

Long Forgotten Locals

Most Oxford residents are familiar with names like Lamar, Faulkner and Manning. But others we encounter daily without knowing much about the actual person. *Invitation Oxford* selected a few well-known names from around town in order to learn more about the lives they led.

illustrated by Kenneth Franklin photographed by Joe Worthem

Who was Molly Barr?

by Emily Grace Ames

The little cabin where Molly Barr once lived is hidden from view, empty now. Its red tin roof sags in the middle, the boards hang crooked on the front. There's a rusted washtub in the weeds and a chain on the door. There's no sign of the woman who once lived there, all the evidence now showing clearly that she no longer does.

But, several yards away, there is a green sign with her name on it. Molly Barr Road, which runs out front, is full of a steady stream of traffic. And in the space between these two facts – a woman who faded from memory, and a well-traveled street that appeared – is the story of Molly Barr.

She was born to Edward Barr and Rachel Mays Dec. 27, 1878, according to her headstone (although other sources list her birth year as 1882). Her aunt Caroline "Callie" Barr was William Faulkner's caretaker, and Callie would sometimes bring the Faulkner boys to visit and play at Molly's place. But Barr was famous in Oxford in her own right. She was a midwife and did domestic work for local families.

By being frugal with her finances, she saved money to purchase land over time. Barr owned several acres off what is now Molly Barr Road, near what today is the Airport at Ole Miss.

According to Judith L. Senisbar's book, *Faulkner and Love*, Molly Barr Road was built "to provide access to the Ole Miss Campus that avoided downtown traffic," and it bears Barr's name because it traverses much of the land she once owned.

In her backyard, Barr kept chickens, turkeys and a pigpen. She had colorful flowerbeds in front of the home and a front porch that welcomed those who stopped by. According to Sensibar's book, Barr also owned a juke joint, making her one of Oxford's few black businesswomen at that time. Her home was usually filled with family, friends and visitors in need of a warm bed and a hot meal. She often took people in off the streets and helped them get back on their feet. She held community-wide picnics at her home that included hogs, goats, fried chicken and all the fixings.

"We used to feed a lot of hobos back in the days," said her grandson, James Barr Jr. "When they heard that train coming down the tracks, you can count on them jumping back on the train. Everybody was welcome at my grandmama's house...it

