Grady County Historical Society. CA-002 Series 3: Files from Sections Hawthorne Papers - I

1939-2005

Hopkins Papers

MORE LOCAL NEWS

Imparting knowledge, faith to another generation

Theo Titus
Columnist

My earliest recollection of Paps, as I always knew him, was sitting at the head of the dining table in the big dining room with his family around him. My place was in the high chair at his right side. Dinner was the forum at which discussion ranged from politics to quail shooting to government and back to tarpon fishing — all of which he was a recognized expert.

When I was barely able to walk and talk, he assumed the right to bring me up in the way he felt was best and not always just the way my parents had planned. This was some job for a man who was over 70 and had lived through the Civil War and reconstruction and then grown with the country in its great expansion during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

He was born Jan. 3, 1850, on the Georgia coast near Brunswick to Thomas Spalding Hopkins and his wife and was christened Henry William. His early years were spent learning and working at his father's plantation where the elder Hopkins combined his profession as a doctor and surgeon with the pursuit of agriculture. When he was 14, the gunboats of the federal navy began to cruise the coastal waters and shell the homes and buildings of the plantation owners and young Willie was required to supervise the moving of his entire complex of people, stock and belongings to the sparsely settled area of southwest Georgia now covered by Thomas County.

His father had bought a block in the center of the village of Thomasville and had arranged to have the family settle there so that they would not be endangered by the shelling of the boats. Willie was the only male available to move the group as his father was then at Andersonville trying to alleviate the suffering and horror of the wounded soldiers held there.

As soon as he had settled his people in Thomasville, he walked to Albany, a distance of 60 miles to the north and enlisted in the Confederate Army to fight for his state and country. This was no problem, since even at this early age, he was a full six feet tall and quite mature looking.

Shortly after he was sent to Atlanta as a regular, his father learned from the military commander that the young man had enlisted and promptly arranged to have him discharge and sent home. He spent the rest of the war with his brothers and his mother in Thomasville.

After the war, he returned to Atlanta to study law under a relative and then returned to Thomasville to continue his studies and practice his profession with the man who later became his father-in-law. This was James Seward, the first U.S. congressman from Thomas County.

He married Frances Seward and they began their long life together and the production and rearing of their children, the second daughter being my grandmother.

My memory is filled with first-hand accounts of trips to Boca Grande Pass to spend weeks on Jack Archbold's yacht, fishing and sunning and relaxing along the then-remote west Florida coast. I still treasure the postcards sent from Tampa, Fla., with pictures of the strange birds and wild scenery of the area and telling of the big tarpon and the devil fish which really was a manta ray. I'm sure my mother hasn't forgotten the fine hermit crab he sent home to me and which had to be kept in saltwater in a tub in her kitchen. Her opinion of that fine specimen was less than glowing.

Then there were the long absences brought about by Pap's regular terms in the state legislature in Atlanta and the letters telling about the experiences in the old Kimball house where most of the legislators lived during the session.

My favorite was the one about the day he lost his spectacles and asked the bellboy to find them for him. The boy just grinned and answered, "judge, ain't they on your face?" Sure enough, they were.

It was about this time that a black man, Ben Ford, found the little farm he wanted near Miccosukee Lake in north Florida, but he couldn't handle the deal financially. Paps put up the money for him without security and Ben paid him for it a little at the time as his crops matured until the whole loan was returned. Ben's loyalty remained steadfast as long as he lived and I have enjoyed many days of fine fishing and shooting on the lake with him as boatman and companion.

He had the fire burning and the house open for us when my bride and I arrived at the lake cottage on our honeymoon. Can't let any of judge's folks do without, he argued.

Paps was the author of many bills in the state legislature which were almost revolutionary in their concept, such as the location of a new agricultural experiment station in south Georgia, to study cattle breeding methods and feeding. The station was first in Thomas County and later moved to Tift County where the development of the famous coastal Bermuda grass came about.

While the horse and buggy were the principle means of transportation for the nation, Paps introduced the bill to create Grady County from parts of other counties so that the people could have a nearby county seat for court proceedings, tax collections, public records and all the routine business of government that had previously taken several days to handle when people had to ride for two days each way to the county seat.

The editors of the newspaper called the Cairo Messenger were so grateful that they gave him a life subscription to the paper. These were the days of almost no public education for the great majority of the people.

