

The coroner, a trusted Democrat

by Jack Sharpe

The office of coroner, now extinct in Robeson County, was occupied actively in the 1900s, most of that century by Dennis and Chalmers Biggs, father and son.

Like medical doctors in a bygone era, coroners responded to calls from out in the country as well as in town. They became widely known, familiar figures in times of distress.

The Biggs name appeared on election ballots as Democratic party candidates from 1922 to 1990 and on invitations to the White House in the 1970s when President Carter was host.

Although re-elected every four years, neither Chalmers nor his father before him was ever known to have made a political speech.

The coroner's powers were linked with law enforcement. He was the only person authorized to arrest the sheriff, if that became necessary. It seldom did, although "people were all the time suing the sheriff," and the coroner had to serve papers on him.

Most calls for the coroner were from the scene of fatalities, anywhere a person died from an unnatural cause. That included deaths by accident or murder. It was the coroner's duty to determine the cause. If a death occurred in questionable circumstances, it was up to the coroner to decide whether an official inquiry into the cause should be made. If so, the coroner ordered an inquest, much like a trial in court, with witnesses testifying before a jury. If the jury found probable cause for an indictment, the case would go to the grand jury.

Intermittent demands made a coroner's service part-time. The Biggs men, from one generation to the next, were merchants and funeral directors. Dennis Biggs came to Lumberton from the Saddletree farm community in 1906 as a deputy of Sheriff Edwin Chalmers McNeill and married the sheriff's daughter, Flora McNeill.

At first in the mercantile business with his brother, John T. Biggs, by 1913 he had established a furniture and funeral business on Elm Street between 3rd and 4th. The funeral parlor was on the second floor. In 1919 the funeral business of Caldwell and Carlyle was purchased. In 1922 Mr. Dennis went to a mortuary school in Raleigh and earned a funeral director's license. In the same year he was elected coroner, the office he held until he resigned in 1968.

Chalmers, the son who grew up in the business, was appointed to serve out his father's unexpired term of office. On his own he was elected every four years

thereafter, until his own retirement in 1990.

Between them, the two coroners viewed the worst accident scenes in a lifetime: the explosion of a cotton gin near Rowland in the early '20s, leaving five persons dead; the collision of a railroad train and a truck at the Fairmont Road crossing in Lumberton in the early 1930s, killing six or seven persons and scattering body parts along the tracks; the nationally publicized train wreck near Rennert in the early 1940s, with 76 fatalities; a bus-truck collision soon after that, on highway 301 south of St. Pauls, with five persons killed; and later, a bus wreck on highway 211, killing four persons on their way to Bladenboro.

The accident between Rennert and Buie, in which two trains collided, was the worst not only in number of fatalities, but also in the difficulty of rescue operations – at night during a snowstorm.

But most deaths were non-violent. As funeral directors, the Biggs men prepared for burial thousands of citizens, young and old, of the Robeson County population. The biggest funeral of all, as



Dennis Biggs is pictured holding his son, Chalmers.

Stolen car tale straightened

A stolen car incident in which Dennis Biggs was involved, sometime in the 1930s, has been told and retold in so many ways that his son, Chalmers, has volunteered to set the record straight.

The car, a Chrysler "Airflow," disappeared one night from the yard of the Biggs home. "That upset everybody at home," Chalmers said.

"Three or four days after that my father took my mother and Dennis (brother) to ride with him to visit his farms. He had a farm out in East Howellsville and another up at Rennert; so he was taking a shortcut on Powers Road and he came across Ten Mile Baptist Church. ... About a mile after he passed Ten Mile Baptist Church, he saw his car parked in the yard of an old farmhouse.

"He knew, and Dennis and my mother all agreed with him, that was the car. So he carried them straight home, and went to the sheriff's office to get somebody to go out there and get the car back. There was nobody there except Marvin Barker, who then was a deputy sheriff. He asked Marvin to go with him to help him get the car. He drove right out there as fast as he could, and the car was still sitting there in the yard.

"Marvin told him to drive up and put his bumper against the front bumper of the parked car and he would get out and go in the house. Before he

could get out of the car good, these two fellows ran out and jumped in the car and backed up way back.

