

DALLAS COUNTY  
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

# THE DALLAS COUNTY CHRONICLE

VOLUME 17, ISSUE 4

Fall 2018

## The Case of the Missing Community

### *Little Egypt and the History Detectives of Richland College*

**By Fred Durham**

Our story begins, like all good mysteries, with a series of seemingly unrelated facts, events, and people: a street curb, two professors, a shopping center, a phone book, and a chance encounter at a library.

Once, not so long ago, there was a black community, Little Egypt, which was founded by a former slave on thirty acres along Northwest Highway in what is now the Lake Highlands neighborhood of Dallas. For eighty years, Little Egypt existed, and then, in a single day in 1962, this community of about 200 people (many of whom were related) completely disappeared, seemingly leaving behind no trace of its existence.



Four former residents of Little Egypt. From left to right: Gloria McCoy, Joanne McCoy, Sandy McCoy, Jr., and Jerry McCoy.

Clive Siegle, a history professor at Richland College, lives only a few doors west of where Little Egypt once stood, but, until recently, he had no idea that it had ever been there. As long as he could remember, the property near his home had been a shopping center.

One day, while mowing his lawn and casually looking up the slope toward the shopping center, he noticed a difference between the curb and the streets around the shopping center and the rest of the neighborhood.

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He began wondering what used to be there before the shopping center. He knew one person who had lived in that neighborhood longer than anyone else and went to see him.

The man told him he remembered it well. "Oh, it was a black community. They all moved out on the same day back in the early sixties. It was called Little Egypt. We didn't go up that way much."



Little Egypt on its last day in 1962.

See **Little Egypt** on page 3

# The Dallas Black Dance Theatre

## *Where Art, History, and Community Meet*



There is no better example of how art can be intertwined with history and community than the Dallas Black Dance Theatre (DBDT). Founded by Ann Williams, a graduate of both Prairie View A&M and Texas Woman's University (she was the first African American to earn a Master's degree in Dance Related Arts at TWU) and a Kennedy Center Honoree, the DBDT was created to fulfill Williams' goal of wanting to inspire minority children to see themselves as professional dancers.

Since 1976, DBDT has sought to produce and promote dance that bridges cultures and reaches audiences and potential dancers that might not ordinarily have had this opportunity. During this time, DBDT has performed for 4 million arts patrons and 2.6 million children in five continents, fifteen countries, and thirty-one states, and each week, its Academy trains about 550 students in year-round classes. In doing so, DBDT has become the oldest, continuously operating professional dance company in Dallas and the fourth-largest black dance company in the U.S.

Its performances and classes feature a variety of traditional dance styles and techniques, like ballet and jazz, as well as African dances, hip hop, and stepping that reflect the organization's African American origins.

In 2008, DBDT's tie to history was further strengthened when the building that had originally been the Moorland YMCA became the permanent home for DBDT's rehearsal studios, training classrooms, and administrative offices. Moving to the Moorland YMCA was particularly symbolic and poignant as the Moorland YMCA had been the first "Y" constructed in the southwest for African Americans, and in a city that once offered few places outside of church for blacks to congregate, the Moorland YMCA was where Dallas African Americans could gather and socialize—it was where proms were held, clubs and organizations met, and school basketball games were played.



The DBDT's present home was once the Moorland YMCA, the social center for many of Dallas' African Americans.



Dallas Black Dance Theatre founder Ann Williams. (photo courtesy of Brian Guillax)

A November 8 review of a recent performance praised the DBDT, saying that it "continues to astound audiences with their athleticism, versatility, and rich content." With the foundation laid by the incomparable Ann Williams and the spirit of the Moorland YMCA behind it, nothing else would have been expected.

## Aldredge House Takes on Another New Role

**by Henry Tatum**

Just as it has once before, the Aldredge House in Old East Dallas is at the forefront of something new. Over forty years ago, the two-story mansion that was built in 1917 served as the flagship of a bold movement to save one of Dallas' most historic neighborhoods and helped bring about an appreciation for historic preservation in Dallas.

