broom of a mustache and carried a comb and toothbrush in his jacket pocket, Floyd frequently found himself in political squabbles with the county establishment, which he saw personified in clerk of court Dexter Goad, commonwealth's attorney William Foster and leaders of the sheriff's department. The Allens were unreconstructed Democrats, the county fathers were mildly progressive, albeit still conservative, Republicans.

The battle of tradition against modernity seemed to be the heart of the rivalries: Would Carroll County be a 20th century civilized bastion of law, order and rules, or would the hidebound rugged frontier individualism of taking law into one's own hands and the bucking of authority prevail? The answer would soon become obvious.

Allen and Goad had butted heads before. Allen once accused Goad of running liquor, which forced the clerk to resign from a prestigious post as federal commissioner. Perhaps to get even, Goad charged Allen with falsifying expense reports when he worked as a county deputy. Allen also had political run-ins with Foster, who switched parties from Democrat to Republican in order to defeat an Allen relative for the prosecutor's post. Floyd said Goad and Foster were part of a "privileged clique," according to Hall, one that would never include the likes of Floyd or his family.

So, in late 1910 when two of Floyd Allen's nephews got in a little trouble with the law, the consequences would be deadly.

The Courthouse Tragedy

The trouble started with a kiss. A stolen kiss.

Brothers Wesley and Sidna Edwards (not to be confused with their uncle, Sidna Allen, Floyd's brother), attended a corn-shucking party, a country frolic where folks played music, drank liquor on the side and, yes, shucked corn. A local tradition maintained that if a boy discovered a red ear of corn, he had the choice to kiss any girl at the party. Wesley, the story goes, shucked a red ear of corn and proceeded to kiss the girlfriend of a Thomas boy who he did not like. Later, the Thomas boy and others scrapped with the Edwards boys outside a church service, with the Edwards brothers getting the best of their rivals. Wesley and Sidna would be charged with assault, but before they could be arrested, they dashed across the state line, where Carroll County lawmen could not apprehend them.

Eventually, Carroll County deputies Thomas "Pink" Samuels and Peter Easter nabbed the brothers in North Carolina, shackled them and loaded them on a wagon for the long ride up the mountain, passing by Sidna Allen's home and store in Fancy Gap — where they were met by none other than a hot-tempered Floyd Allen, who was angered that his kinfolk were hog-tied in a wagon like livestock being carted to market.

Floyd freed his nephews and took them himself to the Hillsville jail two days later. Now, the manner by which he freed them depended on who was telling the story. Floyd said he did it peacefully and lawfully, claiming that the deputies did not have proper warrants for arrest. The deputies, though, accused Floyd of forcibly freeing the brothers, assaulting the lawmen and smashing Deputy Samuels' pistol against a rock. Floyd admitted that he might've gotten rough with Samuels.

Despite taking his nephews to jail himself, Floyd was accused that he did "feloniously and forcably [sic] rescue" his nephews, according to a grand jury indictment. Floyd Allen was going to trial.

(Interesting Southwest Virginia side note: Initially, Floyd's nephew Barnett Allen, the grandfather of legendary Virginia Tech football coach Frank Beamer, was charged along with his uncles Floyd and Sidna for taking the Edwards boys from the deputies. Seems like everybody from Carroll County has some connection to this story. Charges eventually were dropped against Sidna and Barnett before the trial.)

March broke cold and rainy in the mountains. Floyd Allen's case had been continued a couple of times before he finally appeared in court for a two-day trial that started on March 12, 1912. Nearly impassable muddy roads and a raw wind that carried snow flurries did not stop nearly 100 people from jamming the 1873 courthouse to see the spectacle of Floyd Allen possibly being led away in handcuffs.

Late in the day March 13, the jury had not reached a verdict, so Judge Massie sent them to the nearby Thornton Hotel for the night. Floyd spent the night at his brother Sidna's splendid new home in Fancy Gap, about 7 miles away. The next morning, the jury quickly returned a guilty verdict and a sentence of a year in jail and a $1,000 fine. The courtroom buzzed. Massie had been urged by Foster and Goad to disarm the throng before the trail began. Massie refused, saying he was there "to prosecute, not persecute."

Everybody was packing weapons, it seemed. Not only the sheriff and deputies, but Goad and Foster. Even the accused, Floyd Allen, carried a pistol.