Paps came to the front with the donation of the land to start a school for the children of the blacks in his town and was instrumental in the founding of the Allen Normal School, later to become part of one of the earliest real public schools for blacks in the Deep South. His argument in favor of educating blacks was that with proper education they could take their place in the economic and cultural life of the South.

In the days of the development of huge private power and light complexes, Paps helped to organize the municipal power and light company that still supplies water and power to this area. The result was more and cheaper power for all the people of his community.

All these things list only the public part of his life and this to me is really the least important from the standpoint of a small boy growing up in a country town.

To me, Paps was all the joy and wonder that a little boy dreams of, and unlike so many little boy's dreams, I had someone to make them true for me.

I was barely three years old when I was handed my first gun, a BB air rifle. To my amazement, before I was ever allowed to shoot it, I was put through a complete course in care, handling and safety and only then was I taken into the big oblong parlor and set down by the piano and told to fire at the target in the fireplace in the other end of the room. The target was placed between the big iron firedogs that supported the light wood stumps burned in the winter and the shots spent themselves on the bricks at the back of the fireplace.

We encountered some protests from several of his daughters but shoot he would and shoot we did.

Soon I was allowed to graduate to an outdoor range and we rolled condensed milk cans across the lawn, swung tin cans from strings and made use of many other moving objects to improve my aim.

The next year I arrived, I was given a real .22-caliber rifle and taken to the farm on a red clay road about four miles from town.

The trip in the Maxwell touring car was an adventure all by itself, with Enoch, a black chauffeur and handy man, enlivening the trip with his remarks.

Once arrived at the farm, we set out to locate some of the English sparrows that were always building their nests in the eaves and creating a major fire hazard. I stalked carefully, but it was only after about the third attempt to get one at a disadvantage that I saw one sitting quite still in the fig tree.

At the crack of the little gun, he fell to the ground and I retrieved him immediately and turned to Paps to receive my praise for a good job.

This was the signal for another lesson in sportsmanship that he had been waiting to pass on to me and it has been passed on to a whole new generation of boys since then. He took me up on his knee and asked if I knew why we hunted and killed game.

I don't remember my answer but his is still vivid in my memory. A real sportsman never kills for the simple act of killing. We shoot for sport only those birds and animals suited for use as food and which are so plentiful that their numbers will not be seriously reduced by the ones we take.

His one order to me was that any bird or animal shot on his farm must be prepared for cooking by the shooter and when cooked, must be eaten. No useless killing was to be tolerated and any violation would be the end of the privilege of shooting.

I have never had any desire to shoot any living thing that was not edible since that day. My own boys are all under this same rule today. It is just as effective now as it was the day Paps put me under it.

When Paps reached his 88th birthday in January 1938, he applied his rule of sportsmanship to himself and never fired a gun at anything from then until his death seven years later.

A deer drive had been organized as a birthday celebration and when the deer ran by him on his stand he fired and the deer went down. The men working the dogs heard him blow his hunting horn for a kill and when they arrived at his stand, they asked where the deer was.

"I can't find it," he answered. The dogs trailed the deer to the spot where it had fallen and it was stone dead. A clean kill. The protective coloring was so near that of the undergrowth that it was impossible for him to find it with his failing eyesight.

On every occasion that I found to visit at home, I was struck by the advances of the years on Paps. No matter, though, he held on with his usual strength and was on hand for the christening of my first son, who began to love him much as I had 20-odd years before.

No man should handle a gun who is not fully capable of seeing everything in range of the gun. Never again did he take his gun out for his own use. At the annual eggnog party in his home that night, he announced his retirement from the field.

These parties were really a community affair where all Paps' friends and associates came to wish him well on his birthday and stay for the eggnog served from the huge flowered china punchbowl in the main dining room.

Eggnog was a ritual that must be carefully followed if it would be just the right creamy consistency and not watery or runny but just right to eat with a spoon from the punch cups. No one was denied a cup, no matter what age he might be, from babes in arms to the oldest friends and relatives.

A new bowl would make its appearance just in time to replenish the one just being finished until somewhere about midnight, the last guest would depart and Paps and I would go upstairs to bed. As long as he lived, my bed was never removed from his room. I used it less and less as the years moved on but it was always there, waiting.

One warm night in early summer, I was told to come with him to the front porch but not to say or do anything but sit still and listen. Gathered on the lawn was a group of hooded and sheeted figures with a single member out in front who seemed to be the leader of the band. This figure called out to Paps to come with them and join in some sort of mission or action.