"Marvin was out of the car, and so they came back and when they got beside Papa's car, Marvin was standing out with his pistol. When they passed by they shot a couple of times, hitting one of the windows of Papa's car. Papa was down in the floorboard, but Marvin was on the outside, and as the car left going down the road, Marvin shot a couple of times and hit the car. Well, everybody was all upset and real excited that these fellows got away from them.

"About a week later, the car was found in Raleigh; the police circled it and watched. Finally these two fellows came out to get in the car, and they arrested them. They were these outlaws; they'd already been named outlaws. They had escaped from prison. Papa and Marvin went up to Raleigh to identify them and get the car. They could identify it by the pistol marks on the back of the car."

The arrest of the two outlaws was written in the paper, the news widely circulated. "Papa asked what they were doing down in Lumberton. One of them said, 'I was going with one of the teachers, and I had been to the teacherage.' He never would tell who the teacher was."

Chalmers recalls it, was that of Gov. A.W. McLean in 1935. The last rites for the Lumberton banker and "businessman governor" of North Carolina attracted an immense crowd including representatives of government at every level.

Funeral services, over the years, have remained largely traditional. The most obvious changes have been in transportation. The earliest hearse that Chalmers remembers was a wagon drawn by two horses. Later, his father took the hearse to the Carthage (N.C.) Buggy Company and had it mounted on a truck bed.

Until recent years, graves were dug by men with shovels. Mechanical grave-diggers became practical long before being put into use locally. Digging crews had trouble getting the new machines to work.

In 1933, the mortuary business was moved from the furniture store to a one-story stucco-walled building on East 3rd Street. In the mid-1940s Mr. Dennis served as president of the North Carolina Funeral Directors Association. In 1948, the furniture store was relocated in a new building at the corner of

Chestnut and Third. In 1953, the former Kelly Barnes residence at Chestnut and Elizabethtown Road was bought and the mortuary was moved into it.

As the funeral business expanded, the furniture store was sold to the Kimbrell Company, and additions were made to the big brick house with its adjacent parking lot. The mortuary occupied most of a town block.

Politics

As the Democratic party's most consistent candidate, Chalmers was a leader in county Democratic politics. He often made political trips, and many times was accompanied by John McArthur of Wakulla, N.C., a consistent supporter of Democratic candidates and a hard worker on their behalf. In 1977 Chalmers and his wife, Mary, received invitations to several conferences and social events at the White House. Another Southerner, Jimmy Carter, was president, so the invitations, although formal, were as welcoming as "you-all come."

The trip to Carter's inauguration was very memorable. Biggs and McArthur had reserved a railroad coach to carry inauguration spectators from Raleigh to Washington, and every seat was taken by Robesonians. One was occupied by his cousin, Franklin Biggs, a confessed Republican. Getting Franklin to pay for a train ticket to see a Democrat president sworn in was something to chuckle about.

In Washington the train travelers mingled with the great crowd of witnesses to the inauguration. Suddenly one of them pointed at the grandstand and yelled, "Look up there." What was up there, among the national dignitaries on display was Franklin Biggs, sitting right beside Senator Jesse Helms.

The train ride back to Raleigh was uneventful, physically. Chalmers was glad of that, for at times he was uneasy about Franklin's safety. Some of the passengers celebrating the Democratic inaugural were resentful of a Republican fellow-traveler. Franklin had

made a few boastful remarks, in jest, but right away he found it was advisable to keep quiet.

Now in a rest home, Franklin remains a stalwart Republican. Chalmers still is a committed member of Robeson County's vast Democratic majority.

At the age of 88, Chalmers retains a sense of humor which, along with an easy manner, has enabled him to witness countless scenes of sorrow and disaster, remaining cheerful and friendly.

He has outlived the office of coroner in Robeson County. It still exists in Bladen and Columbus, and there were coroners in Robeson even before his father. But that, as folks used to say "was away back." The coroner of Robeson had been one of the Biggs men "since the memory of man runneth not to the contrary."

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Chalmers Biggs



Biggs Funeral Home on Chestnut Street