As Foster followed the judge's instructions to re-write the verdict on the indictment, Allen's lawyer, W.D. Bolen, asked for bail and for Allen to be freed as they appealed the case. The judge refused. He told Sheriff Lewis Webb to take the prisoner.

Floyd stood up, his hands fidgeting with the bottom of his sweater, and he spoke his defiant words.

"Gentlemen, I just ain't a-goin'."

As historian Ron Hall wrote in his book: "And for a moment, the world stopped."

One shot. The pop of a single revolver. Then a cacophony of gunfire.

Ninety seconds later, 57 bullets had been fired. People were struck, some were wounded, some killed instantly.

To this day, 110 years later, nobody who has studied this notorious event can say with any assurance who fired that catastrophic first shot. Hall thinks that Sheriff Webb, who was carrying a borrowed gun, might have fired accidentally. The Allen clan believed that Goad shot first. One local historian interviewed

by Williamson for The Roanoker magazine in 1982 stated unequivocally that Claude Allen, Floyd's son, fired first. In the 1960s, a boisterous flea market and liquor store owner in Cana named Rufus Gardner took up the Allens' cause and found two men who claimed one of Goad's assistants admitted to firing first at Floyd Allen.

Again, no investigation was made at the scene. No autopsies were performed. Maybe the county leaders didn't want to find errant bullets from their own guns in the bodies of the dead, some county residents whispered.

Massie, Foster, Webb and juror Augustus Fowler died in the courtroom. Betty Ayers, an 18-year-old witness, was hit in the back while fleeing the courtroom and died the next day.

Most of the Allens and their cohorts escaped initially, but an emergency call to Virginia Gov. William Hodges Mann from Hillsville's one outside line brought the famed Baldwin-Felts detectives to town the next day. The agency, infamous for busting coal miner unions, breaking strikes and shooting people in West Virginia, were led by Thomas Felts from just down the road in Galax. Felts and his team strode into action, quickly arresting a badly wounded Floyd Allen at a Hillsville Hotel during a staged scene for newspaper photographs.

The "grand posse," as Sidna Allen would mockingly call them in his memoirs, rode horses, carried shotguns and rifles and posed for pictures — even though they spent a lot of time flailing through the woods in search of the Allens. Eventually, most of the clan was captured, although Sidna Allen and his nephew Wesley Edwards, whose fight in a churchyard had lit the fuse on this powder keg in 1910, made it to Des Moines, Iowa, where they worked and lived under aliases. They, too, were captured by Felts and his men, as Sidna Allen came to believe that Wesley's girlfriend back home had betrayed them.

Justice came swiftly to the Allens, perhaps a bit too swiftly for those folks who began to believe that a grave conspiracy among county officials had provoked the Allens in order to bring them down. Two months after the shootout, Floyd Allen was convicted in Wytheville of killing Foster, the commonwealth's attorney. Three trials were needed to finally convict Claude.

Claude had become a *cause celebre* in his final days, perhaps for his handsome looks that were regularly featured in newspaper photos and the fact that he was leaving behind a grieving fiancé. Thousands of people wrote letters to Gov. Mann asking either that the Allens be given clemency or be executed swiftly.

On March 28, 1913, barely a year after the bloodshed in Hillsville, Floyd and Claude Allen were executed in the same electric chair.

Floyd, 56, a once proud man now destroyed, was strapped to the electric chair, a leather mask placed over his face and four, 1-minute bursts of 2,000-volt electrical shocks were sent coursing through his body until he was pronounced dead at 1:26 p.m.

Claude, just 24, was electrocuted in the same chair 12 minutes later.

A ghoulish spectacle occurred when the bodies of the two men were placed in public view at a Richmond funeral home, where as many as 5,000 people lined up to gawk at the mountain outlaws they had read about.

More leniency was given to the other Allens and their family members. Sidna Allen received a 35-year prison sentence, his nephews Wesley and Sidna Edwards and Friel Allen got lesser sentences. All men were pardoned by Gov. Elbert Lee Trinkle and Gov. Harry F. Byrd Sr. in the 1920s.

When Floyd and Claude Allen's bodies were brought back to the family's house in Cana, Frances Allen — Floyd's wife, Claude's mother — entered the room dressed in black and fell across her son's coffin, embracing his body like a child. Witnesses said she never looked Floyd's way. One can wonder if that was a sign that she blamed her husband for the tragic calamity that befell the family.