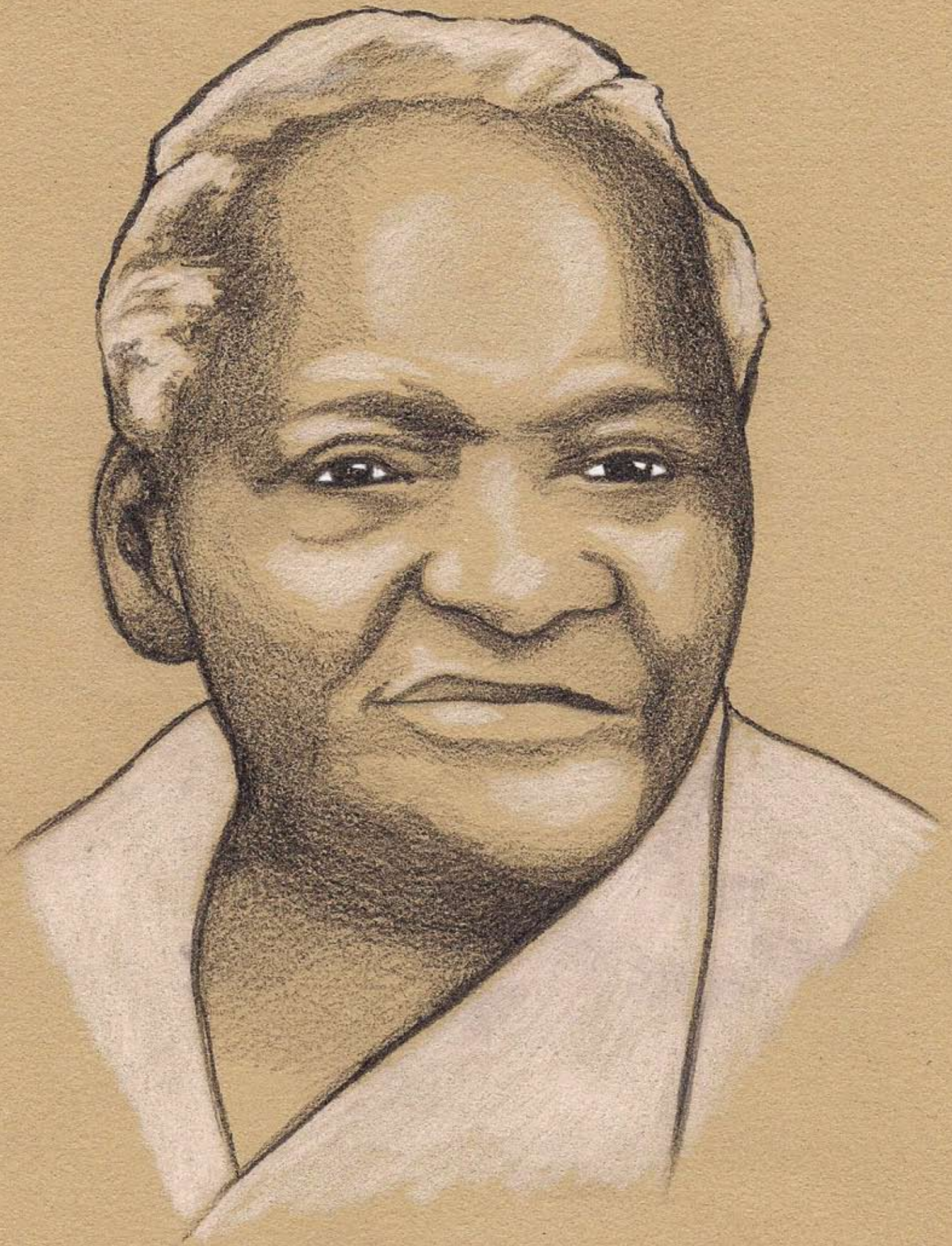


Molly Barr's house on Molly Barr Cove has been long abandoned, but was once a vibrant gathering place.



didn't matter what color you were."

She was diagnosed with diabetes, and by the end of her life both her legs and arms had been amputated. Despite being confined to a wheel chair, relatives praised her positive outlook and indomitable sense of humor. She died Aug. 31, 1965. Many of the people who knew her have died, too. Except to her family, Molly Barr isn't usually remembered as a person any longer. She's a road, one with open lots for still unbuilt houses, rows of trendy town homes and, on the railroad tracks that once brought the poor to her door, bike paths for students. Her old house is falling down, rusted and forgotten, but the sign with her name is bolted on tight.



MOLLY BARR

Sarah McGehee Isom: Nineteenth-Century Drama Queen

by Julie Cantrell

Born Sept. 25, 1854, Sarah “Sallie” Isom became the first female faculty member at the University of Mississippi. There, she taught elocution to some of the nation’s leading politicians and public speakers. However, her first love was theater. Most believe she would have been a Broadway star, had her parents not frowned upon the acting profession.

Red-headed Isom always had a flair for the dramatic. As a young girl, she was often found playing dress-up. Day after day, she would act out elaborate stories while portraying a broad range of colorful characters. Legend has it that Isom once put on all of her mother’s rings and hoisted herself up – bareback – onto her father’s horse. Wearing one of her mother’s long dresses, she led the horse around the countryside and pretended to be a queen.

All was well, until she landed in what some refer to as quicksand. In a panic, the horse threw Isom, and neither could free themselves from the pit. Luckily, two men were able to save her, but her mother’s jewels were lost forever in the deep mud.

