

A Killing on Ring Jaw Bluff

When the boll weevil and falling commodity prices threaten King Cotton, just how far will a prominent Sandersville businessman go to protect his "empire"?

WILLIAM RAWLINGS

A visitor standing on the front lawn of the Methodist Church in the east-central Georgia town of Sandersville in late February 1925 might have thought this a prosperous community, one with both a distinguished history and a bright future. The church, crafted of red brick with white marble accents and a suitable number of stained glass windows, faced the main east-west highway, appropriately named Church Street, but as yet unpaved. Directly across the street stood a simple, white frame house on whose porch the body of a dead Yankee soldier had lain, killed in a skirmish during Sherman's March to the Sea in November 1864.

A few hundred feet to the west of the church, a small forest of white marble monuments sprouted from the Old City Cemetery, their sheer quantity and ornateness confirming the fact that Sandersville had produced a significant number of citizens who felt their wealth should be on display long after having shed their mortal coils. Just inside the cemetery entrance that faced the church, two family plots lay on either side of the wagon path. To the left, Rawlings. To the right, Tarbutton. A freshly covered grave in the Tarbutton plot awaited its permanent tombstone.

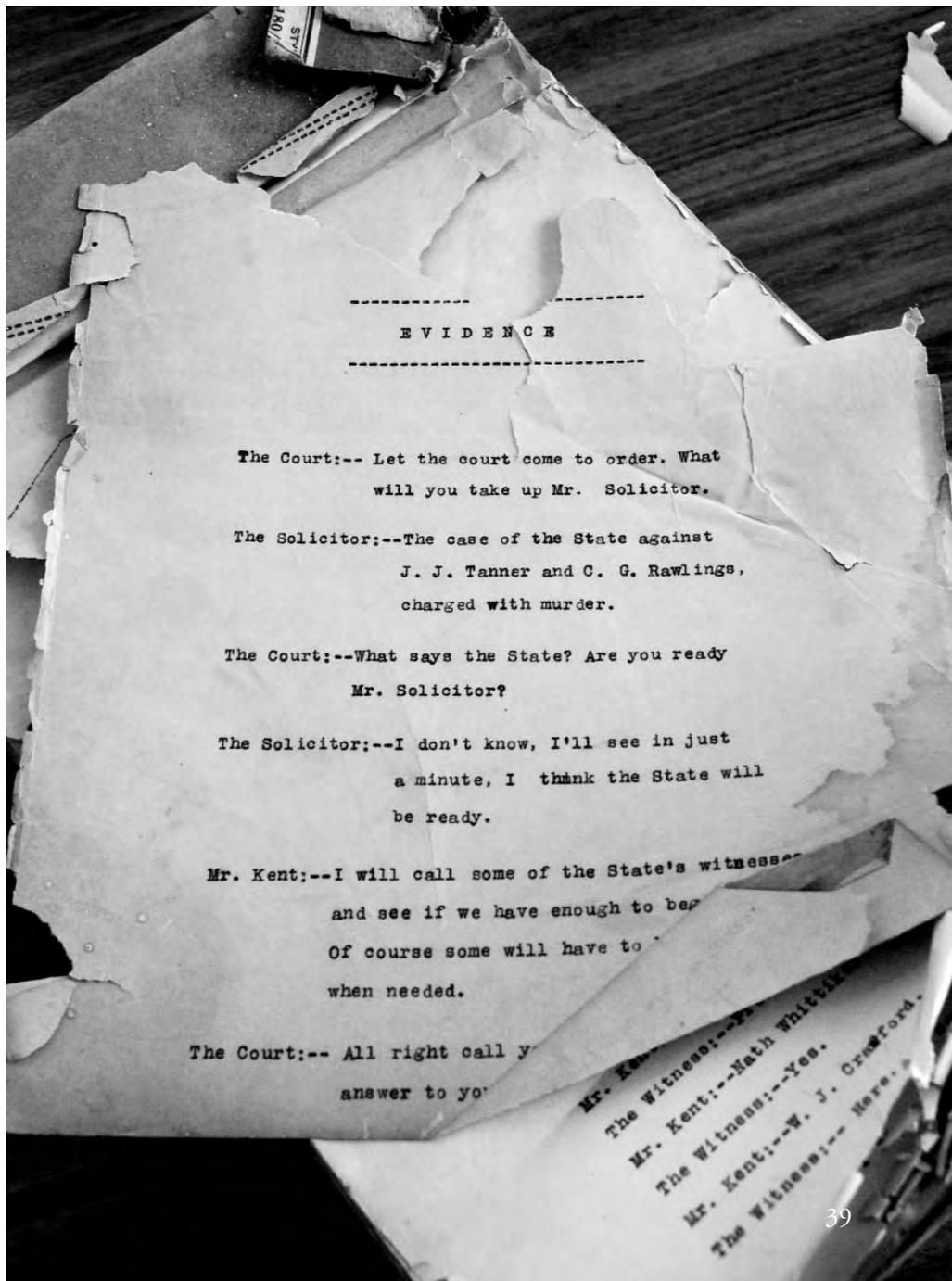
A block to the east, the spire of the First Baptist Church loomed over the intersection of Church and Harris Streets, the latter being the local name for the main north-south highway through the town. On the opposite side of the intersection, a large white Victorian house dominated the crossroads, its location and size a testament to the wealth of its owner. A broad covered porch lined with turned balusters was shaded from the harsh afternoon sun by two huge magnolia trees. The ornate door opened into a wide hall lined with raised-panel walnut, its glass window etched with the

