



Bootlegging in Garland 1920-1933 – The Prohibition Years – Part 3

The first white man in Texas executed in the electric chair was from the Garland/Rowlett area and was a much beloved bootlegger. John Sidney “Pete” Welk was born in 1893 in Sachse, but his struggling tenant farmer parents went on to raise him in the Rowlett area. He married a woman named Willie, and they had five children. Welk’s growing family rented a plot of land in Garland that was owned by Millard Flook. Their home was a battered two-room house with wide gaps in the floorboards and broken windows, according to one reporter.

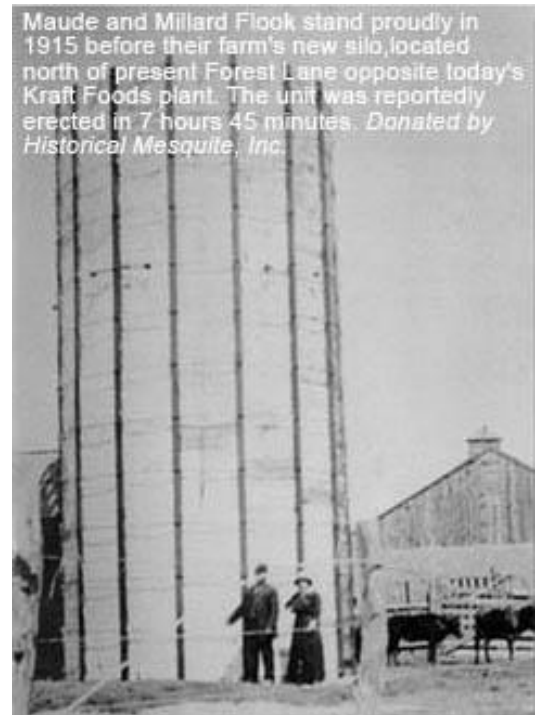
Struggling to support Willie and the children, Welk began operating a large 60-gallon still in the creek bottoms near Mills Cemetery. He was arrested in January 1921 for running the still but was quickly back in business. The bootlegging operation seems to have gone mostly unbothered for two more years.

Pete Welk was friends with Jim Flowers who was thought of fondly in the area. Flowers would do anything for a friend as his willingness to break “into” jail demonstrates. In 1912, two of Flowers’ friends, Dickerson and Whitten (no first names listed) were locked in the Garland calaboose (tiny jail). Flowers took it upon himself to break into the jail to help the two break back out. He got a two-year sentence for this unsuccessful escapade. Then later, in 1925, he faced a charge of carrying a pistol and selling beer. Flowers received a light sentence or fine for those charges.

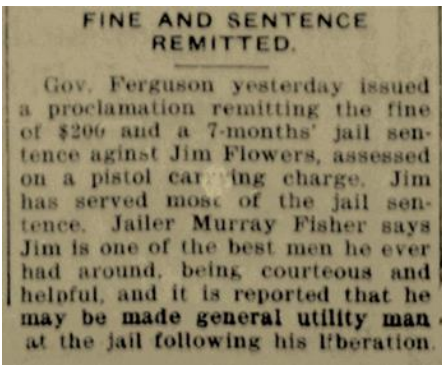
In the intervening years of the early 1920s, Welk’s moonshine operation was large enough to necessitate help. To that end, he had three folks working with him on the night of Dec. 21, 1922, when the operation was raided. One of these helpers was Flowers. The four bootleggers were completely surprised by the law enforcement ambush, as a raid on local stills was uncommon at the time. Garland and Rowlett were small towns where everyone knew everyone else. Now and again, though, law enforcement felt compelled to make a show of enforcing the 18th Amendment which outlawed making, selling or shipping alcohol.

This seemed to be one of those nights. No courtesy warning was extended to the bootleggers, as was often the custom. Taken off guard by the raid, shots rang out in all directions between the four men working in the creek bottom and the five officers. All nine men were armed. Among the officers were Sheriff’s Deputies HC Brite and Tom Wood.

After the gunshots stopped, the four bootleggers checked in with each other. They were unscathed. The five officers checked in with each other – four were unscathed. Deputy Tom Wood had taken a lethal bullet to the head. A chase ensued which resulted in all of the bootleggers being taken into custody over the next several days and charged with the deputy’s murder.