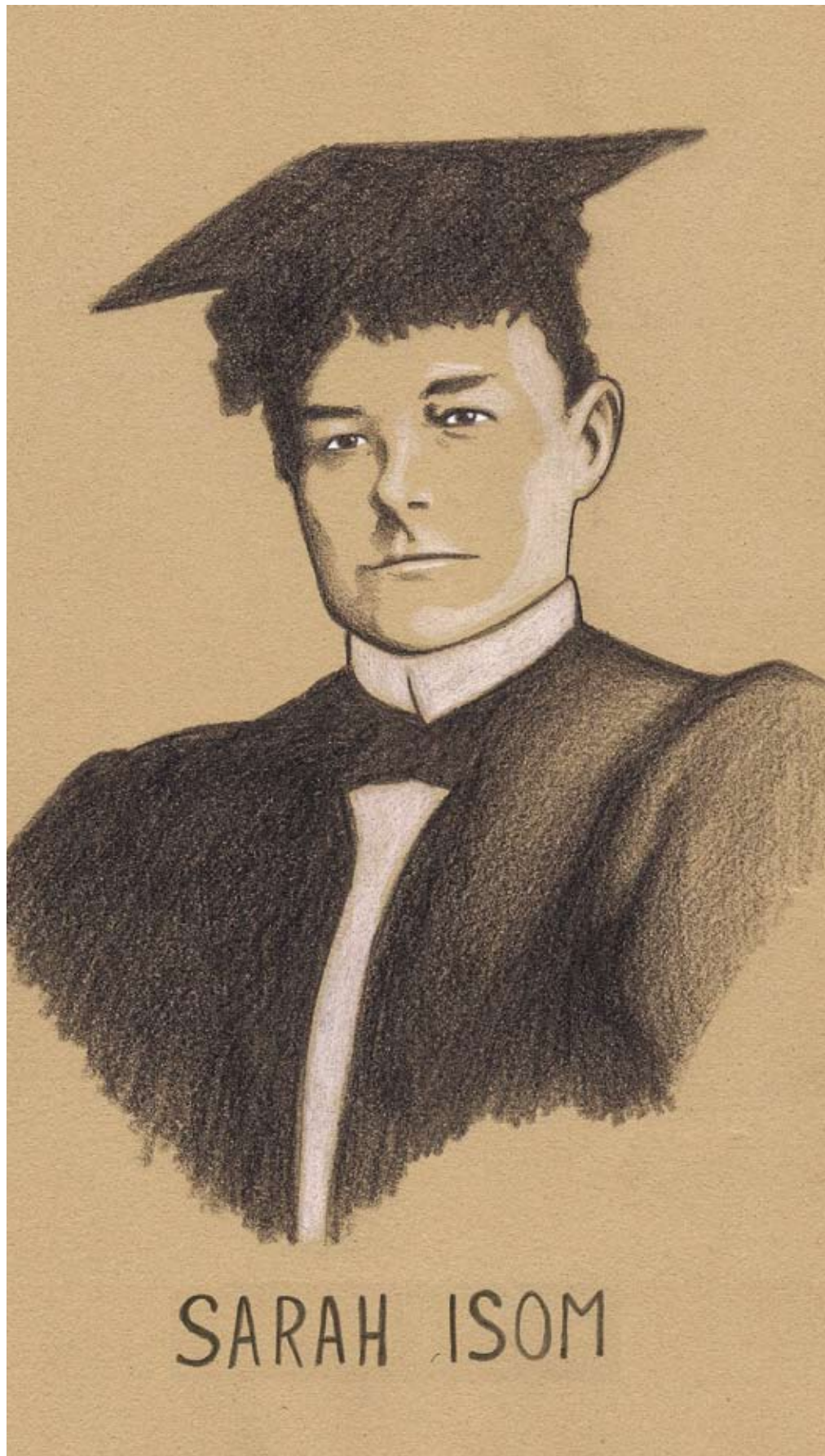
The troublesome adventure didn’t calm Isom’s creative spirit. In fact, her family learned to tune out the sounds of shouts coming from her bedroom as she took part in “vocal practice” each day. This led to yet another predicament when a large wardrobe turned over, pinning the child underneath.

Despite Isom’s crying and banging on the floor, her sister continued sewing in the room below. Supposedly she remarked that Isom was doing well that day; she had never heard her “sound more natural.”

In the end, these vocal talents landed Isom a coveted position among her male counterparts, teaching the oratory arts. One of her most famous students, Stark Young, went on to become a renowned theater critic and author in the early 1900s (*So Red the Rose*). He reportedly said Isom was an outstanding instructor, at least to her male students, but admits she gave little effort toward the females in her classes, saying they would “never amount to anything, for they would only marry and be wives.”

As an adult, Isom’s closest companion is said to have been her maid. “Together,” said local historian Jack Mayfield, “the two would enjoy long drives in the country, where Sallie supposedly spent time meditating and smoking cigars.”

Today, the university has dedicated a building to Sarah Isom, and her family’s home, now the Barksdale Reading Institute on Jefferson Avenue, was awarded a place on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980.



W.S. Neilson: A Pioneer with Pizzazz

by Julie Cantrell

Here's what everyone wants to know: Is it "Nelson" or "Neilson"? Well, the family's name was originally pronounced "Neilson," as it is spelled. However, locals have mispronounced the name so frequently since the store was formed in the 1830s, the altered pronunciation has taken preference. The family didn't seem to mind. In fact, it's said that years later, when a radio advertisement announced the name correctly, locals protested so voraciously that the ad was pulled.

If there's one thing the Neilson family was good at, it was flexibility. And as anyone can tell you, the sign of a true leader is the ability to adjust. Perhaps that's why Neilson's has thrived as the South's oldest department store, surviving – against all odds – both the Civil War and the Great Depression.

William S. Neilson first arrived in Oxford in 1839. As the Chickasaw were experiencing forced relocation to Oklahoma, Neilson built a log cabin on the current Oxford Square and opened a store. There, he provided everything pioneers could possibly need as they migrated to these undeveloped lands.

