



CHARLES WILLIAM WORRILL served on the Court of Appeals 1949-1953 and on the Supreme Court 1953-1954, when he retired and was appointed Justice Emeritus for life. He was born on February 8, 1887, in Cuthbert, Randolph County, Georgia, and died in Mathews, Virginia, on October 14, 1972.

He graduated from Bethel Military College of Cuthbert in 1902; attended United States cavalry and army schools and was a rider at Fort Yuma, Arizona; was a Texas and a California Ranger and a deputy marshal. He received his law degree from Mercer University in 1909 and began the practice of law in Cuthbert, Georgia, the same year.

He married Adelin J. Helms of Cuthbert on November 6, 1915, and they had one daughter, Adelin W. Hammack. For names and details of his grandchildren and other family history and his achievements, see the memorial dated June 13, 1973, in 229 Georgia Reports, pages XXXI-LVIII. He is the son of the famous William C. Worrill, whose memorial is in 190 Georgia Reports 897 and who was a Judge of the Pataula Judicial Circuit.

He was City Attorney of Cuthbert; County Attorney of Randolph County; elected Judge of Pataula Judicial Circuit; Court of Appeals and Supreme Court of Georgia; a baseball player and umpire.

"He was a strict, very effective jurist, and became very popular for his stern observance of judicial dignity and efficiency. 'This court costs a dollar every minute,' he said over and over again, and the depression-ridden taxpayer loved him for it." It was said he was a "legend in his own time" all over the state we called him 'Judge Two-Gun Charlie Worrill.' "This was in reference to the story that he presided in court with two pistols on the Bench. At one time he issued an injunction restraining the National Labor Relations Board from setting foot in Randolph County. Very respectfully inquiry was made as to his authority, and he replied: "Tell your superiors to violate the restraining order, just a little, and we will soon find out by what authority a State Court Judge can do so." Another said he was "firm but compassionate... resolute in his views... considerate of the views of others." He believed, "What this country needs to do is to get back to the old Biblical law, the old Biblical law that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai." He was "warm, unselfish, thoughtful and tender-hearted."

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Guest
C o M M e n t a r y
The Lena Baker Story:
Execution in a small town
By Lela Bond Phillips

Printer Friendly Version

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In 1996 while doing some research about 1940s Cuthbert, Georgia, I ran across some information about Lena Baker. At that time, the ordeal and execution of Lena Baker was one of the best kept secrets in town. After reading the Superior Court Minutes of her trial, I knew that Lena needed a voice. Almost sixty years after her tragic death, I knew her story cried out to be told and I was going to tell it.

Lena Baker had a least four strikes against her when she was born at the turn of the century in Randolph County, Georgia. She was from a small, rural southern town; she was a woman; she was poor; and she was black. Lena was born in a former slave cabin, about five miles southwest of Cuthbert. At the age of forty-four in 1944, Lena had never known anything except hard work and the pangs of poverty and despair. She chopped cotton, cleaned houses, and took in laundry to help support her mother and her three children.

When Ernest B. Knight, a local gristmill owner, hired her to care for him while he recovered from a broken leg, it must have, at first, seemed like a windfall. Knight, a white man, was twenty-three years Baker's senior. It was well known in Cuthbert that Knight was heavy drinker and that he often carried a pistol strapped to his shoulder. It wasn't long before a sexual relationship developed between Knight and Baker. When she attempted to extricate herself from this relationship, Knight locked her in his gristmill for several days at a time, and as a nearby newspaper reported after her execution, kept her there as his "slave woman."

At her trial, Lena explained how Knight approached her house and forced her to go with him on that Saturday evening of April 29. Baker had been warned by the county sheriff to stay away from Knight or that she was going to be thrown in jail; too, she was afraid of physical abuse by Knight (and once even Knight's son had given her a terrible beating with a warning to stay away from his father). Therefore, as soon as she could, Baker gave Knight the slip and spent the night sleeping in the woods near the convict camp. On her way back into Cuthbert the next morning, Knight cornered her again and this time took her to the mill house and locked her in while he went to a "singing" (a form of religious celebration in the South) with his son. Lena soon became fed up with spending the sweltering day lying on an old bed in the gristmill. When Knight returned, she informed him that she was leaving. They, in Lena's words "tussled over the pistol."

At her trial when asked who pulled the trigger, she replied, "I don't know." She also explained the Knight was brandishing an iron bar that was used to secure the door to the gristmill and that she was afraid for her life.

Under the jurisdiction of Judge Charles William "Two Gun" Worrill, who presided at court with two pistols on the bench, the trial didn't last even a full court day, taking a little over four hours. A former "lawman" out West, Worrill boasted of gunfights with twelve men, seven of whom died. Later he was appointed to the Georgia State Supreme Court by Governor Herman Talmadge, who later became a vehemently segregationist senator. The jury consisted of twelve white men (not unusual for 1944), but many of the jurors were good friends who attended the same small churches, socialized with each other's families at card parties, and shared morning coffee at a local cafe.