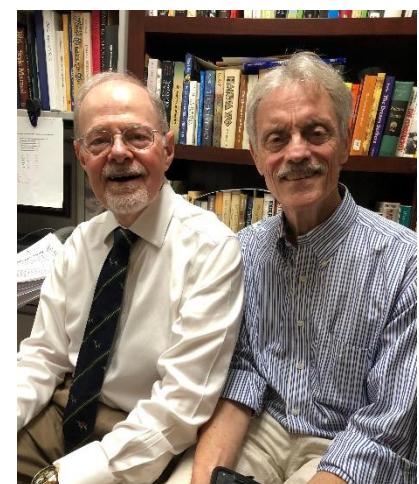
Out of this effort came the Swiss Avenue Historic District, the city's first historic district, which was created in 1973 to stabilize and preserve a neighborhood that had the



## Little Egypt (continued from page 1)

This fascinated Siegle, and he began looking into this community further. Soon, he was joined by Tim Sullivan, an anthropology professor at Richland with whom he frequently collaborated. The two, who always seek to have their classes discover what was happening “in this very place, at the time we are studying,” quickly decided to involve their students in what became known as The Little Egypt Project.

This team of detectives first discovered, through records and stunning aerial photographs, the existence of Little Egypt and the bare facts of its birth, life, and demise. They learned that, in 1961, a developer had approached the community and had offered to buy it on the condition that every member of the community had to agree to sell. While, in most other instances, it would have been impossible to have such unanimity, in Little Egypt, perhaps because of the family relationships, it was possible to do so, and on May 15, 1962, a fleet of thirty-seven moving vans, accompanied by a group of bulldozers, arrived to move everyone and everything. By the end of the day, there was nothing left in the community—including the community itself.



Two of Richland's chief history detectives: Clive Siegle and Tim Sullivan (left to right).



Additional photos from the last day of Little Egypt.

But larger questions still remained: Who were the community's residents? What was life like for them during the years the community existed?

The key to answering these questions turned out to be the church—Egypt Chapel Baptist Church—that once had served the community and is thought to have given the community its name. When the bulldozers came in 1962, the church moved and subsequently relocated to southern Dallas. Using an old-fashioned information source—the yellow pages—they discovered the church still existed, and through its pastor, that at least one person from Little Egypt, Jerry McCoy, was still a member.



The community's Egypt Chapel Baptist Church at its original location in 1962.

McCoy, who was a teenager living in Little Egypt when everyone moved away, was more than willing to meet with the student researchers. When the students arrived, armed with cameras and recorders, they discovered he had invited his brothers and sisters, and all were eager to share their stories, photographs, names, and contacts. They even sat down and recreated a map of the community, remembering who lived where and what each structure was. Their help was so critical to understanding and learning about the community that Siegle calls the McCoys “the Rosetta Stone” for Little Egypt.

From these discussions, it was also discovered that the only property remaining from Little Egypt that had never been redeveloped was where the McCoy house had actually stood. With permission from its current owners and guidance from the McCoys, Sullivan and his class were able to begin archaeological work on the site. To date, they believe they have located the house's front porch, a smokehouse, the outhouse, and a chicken coop. Their goal is to create a virtual 3D reconstruction of the McCoy house and property.

Another discovery came when Siegle was giving a program on Little Egypt one night at the Audelia Road Public Library. Someone there mentioned they had lived in the area next to Little Egypt and that they remembered the day the community moved away and the buildings were demolished. In fact, she said, her parents had taken home movies of that day. Did the film still exist?

“Yes,” she said. Her sister in Illinois had it.

The sister was more than willing to allow it to be digitalized, and these two minutes of the most remarkable images of the people and structures of Little Egypt on its very last day are now at the center of an effort to create a museum display that will reanimate the life and heritage of this community.

And while the mystery of the missing community has been solved, the story nevertheless continues. With the help of Dallas City Councilman Adam McGough, a Texas historical marker for Little Egypt has been approved, and once it is installed, a community that most never knew about will be permanently commemorated.

## Aldredge House (continued from page 2)

city's first paved street and where the city's wealthiest residents had lived in the early 1900s. The success of this district and the realization that preserving the past has great value in a variety of ways has since led to the city creating twenty other historic districts.

A critical key to this success was The Aldredge House which was given to the Dallas County Medical Society Alliance (DCMSA) in 1973 by Rena Munger Aldredge. The home's subsequent restoration clearly demonstrated to the public the benefits of preserving both an historic home and an entire neighborhood.



Today, the 101-year-old home at 5500 Swiss Avenue has a renewed focus on promoting historic preservation in a city that is still sometimes too quick to take down the old and replace it with the new. With the city council's approval of new zoning for the home earlier this year, The Aldredge House continues to serve as the headquarters for the DCMSA and its foundation, and it is now also a place for educational programs, community engagement, and house tours.