Neilson's became the source for groceries, hardware, clothing, pharmaceuticals, even coffins. With business savvy and honest principals, the Neilson family enjoyed tremendous success and became a well-respected family in the community.

Years later, when Grant's army occupied Oxford in December of 1862, Union officers were quartered in the Neilson home (a stately mansion on South 11th Street that still stands today). Mrs. Neilson's journal reports the Union troops stayed in tents on the property, destroying fences to use as firewood and raiding the family's supplies. It is said that Neilson, a progressive thinker, predicted the dangers with the war and converted his money to gold. His wife then encouraged him to bury it in her garden.

While most families in town were robbed of everything and Confederate money became worthless, Neilson was able to uncover his gold and carry on after the war. Although Union troops burned the store, Neilson rebuilt the shop and opened quickly to conduct business as usual.

After working his way up through the company, Will Lewis Sr. became a partner in 1930 – nearly 100 years after the store was founded. That partnership proved to be a positive one, as the Lewis family continues to own and operate the store today. Years later, the Lewis family even purchased the original Neilson house and still calls it home.



Della Reed Davidson: An Educator Who Defined Excellence

by Julie Cantrell

When Della Davidson was 4 years old, she begged her mother to let her attend school. She had to walk four miles each direction, but that didn't stop the determined young Davidson from getting an education. She enjoyed school immensely and, by the age of 7, she was certain she would dedicate her life to helping others do the same.

Attending college was not a guarantee for Davidson. Financial limitations made it impossible for her to enroll after high school, but after a year of working to save money, she was able to enroll at Rust College in Holly Springs, Miss., where she graduated with an English degree in 1937.

That year, she began her career as a teacher in Oxford. The elementary school building had burned, so she managed her students in Burns United Methodist Church for two years until the Oxford Training School was constructed (currently named Oxford Middle School). A well-respected teacher in the classroom, Davidson was admired by students, teachers and administrators. She soon became assistant principal of Johnson-Peterson Elementary School where she served as a dedicated leader for the families in her community.

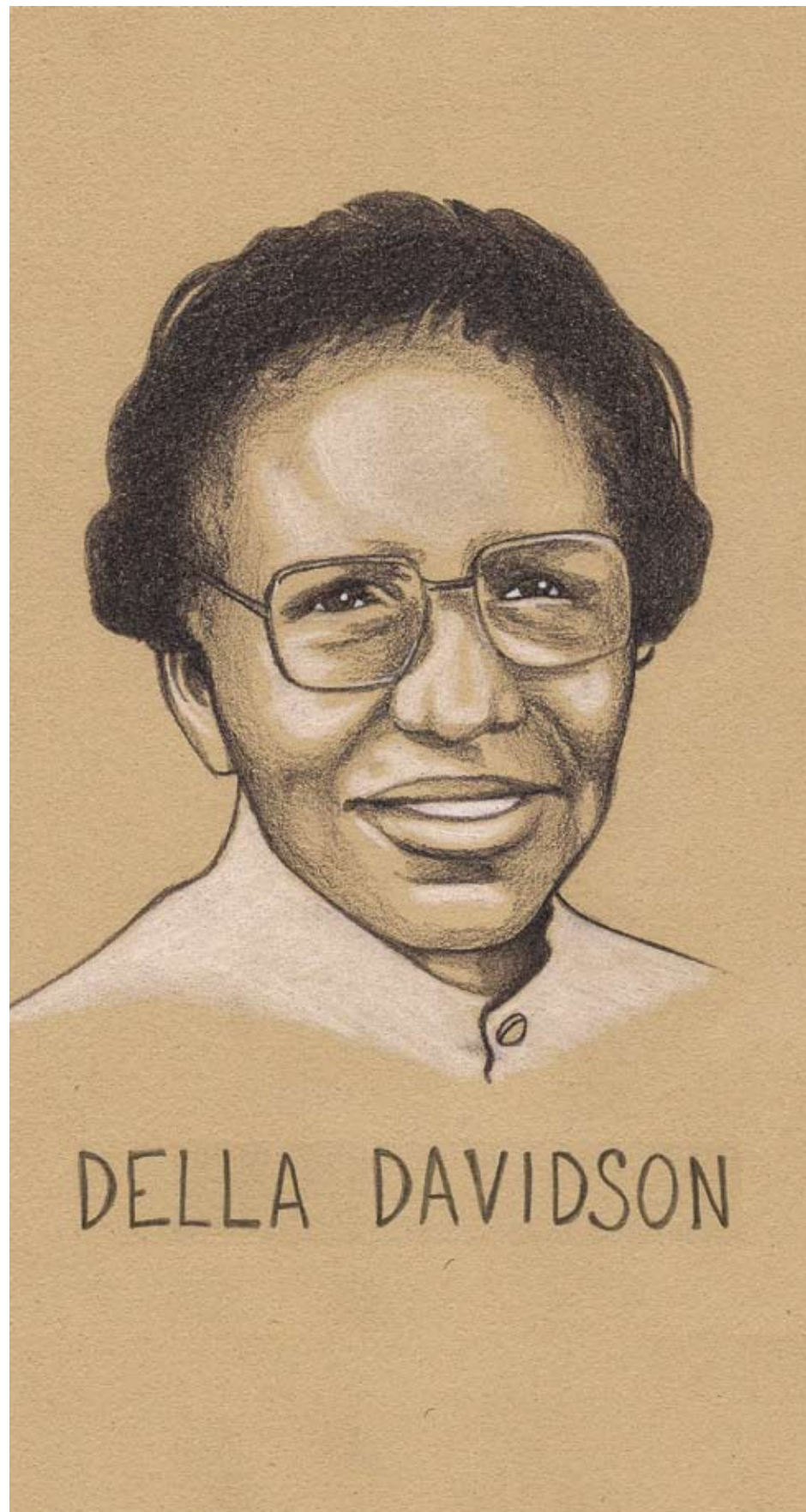
It is said that Davidson's favorite quote was, "One never stands taller than when one stoops to help a child." That might be the best way to sum up her lifelong commitment to education.