In less than one-half hour the jury came back with a guilty verdict and Worrill sentenced Baker to death in Georgia's electric chair, nicknamed "Old Sparky." Her lawyer immediately asked for a new trial to be scheduled because "the verdict was contrary to the evidence and without evidence to support it ... and the verdict was contrary to law and the principles of justice and equity." He then just as immediately resigned as her lawyer. Later Lena was granted a sixty-day reprieve by then Governor Arnall, but the Board of Pardons and Parole denied clemency when they heard the case. Lena's execution date was scheduled for March 5, 1945. On February 23 she was signed into one of the worst prisons in the United States, Reidsville State Prison, where she was housed in the men's section until just a few days before her execution when she was moved to a solitary cell just a few feet from the execution chamber itself.

Lena went to her death calmly. Her last words were, "What I done, I did in self-defense, or I would have been killed myself ... I am ready to meet my God." Witnesses stated that it took six minutes and several shocks before the prison doctor pronounced her dead. Although Ernest B. Knight's death had not made the headlines in the *Cuthbert Times*, Lena's did. The paper crassly reported, "Baker Burns."

In 1998, the congregation of the church Lena attended as a young woman raised \$250 for a slab and marker for her grave. Her relatives, now scattered from New Jersey to Florida, met this year, the 58th anniversary of her death, to place a wreath on her grave. They are beginning to reconnect and plan a reunion on Mothers Day, May 11. They have asked the state Pardons and Parole Board to clear her of the crime. Perhaps if this happens, a healing process can begin. The only response thus far from the Board is that it usually does not grant pardons of this kind.

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THE NEW GEORGIA
ENCYCLOPEDIA**Randolph County**

Randolph County, in southwest Georgia, was created from Lee County by an act of the state legislature on December 20, 1828. Georgia's seventy-fifth county was named for Virginia congressman John Randolph (1773-1833) of Roanoke, one of the more controversial statesmen of the early federal period. The land lottery of 1827 had opened the southwest Georgia lands to settlers, who continued to have troubles with the Native Americans until the Creek Indian War of 1836, part of which was fought on Randolph County soil.

Lumpkin served as the county seat until 1830, when it became the county seat for Stewart County, which was formed from Randolph. Cuthbert was named Randolph's county seat by an act of the legislature in 1831.

Agriculture became the mainstay of the region. By 1850 the population of Randolph County totaled 12,868. During this decade two colleges, Baptist Female College (1852) and the United Methodist-affiliated Andrew Female College (1854), later as Andrew College, were established. By 1859 the railroad had come to Randolph County, opening the doors for better transportation and quicker trade.

Some minor skirmishes occurred in Randolph County during the Civil War (1861-65), but the region was spared much military action. Many refugees came to the area for protection. Both of the colleges were used as hospitals during the war years.

After the Civil War, Randolph County continued its educational reputation when Howard Normal School, established by the American Missionary Association, opened its doors to area African Americans in 1867. Richard R. Wright became the first black headmaster in 1876. During his four-year tenure, he organized the Georgia State Teacher's Association and edited the *Weekly Journal of Progress*. Fletcher Hamilton Henderson Sr. became the headmaster in 1880 and remained until 1942.

Henderson's son, bandleader Fletcher Hamilton Henderson Jr., was one of Cuthbert's most famous citizens. He received his education at Howard Normal School and eventually went to New York, where he signed with W. C. Handy's music firm. The band Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra served as the principal model for the Big Band style. The Fletcher Henderson Jazz Festival, held every April in Cuthbert, celebrates this innovative band leader and his legacy.

In the twentieth century Randolph County has been the home of two Georgia Supreme Court justices, Charles William Worrill and Jesse Groover Bowles Jr., as well as one U.S. congressman, Bryant T. Castellow. The county also produced two internationally known athletes—Roosevelt Grier, known as one of the "Fearsome Foursome" of the Los Angeles Rams football team in the 1960s, and Larry Holmes, who has held the World Boxing Council heavyweight title.

U.S. Highways 82 and 27 traverse Cuthbert, which is one of the few municipalities in the country with a water tower in the middle of a federal highway (U.S. 82). The Cuthbert Historic District boasts architectural styles spanning most of the county's history.

Randolph County, encompassing 429 square miles, has seen a decline in population since 1980, with 7,791 people (38.9 percent white, 59.5 percent black, and 1.2 percent Hispanic) according to the 2000 census. It is still a rural county, and the 2003 Farm Gate Value report shows that Randolph is the number-one wheat grower in the state, as well as the number-one sorghum grower. Peanuts, cotton, soybeans, and corn are also important crops for Randolph.

Suggested Reading

Iva P. Goolsby et al., comp., *Randolph County Georgia: A Compilation of Facts, Recollections, and Family Histories* ([Cuthbert, Ga.]: Randolph Historical Society, 1977).

Randolph County, Georgia, vol. 2 (Cuthbert, Ga.: Randolph Historical Society, 1997).

Annette McDonald Suarez, *A Source Book on the Early History of Cuthbert and Randolph County, Georgia* (Atlanta: Cherokee, 1982).

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