When the men were buried, it was beneath one final statement of defiance. According to local legend, a headstone placed atop their graves read: "Sacred to the memory of Claude S. Allen and his father, who was judicially murdered in the Va. Penitentiary March 28 1913 by order of the Governor of the State over the protest of 100,000 citizens of the state of Va."

The legend also claims that the marker was removed as a condition of Sidna Allen's pardon in 1926 after he served 14 years. Sidna was released from prison, but he never set foot in his fine house again. He wrote a memoir, made beautiful furniture from delicately inlaid wooden pieces and spent the rest of his life telling people that the Allens did not shoot first. He died at his daughter's home in Hillsville in 1941.

The detail from this indictment of the Allens and their associates following the shootout bleeds with raw emotion. This document was part of thousands of pages of trial exhibits recently returned to Carroll County. Photo courtesy of the Carroll County Heritage Digitizing Organization

Aftermath, pain and healing

After years of being privately owned, Sidna Allen's house was given to the Carroll County Historical Society in 2014 by siblings Stanley Widener and Bonnie Wood, whose mother, Marlene, often opened the house to the public for tours.

The historical society has raised thousands of dollars and conducted much-needed remodeling work in order to resume free tours, with the next public opening happening June 4-5.

The historical society's museum resides on the first floor of the old courthouse, which no longer is a government building but still majestically commands the high ground of Main Street like it did in 1912. Two bullet holes — Floyd Allen's final shots in the massacre — are still visible in the wooden steps. You can also see some of Sidna Allen's furniture craftsmanship and Claude Allen's banjo on exhibit in the museum.

The spotlight returned to the story of the shootout when the centennial of the tragedy was marked in 2012. The historical society held a symposium that featured several speakers, and a play about the tragedy called "Thunder in the Hills," written by Carroll County author/playwright/orchardist Frank Levering, was performed before sold-out audiences in the courtroom of the old courthouse where the shootout happened. The play was still occasionally performed before the pandemic.

Interest in the story never wanes, even though, as the historian Hall said, "we've about beaten the thing to death."

That's why the discovery of the trial exhibits and documents in Wythe County is significant. The words, the handwriting and the language remind us that these people — long dead and seemingly characters set in stone like the Confederate statue that still stands in front of the old courthouse — were human beings caught up in a cataclysmic tragedy.

Howard Sadler's grandfather, Howard Gilmer, who died before Sadler was born, carried the enormity of the tragedy with him throughout his short life. Sadler said that his grandfather's reputation was that of an attorney who possessed a great gift of gab and was a prolific letter writer, but he never left behind any record of what he saw or heard that day in the Hillsville courtroom.

"He never wrote a damn word about the most significant event in his life," Sadler said.

Howard Gilmer had traveled to Hillsville with Massie because he had a case pending in court. He was not in the courthouse during the shootings, but immediately ran to his dying friend and mentor. Gilmer accompanied the body on a short train ride from Sylvatus to Pulaski, where a throng of mourners awaited, Sadler said. Howard Gilmer testified during the subsequent murder trials about the judge's fatal bullet wound.

And then, he apparently moved on with life. But it turned out that he actually had left behind one document about what he saw and heard on March 14, 1912.

As Sadler studied his grandmother's old scrapbooks, he found a copy of a letter that he had written to state legislators nearly 20 years after the shootout. He wrote urging that the state should pay a stipend to Judge Massie's widow, who had become destitute in the years since her husband's death. He also wrote that as the judge lay dying, he told his young protégé, "Tell my brother Robert to take care of my family."

Sadler, who said he spent more than 1,700 hours researching the story, spoke to a gathering in March that commemorated the 110th anniversary of the tragedy. In a presentation he called "The Last Witness," he recounted his grandfather's story and reminded people that, with the return of the trial documents

to Carroll County, they were all watching history unfold.

"The significance of this event to Carroll County is profound," Sadler said. "In some ways, the county never recovered from that day. Now, thanks to Gerald Goad's interest in this, the return of these documents can be part of a healing process. Because of his vision to preserve and protect these exhibits, they'll never be lost again."

The 1912 documents referred to in this story were scanned and digitally archived by Delilah Brady, a volunteer and director for the Carroll County Historical Society and Museum. Those documents can be found at www.ccva.digital/1912-historical-courthouse-tragedy.html.

Trevor McKenzie, director for the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, sings the ballad "Claude Allen" during the 2015 Ashe County Bluegrass & Old Time Fiddlers Convention in Jefferson, North Carolina. McKenzie's performance took first place in the Folk Song category.