Maude and Millard Flook stand proudly in 1915 before their farm's new silo, located north of present Forest Lane opposite today's Kraft Foods plant. The unit was reportedly erected in 7 hours 45 minutes. Donated by Historical Mesquite, Inc.



were only given 10 years. (Belcher's sentence was overturned entirely in the coming years.) Flowers walked away almost scot free.

Welk was given a 40-year sentence for killing Officer Thomas Wood even though it does not appear it was proven that his gun was used in the crime. He was taken to Dallas to jail. He left behind Willie to look after their five very young children. Because of the financially desperate situation of the Welks, his inability to support his family was met with much outrage in the Garland/



Rowlett area. The situation in which he found himself was seen as wildly unfair and the 40-year sentence, outrageous. Most folks stridently argued that Welk was innocent.

He was being held in the relatively new Criminal Courts Building at

Houston and Main Street in Dallas. The building had been opened in 1914 and was a showstopping bit of architectural design by HA Overbeck. It is now usually referred to as the "Records Building." With the completion of the Criminal Courts Building, public hangings were moved indoors. No longer would this particular form of punishment be carried out in the square in front of the *Dallas Morning News* building for the crowd's entertainment. Hangings were the means used for all death sentences in Dallas until 1925 when the state-of-the-art Criminal Courts Building would install their own electric chair according to the Dallas County website. Pete Welk was to face his death in Huntsville earlier in 1925.

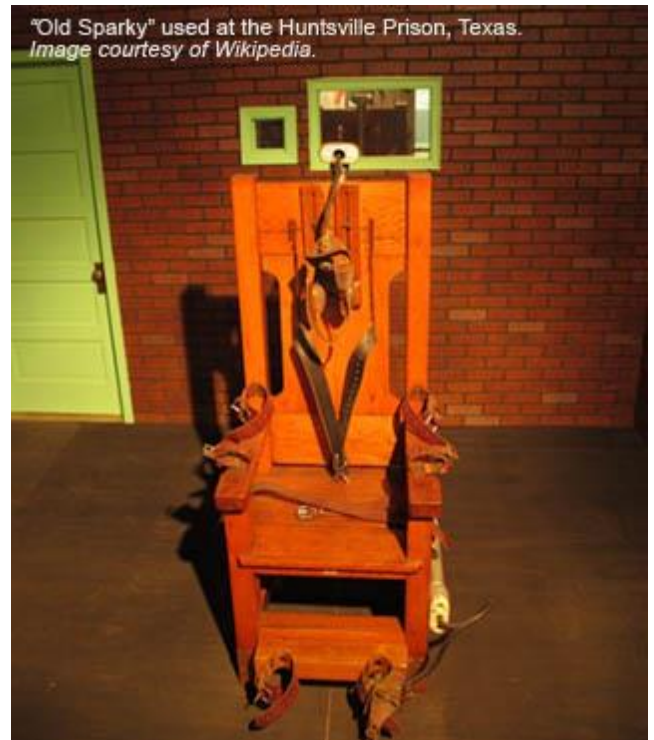
It is not clear why, but Welk was given a much stiffer sentence than anyone else present that night. While Welk was sentenced to 40 years, Clayton Coomer and Henry Belcher

Huntsville had been using the electric chair for a few years, but only on African American men. White men were still hung. Welk's fate would change that.

That opportunity arrived Sept. 26, 1923, at roughly 8 p.m. Having only been on the job for three months, Deputy Willis Champion was taking a new prisoner up to the 6th floor (other reports say the 5th floor, but that was the private rooms of the jailer and his wife) in the elevator. Also in the elevator was an employee by the name of Ozie Davis. Welk and Gaines were hoping to use the element of surprise to make a break for it when the elevator opened. As the jail was set up, a special key was needed to access the elevator or the stairs once the doors were closed.

Welk and Gaines were ready when the elevator door opened. They initially demanded the key from Deputy Champion, but, in an effort to hamper their escape, Champion tossed the key out of the window. This resulted in the deputy being shot by one of the escapees in frustration.

