

CONNECTIONS

Would you believe that Jefferson County history can connect a death in Hobbs Mill Pond with the Rough Riders and the first prison riot in Oklahoma history? Well, one Mt. Vernon family's story can "do the trick."

In 1937 L. L. Emerson wanted to construct a new building on the northeast corner of 9th and Harrison. When the workers began digging a foundation, they found evidence of an old pond. Older residents remembered it well. It was the pond for Hobbs Mill. Thomas "Uncle Tommy" Hobbs had established the mill there about 1865 when he returned from the Civil War. It was a fixture in Mt. Vernon for many years. Hobbs died in 1897 and the mill burned in the early 1900s.

One story about the old mill pond remained fairly fresh in people's minds because one of Mt. Vernon's best-known citizens had written about it in his newspaper column. John A. Wall (the author of *Wall's History of Jefferson County*) had a column called "Unowho" in the *Mt. Vernon Register* in the early 1900s.

In the late 1860s a man named Major William Allen Thomas (born 1818) drowned in the Hobbs Mill Pond. His body was found by John A. Wall. Thomas came to Jefferson County in the early 1840s and one of his sons, John Robert Thomas was born in Mt. Vernon in 1846. "Bob" Thomas attended the local schools and then moved to Princeton, Indiana, where he attended Hunter Collegiate Institute. When the Civil War began, he joined the One Hundred and Twentieth Indiana Infantry.

After the war, Bob Thomas returned to Illinois, studied law, and became the State's attorney of Metropolis from 1871 to 1874. He was elected to the U.S. Congress as a Republican and served from 1879 to 1889. Then he moved to Muskogee, Oklahoma, and practiced law until President McKinley appointed him to be the U.S. judge in the Indian Territory of Oklahoma in 1897.

When the Spanish American War began in 1898, Theodore Roosevelt—also a Republican—asked "Bob" Thomas to recruit volunteers for the Rough Riders. One of his recruits was his son, John R. Thomas, Jr. (born 1876 in Metropolis). He was seriously wounded at Las Cuasimas, Cuba, and—along with Roosevelt and the other Rough Riders—became quite famous as a hero. Of his wound he said: "I have been asked a hundred times how it feels to get shot. Why, it doesn't hurt much at first. The bullet drilled a clean hole right through my shin bone, tearing a good-sized wound as it came out through the flesh."

On April 5, 1905, John Robert Thomas (the father) was on a committee to receive President Roosevelt at Muskogee, Oklahoma, where a reunion of the Rough Riders was to take place. Of course Judge Thomas reminded the president that his son, John Robert, Jr., was one of the Rough Riders. You can imagine that Judge Thomas also mentioned to the President that his train had gone through the judge's home town of Mt. Vernon, Illinois, on the previous day (April 4, 1905).

On January 19, 1914, Judge Thomas was visiting the state penitentiary at McAlester, Oklahoma, when three prisoners made the first-ever escape attempt at the institution, which was opened in 1908.

They stole a gun and became involved in a gun battle with an officer named Herman Drover, who was killed near his office. Hearing the gunfight, Deputy David Oates, who was conferring with Judge Thomas and others in his office, came out into the hall and engaged the three prisoners.

When Oates ran down the hall for more guns and ammunition, the convicts burst into the office where they killed Sergeant Fred Godfrey and Judge Thomas. They took stenographer Mary Foster and parole officer Frank Rice hostage. Upon moving back into the hall the escapees were confronted by Oates who had retrieved a shotgun. Oates ordered convict Tom Lane to drop his gun, but Lane shot and killed the warden. The three prisoners escaped, freed their hostages, but were killed later on a ridge overlooking a nearby road. So Judge Thomas from Mt. Vernon and six others were killed in this incident. Thomas was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Judge Thomas' son continued his military career and fought in France during World War I. By the end of the war he was a colonel; he received the Distinguished Service Medal. After the war he served as military attaché at London and Paris. When he died in 1933, he also was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Judge Thomas' daughter, Carolyn (Thomas) Foreman also was very well known. She wrote *Oklahoma Imprints*, which became the reference book for Oklahoma newspapers. Although she wrote many other books and articles about Oklahoma history, she is probably most famous for *Indians Abroad: 1493 – 1938*, a comprehensive history of Oklahoma Indians. She was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 1938 and died February 18, 1967.

Isn't it amazing how a family from a small town like Mt. Vernon can have an impact on so many important events? It also makes you wonder if John Robert Jr. and his sister Carolyn knew the story of their grandfather's death in Hobbs Mill Pond.

Sources

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