His answer was clear: The day of the Klan is past. Law and dignity have taken over and will not be evaded. If the law is broken, call on its officers to correct the matter. You men must go home and hang up your robes for good. Goodnight to you all.

After a few words among themselves, the figures moved away and I have never seen them active again in our city. There have been a few efforts to revive the Klan but none have ever succeeded. Paps' action that night was symbolic of his entire life. He believed in service to others as a whole way of life and in justice for all men, regardless of station. As the years began to tell on his vigorous nature, he spent more and more time with his family and less on his business and professional affairs. He devoted much time to the duties as chairman of the board of the local hospital which he was instrumental in having built in Thomasville by the late John F. Archbold as a memorial to his father, one of the founders of the Standard Oil empire. Archbold had intended building the memorial in New Jersey but at the suggestion of his friend reconsidered and placed it in Thomasville, where it is now one of the foremost hospitals in the South.

When Paps' age and infirmity convinced him that he could no longer give all the time needed, he resigned the post although he had been appointed for life by the donor.

Earlier in his career as a statesman, he saw the passage of the Prohibition amendment and on arrival at his home, took all the alcoholic beverages in the house and poured them down the sink with the statement, "I don't approve of the law, but it is the law and we will abide by it. Someday it will change."

I was with him when the change came about and he told me of the incident with a chuckle.

Paps was in his 91st year when I realized that it was time to enlist in the service of our country to try to stop the forces that intended to remake the world and went to tell Paps good-bye for what might well be the last time.

"Boy," he told me, "you know you must go and you know you may not come home, but be proud that you love your country enough to go."

On every occasion that I found to visit at home, I was struck by the advances of the years on Paps. No matter, though, he held on with his usual strength and was on hand for the christening of my first son, who began to love him much as I had 20-odd years before.

About a year after the birth of this first great-great-grandson, my orders for overseas duty were cut and I left my wife and son to serve in Europe for the duration.

The first letter I had from Paps was months later when he wrote to tell me his impression of my first daughter who arrived a few months after my departure.

He was not able to write to me any more because of his badly failing eyesight, but in 1944, I was sent home for additional training and found him cheerful and physically strong in spite of his blindness and partial deafness. My two children called on him daily and cried out for "muny," small change kept in a small black leather purse hidden under the pillows of his leather couch where he spent his days most of the time.

When my leave was over and I had to return to duty, he told me good-bye and held the children close for what he knew would be the last time. I took the children and their mother with me to a remote Florida air base and in March of 1945, we received the message that Paps had passed on.

Ninety-five fine years of living, which had witnessed the growth of our country from a loose confederation into the most powerful nation in the world and his was the privilege to have been a part of much of the change and growth. When he was laid to rest with the flag of the Confederacy over his coffin, I was alone in a small boat, supposedly fishing, but in truth trying to add up in my mind all the lessons of 25 years association with a man whose life was devoted in a great measure to trying to pass on to me and through me, to my children, the wisdom of his years.

My hope is that I will not fail him for his life was proof that there is no need for littleness or selfishness or greed in our world.

I hope that it will be the privilege of my children and their children to gain some part of the knowledge and faith that was his and which was handed on to me in trust for them. If so, then he will know that he has earned a "well done."

Theo Titus is a retired Thomasville businessman.

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January 17,1939

Mr. Marshall Mays,

Cairo, Ga.

Dear Marshall:-

This letter is to serve as a memorandum to you, since you asked that I remind you to invite Judge Hopkins, Thomasville, Ga. to our Chamber of Commerce banquet. I would be glad if before making final arrnagements for your banquet if you would discuss this matter with Mr. W. B. Roddenbery. Mr. Roddenbery and Judge Hopkins were largely responsible for the legislation creating Grady County. I am not familiar with who were other members of this Committee, but I am quite sure a number of them have already passed on, and it might be that we would like to have what other members, if any, of the Committee fr[redacted]re who worked with Mr. Roddenbery. Mr. Roddenbery can give [redacted]ns who suggested that we should have Ju[redacted], and I am sure that we should and must have him with us on this occasion, and you will please attend to this. There are so many of us, of a younger generation, who have benefited so largely from the efforts of these men, that it will be a real pleasure to have them present.

Yours truly,

J.E.Forsyth.

CC to Mr. W. B. Roddenbery, City.