

Time sheds little light on Egypt Plantation mystery

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answer.

Using Thomas recalls, a "catalogue with all different styles of shoes in it," Mrs. Biggers concluded the body was from the late 1830s to early 1840s. David and Vaskti Warmack bought the land in 1835, and there were several other owners during the next decade, ending with James R. Cooper in 1846 and Thomas E. Nelms, who bought it in 1852.

"In those days, owners didn't live on the land, but in the hills, away from the fever and mosquitoes," says Mrs. Hardeman. Her own mother, the late Eleanor Steele Thomas, came to live at Egypt as a bride in 1920.

Tol Thomas, whose father, the late J.T. Thomas Jr., along with a former partner, W.R. Barksdale, bought Egypt Plantation in 1919, was away the day the lady in red was unearthed. His brother-in-law, a retired Marine, was in charge.

Bob Hardeman remembers a tiny, well-dressed woman who looked young.

"I was in the field. The straw boss, K.P. Rooks, who is now deceased, called me on the radio after Willie Williams hit the coffin. I

called the sheriff. I got there within 30 minutes, I'd say. The body had not deteriorated; there was no odor. I ate lunch, rested, the sheriff came. Back out there, the body had deteriorated greatly in the hour and a half. She'd turned black, and the odor was awful."

Maria Gercens, whose house is between the Thomases' and Hardemans', indirectly caused the "lady in red" incident. Williams was working for Basil King and Loys Gray of Sidon, and the field lines were for the septic tank they'd been hired to install for the Gercens cottage. King's and Gray's partnership has since been dissolved, though Williams still works for King.

Retired now and 80, Mrs. Gercens, a Latvia native, was the Thomases' cook. She and her husband, the late Karlis Gercens, came to Egypt in 1950. She says she never went to see what the fuss was all about that spring day, but she shows where the body was discovered in a flat area used as a garden, near the northeastern corner of her house. Tennis courts separate the site from the Hardemans' house and from the river.

King, 65, remembers the day.

"I was a rural mail carrier, and I think my route ended about 2 p.m. I

went directly to the work site and was surprised to see the backhoe inactive. Of course, I quickly found out why."

King estimates the top of the coffin would have been about three feet deep, though this does not mean the lady in red was buried so shallow. There would have been some change in the soil as a result of weather, time or land use.

Williams recalls the tugging of the backhoe against the coffin, and the awesome sight of the body preserved so perfectly for so many decades in a clear liquid, probably alcohol, beneath half-inch glass. Dirt from the excavation conflicted with the shifting of the body of the woman in that red dress.

Calvin Moore, 68, of Lexington served 12 years as sheriff and 12 years as circuit clerk of Holmes County. He answered Hardeman's call, as most of Egypt Plantation's 2,000 acres is in Holmes County. "It wasn't for me to say to move her, so long as there was no foul play. It seemed she'd been put away in peace," Moore recalls.

Thomas says several factors were involved in the decision to seek a court order to move the remains of the lady in red from Egypt Plantation. Curiosity about her became a nuisance for the family,



MARIA GERCENS SHOWS WHERE COFFIN WAS UNEARTHED

Theories abound about woman's identity, but no one knows for sure particularly for the late Mr. and Mrs. J.T. Thomas Jr., who by the early 1960s had moved from the plantation to a house on Grand Boulevard in Greenwood. There were also health concerns for residents of the plantation enclave.

How would this woman, whose identity and manner of death are

She was preceded in death by services.

a home at Cottonlandia Museum at Greenwood.

Billy Cochran 61, of Durant was on the job when Southern Funeral Home went to pick up the remains of the lady in red in August 1969. He recalls an extraordinarily heavy casket, fitted together with a rubber gasket and screws against glass, which they put in a wood box.

Cochran, who worked for the funeral home for 15 years, now works for the city of Durant. "I went, because it was a job," he recalls, "but I really didn't want to do it. I didn't like to move them (bodies)."

If the lady in red has an overseer now, it's Essie Wigley, 79, who worked for the cemetery association in Lexington for 40 years and who, along with the late John D. Pate, buried her. Wigley lives in a small house trailer near Odd Fellows Cemetery, beyond a pair of pecan trees he and his father planted long ago.

Wigley says the lady in red was brought to him in a wood box, and, as he'd done for so many others, he buried her. What kind, if any, last rites were ever said? If she'd had her mourners, back in 1969, would they have asked for a preacher, a rabbi or a priest?

Police/Fire

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