The Friends of Aldredge House, a nonprofit organization created a year ago, provides financial

security and ongoing operational support for the home. It has already sponsored a number of guest lectures and special events aimed at generating public interest in the earlier days of Dallas and the importance of preservation. It has held seminars on architect Hal Thomson (who designed the Aldredge House and many other of Dallas' finest homes), it has conducted a holiday season Lantern Walk showing how Christmas and Hanukkah were celebrated on Swiss Avenue, and it has held a complete afternoon tea for guests.

The Aldredge House is now open from 10 a.m. until noon on the first Saturday of each month so that visitors can see the beautifully maintained interior of the home.

The Aldredge House has been an important part of the East Dallas community and will be even more so as the city's first official house museum where the public can reflect on the historic significance of the Swiss Avenue area, its vibrant past, and the proud history of Dallas.

*People who would like to become a member of the Friends of Aldredge House or learn more about the organization and its upcoming events can do so by going to [www.friendsofafaldredgehouse.org](http://www.friendsofafaldredgehouse.org).*

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## The Only One: Baseball Coach Pete Lawless

**By Elizabeth Lawless**

Despite Dallas' long-standing relationship with baseball—Ernie Banks was born here, the largest crowd ever to see a minor league baseball game (53,578) occurred in the Cotton Bowl, the Dallas Eagles were the first team in the Texas League to integrate, and through the years, thousands of local boys (and girls) have pretended to be either Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, Ken Griffey, Jr. or Big Papi—there is still only one Dallas high school—and thus, only one high school baseball coach—to have won a state baseball championship and that coach is Pete Lawless, of W.W. Samuell High School.



Pete Lawless, the only DISD baseball coach to win a state championship.

"Bulldog" Lawless was born in Alabama in 1921, one of eight children. He was a star high school athlete in three sports—baseball (of course), basketball, and football—in Tarrant City, which is located just outside of Birmingham. After serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps, he attended North Texas State University and played football, but he was much more than just an athlete as he received first a Bachelor of Science degree and then a Master's degree in Education.

# A Look into Irving's Past

## The Sowers Cemetery

If you know how to ask, cemeteries have long-held the answers to many questions about a community's past. They can tell you when the community began, when it grew, how long its residents lived, and what nationality they were. They can tell you whether a sickness or a calamity may have befallen the community and what organizations its residents may have belonged to.

The picturesque Sowers Cemetery, which predates what eventually became the City of Irving by over thirty years, is no exception.

Edmund D. Sowers arrived in Texas in 1856 from Illinois, claiming 32 acres of land near present-day Pioneer Drive and Beltline Road and just west of where the Sowers Cemetery is today. He began establishing a settlement that soon included a general store.

It is generally thought that the first internment in the cemetery was around 1868 and involved an unknown woman and daughter who were buried on land originally owned by either S. S. Connor or Sevier Smalley. Over the next sixty years, the cemetery, along with the Sowers settlement itself, expanded incrementally. In 1874, Sowers donated adjacent property for the cemetery as well as for a school and a church.

By 1884, the Sowers community had a population of seventy-five and several businesses, including a doctor, a blacksmith, a druggist, and two gristmill-cotton gins. In 1899, Sowers provided additional acreage for the cemetery, and in 1905, the community had 121 residents. In 1926, Otis Brown, who was one of the founders of Irving (which was established in 1903 and which eventually surrounded the Sowers community), donated the eastern-most portion of the cemetery.

See **SOWERS CEMETERY** on page 6



## The Only One (continued from page 4)

Coach Lawless began his teaching career in 1954 at Pleasant Grove High School and then moved to Samuell the next year when that school opened. For the next 29 years, Samuel was his home as he taught history and health and coached junior varsity football, but it was as Samuell's baseball coach that Lawless is best remembered.

His baseball teams won numerous zone championships along the way, but in 1965, Samuell won the biggest—the state championship—and at the largest UIL classification, too--and it continues to be the Dallas Independent School District's only state baseball championship. Fifty years later, the players from that team still remark about "how he was thinking all of the time" and about how they were able to build such chemistry under him. They also talk about how they were "blessed" to have had Coach Lawless put in their path.