Hearing the gunshots, help came almost immediately and a full-on shoot out took place. In the end, Gaines was shot to death and Champion died. Welk had taken many bullets himself but was denied medical help and placed on a cot in a cell. He managed to survive, only to be charged with the deputy's murder and given the death sentence.



Again, no proof that his gun was the one used to kill the deputy was presented, but his compatriot was deceased and there was only Welk to be held accountable. The

facts were that two officers had lost their lives, and Welk had been armed and present both times.

Law enforcement had repeatedly tried to get Welk to tell them the name of the insider that helped he and Gaines, but Welk refused to talk. People working in the jail had their suspicions and only needed Welk's confirmation, but he adamantly refused to rat on the person. Sheriff Dan Harston is on the record as stating that "He [Welk] opened his mouth and talked, but only told us a fairy story."

Whatever Welk said, it was not what they wanted to hear and they didn't let it drop. He was visited the day before his execution by Dallas County Sheriff Schuyler Marshall who tried to get the information but to no avail. He was asked again as he was being strapped into the electric chair – no dice.

While Welk had been awaiting execution, the people of Garland and Rowlett were again mortified on his behalf. It seemed obvious to them that he wanted to break out of jail to be reunited with his family. His continued refusal to name the person who attempted to help in the escape only proved locals' point that he was a good guy. Reading about his plight in the newspaper, people across the state took up his cause and organized assistance to Welk's family. Money and clothing flowed in for the children. The Rowlett bank set up a trust fund for the family.



Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, 29th and 32nd governor of Texas. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

The Welks obtained a lawyer and the entire family made the trip to Austin in hopes of a personal audience with Governor Miriam "Ma" Ferguson. She was known to be very lenient with pardons and commutations; to such a degree that people thought she was taking kickbacks. Even though Willie and the kids camped in front

of her office for hours on end, Governor Ferguson adamantly refused to even meet with them.

Welk was held on death row at Huntsville prison. He was across the hall from an African-American man named Lavannie Twitty. Both had high hopes that a last-minute call from Governor Ferguson would save them, but Welk was to be denied. Lavannie, however, was lucky in the short term. He was granted a 90-day reprieve, after which time he was also executed.

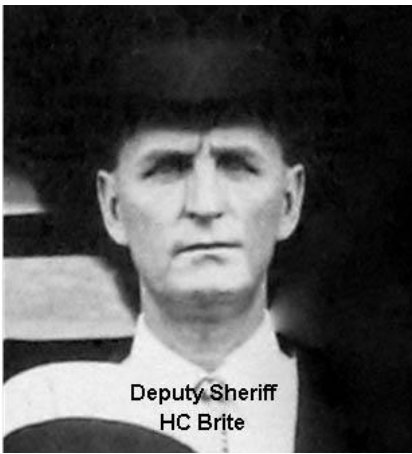


There was much backlash at not only Welk's execution, but his means of execution. The electric chair, since it was put into use two years earlier, had only been used on African Americans. Welk was the first white man to be put to death in the State of Texas by use of the electric chair.

John Sidney "Pete" Welk was laid to rest in Rowlett's Big A Cemetery. His funeral is said to have drawn 10,000 people and traffic was snarled for miles around. Cecil Williams, the Garland undertaker, donated his services and a casket. The Dallas branch of the Ku Klux Klan outfitted the family in proper attire for the funeral and provided them with groceries. Willis Champion, the deputy killed in the jail break, was also supported by the KKK at his funeral.

With the hope of helping the family, wash tubs were placed at the head and feet of Welk's open casket, displayed at the cemetery. If people wanted to see the burn marks on his forehead from the electrocution cap, they had to drop cash in a bucket. The line for this privilege was said to be two hours long and resulted in \$800 being raised (\$13,600 today). Vendors sold snacks and drinks.

Little is known of how Willie, his widow, fared after 1925. What is known is that Mrs. Willis Champion, widow of the assassinated jail deputy, was given a job with the city water department, where she worked until retirement 13 years later. She never remarried. She granted an extensive interview to *the Dallas Morning News* in September 1940, detailing her life since the shooting.



