

Sorsby murder trial reenactment set for April 11

By City Historian Dr. Walter Howell

The “Voices of Clinton” cast will perform a dramatic reading on “The Sorsby Murder Trial, Clinton’s ‘Crime of the Century,’” at the City courtroom on Thursday, April 11, at 7 p.m. The reading is the sixth in a series dating back to 2013 that recounts events and people who were part of Clinton’s past.

William Sorsby is not a familiar name to Clinton people today, but he came from a prominent Clinton family of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sorsby’s grandfather, a respected Clinton physician, is buried in the Clinton cemetery. An uncle, William B. Sorsby, was America’s Minister to Bolivia in 1908. Everett Sorsby, his father, operated a grocery store in Clinton. The family home was on the southeast corner of Main and Capital Streets, across from the town square.

William Sorsby married Margaret Cabaniss, daughter of Judge and Mrs. Edward Cabaniss. The judge was Clinton’s postmaster, and, after his death, his widow became postmistress. Sorsby worked for Mrs. Cabaniss at the Clinton post office

and lived with his wife at his mother-in-law’s antebellum home, “Violet Banks,” on Jefferson Street.

Charles Fitzgerald, postal inspector in Jackson, discovered discrepancies in the Clinton post office financial reports and made an unannounced inspection of the Clinton office in September 1908. He confirmed the shortages, and, though Sorsby secretly restored the missing money, Fitzgerald said he had to report the crime.

Sorsby pleaded with Fitzgerald to drop the charges, to no avail. Sorsby then planned the murder and his escape. He shot Fitzgerald at the Clinton railroad depot while the inspector awaited a train to return to Jackson. Twenty other passengers witnessed the shooting. Fitzgerald died in a Jackson hospital several hours later, the first postal inspector ever killed in the line of duty in U.S. postal history.

Sorsby fled on a horse to Jackson, where his brother picked him up and drove back to Clinton. The brother owned the only car in Clinton. The fugitive went into hiding in the attic of the home of a friend for the next three months. Sorsby sightings were

reported for months, and rumors of his whereabouts circulated through the county.

In November 1908, Clinton mayor Murray Latimer, while on a visit to Jackson, was interviewed about William Sorsby and his crime. The reporter quoted Latimer as saying “William Sorsby had been wild and bad.” The mayor, who also taught Greek at Mississippi College, denied the quote. In a letter to the editor, he clarified his views on Sorsby’s character.

Murray wrote: “I have known him for more than ten years and do not believe anyone could truthfully make that statement. I do know that, during the last two or three years, he has taken a firm and aggressive stand on the side of law and order and decency in our community and has personally assisted me several times in ferreting and raiding dens of vice.”

The mayor’s letter identified the fugitive as a supporter of the law. That Sorsby “had been wild and bad” reflected stories circulating through the county that Sorsby was unstable, possibly insane.

In late December 1908 an informer notified Sheriff Harding that Sorsby

was hiding in the home of Robert Johnston, on the corner Leake and Capital Streets in Clinton. When he and a deputy began a search of the house, Sorsby cried out from the attic “I surrender. I surrender.” After climbing down, Sorsby asked that he be allowed to shave and take a bath. He had been in hiding for three months.

William Sorsby was indicted for murder by a Hinds County grand jury, and his trial took place in April 1909 in the county court house in Jackson.

To learn the fate of Sorsby, see the reenactment of the trial on April 11 at 7 p.m. in the courtroom of the Clinton Justice Building.

“The Voices of Clinton” dramatic readers will be Walt Grayson, Dr. Walter Howell, B.B. Selby, Eric Eaton, George Broadstreet, Jacque Tharp, Jerry Tharp, Dexter Shelby, Willis Washington, Jr. Charlie Carlisle, Kari Hobbs, Juanita Walker, Ed Shelnut, Sam Puckett and Andrew Fehrenbacher. James Anderson serves as the director and script advisor and Marsha Barham as the executive producer.



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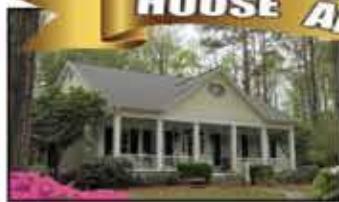
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