After integration of Oxford schools, Davidson was appointed to the role of assistant principal for Oxford Elementary School in 1970. She worked in that position until 1980. At that time, she was asked to serve both Bramlett Elementary and Oxford Elementary as assistant principal until being named principal of Bramlett in 1981. She remained at that post until she retired two years later, saying later about her retirement: "My years said I must retire. If I could, I would repeat the whole thing. I wasn't tired."

One educator said, "Della Davidson had chalk in her veins and compassion in her soul." Perhaps that compassion is what led her to give even more to the Oxford community by becoming president of the Oxford Economic Development Association (OEDA), an active volunteer with The Pantry, a director of the school chorus and a Tri-Hi-Y leader, as well as a devoted member of Burns United Methodist Church whose Family Life Center was named for her. She also served as editor of *Soul Force* magazine, which she affectionately called "The Paper."

It is said that Davidson continued to serve her community until the time of her death in 1996, when she organized the OEDA Children's Christmas Tree program from her hospital bed.

Although Davidson has not worked in Oxford schools since the 1980s, her legacy continues today. The newest elementary school building, which currently houses fourth and fifth grade classrooms, was named in her honor, and she played a part in the establishment of the local Head Start program which serves hundreds of families each year.



Toby Tubby: The Last of the Chickasaw Chiefs in Lafayette County

by Julie Cantrell

Long before Oxford became known for literature and the Grove, the Chickasaw called this area home. After the Treaty of Pontotoc, many were forced to relocate to the Oklahoma territory. Some, however, accepted designated sections of land assigned by the government and never left this region.

One such man was a Chickasaw chief named Toby Tubby. He was well-known by pioneering families in the area and respected as a fair businessman. He not only sold horses and served as a liaison between the newcomers and the Chickasaw, he also operated a ferry across the river that is now covered by Sardis Lake.

Toby Tubby played a major role in the development of Lafayette County and supposedly helped negotiate major business transactions that enabled the county to prosper under new leadership. Unfortunately, he was stabbed by an intoxicated patron at a bar one night while making a trip to Holly Springs. Legend says he was able to make it to the north side of the Tallahatchie River (now dammed to form Sardis Lake), where he found help at the home of Samuel S. Rayburn.

Despite the family's best efforts to save him, the chief died in their house in 1835. He left behind three wives who gradually sold portions of the property to various farmers and developers.

Some historians have recorded an interesting tale about his funeral. Supposedly, it was an older Chickasaw custom to bury a person with valuables. Many say a significant amount of gold and silver was buried with the chief.

Based on local folklore, a treasure hunter arrived years later to find the stash. After promising significant rewards to anyone who helped her, the treasure hunter left in the dead of night with the treasure and never paid the locals who worked to uncover it. Others say, however, the event never happened and the treasure remains buried today.

A few locals claim to know the location of the chief's burial mound which is thought to be somewhere under Sardis Lake. As of today, the mystery continues.

No known photographs of Toby Tubby exist, so this rendering was imagined by the artist, who worked with the Chickasaw Nation Headquarters to accurately depict a Chickasaw chief from the time period.