Deputy Sheriff
HC Brite

Addendum: Deputy Sheriff HC Brite figured in two of the *OnTrack* articles – the raid on Pete Welk’s still and a previous article relating to a shooting at the Green Lantern speakeasy. While HC Brite’s brother, William Rex Brite, was killed at the age of 26 during the robbery of a

streetcar in Fort Worth, Hilliard Cleveland “Hickie” Brite Jr. served in WWI under Sheriff Smoot Schmidt for many years. His police career ended during a high-speed chase crash that permanently disabled him. However, he went on to run a domino hall and advised the African American community on legal matters. He was nicknamed the “Negro’s Lawyer.”

--Written by Holly Stevens



Garland Landmark Society

GarlandHistorical.org

PRESIDENT

Carlotta Barnes

CarlottaBarnes@icloud.com

VICE PRESIDENT

Museum Affairs

John Hatch

JDHatch@garlandisd.net

VICE PRESIDENT

Membership

Jeanette Manning

jeemanning@gmail.com

SECRETARY

Sara James

Jamesjd1@verizon.net

TREASURER

Patsy Rogers

pbrogers1@verizon.net

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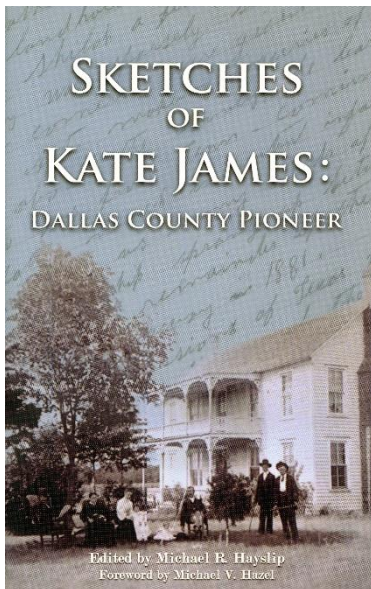
Kim Everett

Mike Hayslip

Laurence Kriv

PO Box 462232

Garland, Texas 75046



Sketches of Kate James: Dallas County Pioneer illuminates the writings of Kate James, a settler who arrived with her family by wagon in 1855. In most ways representative of the local norm, that family included a budding historian who recorded her lifetime of observations with monographs about friends, family and activities in the neighborhood of present Garland, Texas.

Sketches offers more than genealogies of Garland's old families. Expanding from excerpts published in *The Garland News* during 1927, its 160 pages illuminate life throughout Kate's neighborhood as it developed from the 19th to the 20th century.

Annotated, illustrated and indexed are recollections of education, religion, recreation, crime, farming, home building and the folks involved. Even mortuary practices are detailed. And the Civil War erupts in the middle of it all. Through Kate's *Sketches* today's reader can almost join her experience of life in the early days.

Edited by Michael R. Hayslip, the great-great grandson of Kate James, and published with support from the Summerlee Foundation, the book is available in both hard and soft-cover editions.

When ordering, mail payment to Garland Landmark Society, P.O. Box 462232, Garland, Texas 75046.

Sketches of Kate James: Dallas County Pioneer is a great read! James' words create a vivid picture of the area from the time that she and her family arrived in Texas in 1855. Additionally, the book includes a collection of well-chosen photos to illustrate James' memories. Stop by the Landmark Museum to purchase a copy or send a check to the address above. Cost - \$20.

The Landmark Museum and the Pullman Railcar are operated by the Garland Landmark Society, a nonprofit, volunteer organization.

Open
Thursday, Friday and Saturday
10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Brief history of Santa Fe Railroad Depot

The Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railroad constructed the Garland Santa Fe Depot in 1901. Designed by a railroad systems engineer, the new depot replaced an earlier one built in 1886 in the township of Embree that was destroyed by a fire in 1900.



No exterior alterations have been made to the structure, though the original color is believed to be red with a green roof. Only a waiting room partition and restroom facilities were added inside.



In its early years, the depot served as a shipping point for farm produce. In 1972, the City of Garland moved the depot from its original site to its first home as the Landmark Museum located behind City Hall at Museum Plaza. In 1974 the Santa Fe Railroad Depot received a State of Texas Historical Marker designation.

In 2014, the city moved the Santa Fe Depot to its current location at 363 North Sixth Street.



GarlandHistorical.org

Membership Rates:
\$20 Individual/Couple
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Enclose payment with this form and mail to:

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