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# Five years after book, author learns more

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Posted: Thursday, January 24, 2008 12:00 am

Lynn Hotaling

Five years after book, author learns more

An interesting letter sent a couple of months ago sheds new light on a book covered in this space exactly five years ago this week.

In that Jan. 23, 2003, column, the topic was "Presumed Dead," a first novel by Oconee, S.C., native Howard Alley, great-nephew of legendary southern Jackson County Judge Felix Alley. The book weaves family lore, history and conjecture to tell the story of Cornelia Norton, a young girl who disappeared from Whiteside Cove during the often violent aftermath of the Civil War.

Alley, a retired airplane design engineer who divides his time between Roswell, Ga., and a cabin in the shadow of Whiteside Mountain, wrote in November to relate two interesting occurrences that provided new information with regard to the two family stories he used as the basis for his novel – the mystery of Cornelia and a true story of the post-war raid on his great-grandfather Col. John Alley's Whiteside Cove farm by the infamous Col. George Kirk. Alley heard both tales from his father, another John Alley, who was in his teens when his grandfather died and remembered the colonel well.

To summarize, Kirk and his men were prepared to hang Col. Alley and would have done so except for the intervention of one of Kirk's men, a former Union soldier who had served under Col. Alley during the Mexican War.

"The soldier cut the rope from my great-grandfather's neck," Alley said. "He told the others that the colonel had saved his life during the Mexican War and now he would save the colonel's life."

According to "The History of Jackson County," Col. Alley subsequently organized a group of local men who pursued the raiders, caught up with them, and hanged three. Kirk, however, escaped, and, in Alley's book, the young soldier who had saved his great-grandfather's life is wounded.

Cornelia is enlisted to help care for the young man, but anti-Union feelings are still so prevalent that his existence must be kept secret. Cornelia subsequently falls in love with the young soldier and leaves with him when he's able to travel.

At the time, however, none of her relatives were aware of that; as far as they knew, Cornelia simply vanished one night. Though her body was never found, her family believed she was attacked by a wild animal.

"My dad died in 1971 still believing his aunt had been killed by a panther," Alley said.

As he was doing research for his book, Alley consulted family records that included the births, marriages and deaths of all of Roderick Norton's children, except for his youngest daughter, Cornelia. Only a birth date was listed by her name.

Sylva, NC

## Current Conditions

FOG Overcast Humidity: 99%  
63° Winds: at 0mph  
Feels Like: 63°

## Your Extended Forecast

Today High 85°/Low 62° A few clouds	Tomorrow High 8 Aftern thunde
Wednesday High 86°/Low 62° More sun than clouds	Thursday High 8 A few

7 Day Forecast

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July 14 at 10:16am

The band Ol' Dirty Bathtub will perf at Concerts on the Creek at Bridge Park in Sylva from 7-9 p.m. today (Friday, July 14).

From left are band members Brad Boulet, Neil Lippard, Adam Bigelov

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Alley learned that his great-aunt had survived in 1995 when one of his Whiteside Cove cousins received a letter from a descendant of Cornelia's who lived in Tennessee. That information inspired the book's love story between Cornelia and the young soldier.

Once the book came out, however, one of Alley's readers did some online research and found information that solved the mystery of Cornelia once and for all.

"She wound up in Knox County, Tenn., pregnant, as I suspected, and married to Dr. S.K. Garrett. Together the two produced four more children whose names, dates of births and deaths were given, including the date of Cornelia's death in 1925. I have no idea who could have put the information on the Internet," Alley writes in his Nov. 30 letter.

Alley also shared information about a new friend he's made as a result of his book.

"A lady from Illinois called me and asked me to please not hang up on her when she identified herself," Alley writes. "I assured her that I never hang up on a lady, and she then informed me that she was a great-great-granddaughter of Col. George W. Kirk."

The Kirk descendant is Joey Woolridge, who writes for a newspaper in Clinton, Ill., Alley said during a phone conversation on Tuesday. Woolridge and Alley have yet to meet, but they correspond, and Woolridge has sent copies of photos of Col. Kirk. One of those even shows Kirk brandishing the rifle and sword Alley describes in his book.

Woolridge told Alley that her grandfather had been so shaken by his post-war experiences that he had moved to California where he continued to be plagued by nightmares about the ambush organized by Col. Alley.

According to Alley, he has invited Woolridge to visit him in Whiteside Cove and she has accepted, but that encounter hasn't taken place yet due to her newspaper job.

"I'll show her the very house at which her ancestor almost hanged mine," he said.

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Posted in Ruralite Cafe - Lynn Hotaling on Thursday, January 24, 2008 12:00 am.

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