Coach Lawless retired from DISD in 1984. For the next fourteen years, he and his wife operated a Christian bookstore that was ironically on the site of the original Pleasant Grove High School and just a couple of blocks from Pleasant Grove Stadium and the Pleasant Grove Baseball Complex.

He died in 2001 at the age of 80. In recognition for the hundreds of lives that he touched as either a coach or a teacher, the DISD School Board, in 2013, formally named the Samuell baseball complex the "Coach James 'Pete' Lawless Field."

As DISD official Israel Cordero noted, "When I was a coach here at Samuell, we used to talk about what records this building had, and it wouldn't be long before talk about Coach Lawless and that state championship team would start circulating. What Coach Lawless did for all those students still circulates in the halls of the school."



*The name on the scoreboard says it all.*

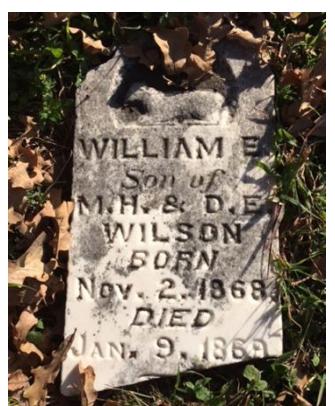
## Sowers Cemetery (continued from page 5)

After Brown's donation, the Sowers community continued for another thirty years until 1956 when it formally became a part of Irving. At that time, the community only had a population of thirty.

Although the Sowers community no longer exists, the Sowers Cemetery continues to tell us much about the people who once lived in the area. We get a sobering reminder of how high the infant mortality rate once was. There are dozens of graves of children who died either within days of being born or before their first birthday. There are also a number of graves of women who died in their thirties, presumably because of child birth complications. It is also especially sobering because this did not necessarily happen in the days of when the community was still "on the prairie." One sees these unfortunate deaths occurring up until about 1940, and we see how they sometimes occurred several times within a family and across generations.

We see how central this cemetery and surrounding area once were. We see the graves of people—Baron, Britain, DeHaes, Gilbert, Story, Herring, Toler, Farine, Irby, and Lively—who have had nearby schools, streets, and parks named after them. We see that even though the Sowers community only had about 100 residents during the 1920s and 1930s and Irving had a population of only about 350-700, there were still over 130 burials that took place during 1926-1940.

We see that people joined organizations like the Masons and the Woodmen, and we see that residents served during World War I, World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam.



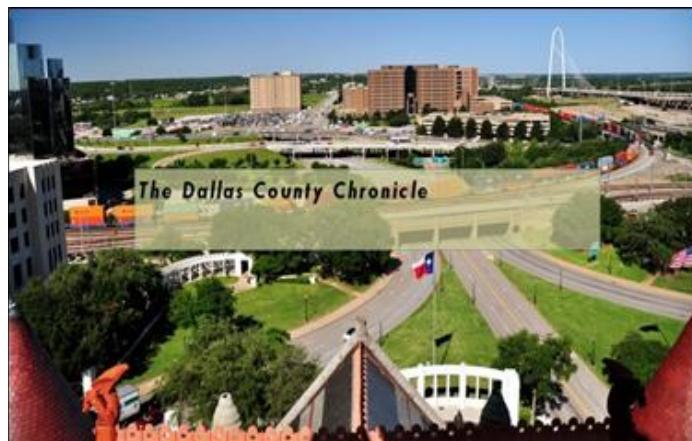
*One of the earliest burials in the cemetery. Also an example of how high the infant mortality rate once was.*



*The 1908 burial of a member of the Woodmen of the World.*

We see how this Norman Rockwell-looking cemetery, with its modest entry sign, its wrought iron fencing, neatly maintained grounds, and flowing flag, continues to have a strong presence. There are now about 1300 graves in the cemetery, and according to Gerald Farris of the Sowers Cemetery Association, there are still about one-to-three burials a year.

It is also not surprising, given the role of the cemetery in the Irving area's past, that in 1973 it became the subject of the first Texas Historical Marker to be placed in the city, and with the care that is being provided by the Sowers Cemetery Association, it is clear that the opportunity to look back into this past and to find answers will continue.



**The Dallas County Chronicle** is the official newsletter of the Dallas County Historical Commission.

The Historical Commission serves as the primary advisory body on historic preservation matters for the County.

Its meetings are open to the public and are typically held on the second Thursday of every month at 11:30 a.m. For more information about the Commission and its meetings, please call 214.653.7601.