initials "CGR," for Charles Graves Rawlings, the home's owner. It was in this home that on the night of February 18, 1925, Rawlings was arrested for the murder of his first cousin, George Augustus Tarbutton.

A Self-Made Man

By any measure, Charles Rawlings was a wealthy man. Known as "C.G." to

his business associates and "Charlie" to his friends and family, he was nearly seven years old when Sandersville felt the scorched-earth wrath of Sherman's army, the punishment being worse because of casualties suffered while securing the town. He was the youngest of seven children born to Fredrick Cullen Rawlings and Susan Malone Tarbutton. The forebears of each family had moved to



C. G. Rawlings

Sandersville and Wrightsville, Ga.

Wholesale and Retail Dealer in

Horses and Mules



Washington County in the first decade of the nineteenth century, settling near the crossroads town that had grown up around Saunders's Store, later known (and misspelled) as Sandersville.

The Rawlings were an accomplished and successful family. Charlie's oldest brother, William, graduated with highest honors from Emory College before studying medicine in Europe and achieving national fame as a surgeon. Another brother, "B.T." (for Benjamin Tarbutton), was a prominent attorney, judge and legislator. And with time, Charlie followed in their footsteps. A 1912 book containing the biographies of "eminent men" refers to him as, "one of the most prominent and successful businessmen" in his part of the state.

The years following the Civil War were ones of opportunity for a man willing to work hard and take risks. Perhaps overshadowed by the achievements of his older brothers in medicine and law, Charlie poured his efforts into business. He was successful far beyond the dreams of most men. The 1870s and the decades that followed were ones of dramatic growth in what are today rural areas of Georgia. Rawlings began, modestly enough, in the livery business, stabling the horses and mules that provided transportation and power for agriculture. He imported mules and soon branched into the lucrative business of supplying farmers with their fertilizer and other agricultural needs.

Washington County, of which Sandersville is the county seat, sits astride the geologic Fall Line. In the northern part of the county, the land is gently rolling. The red clay hills topped by poor

Charlie Rawlings's fortune depended on the booming agricultural economy of the pre-World War I South. His bank, Citizens Bank of Sandersville, was located next to his livery stable and his hotel (opposite page) in a building owned jointly with his brother, Dr. William Rawlings, a renowned surgeon and owner of the local hospital.

sandy soil are ideal for timber production. To the south, on the northern edge of the Coastal Plain, the topography is more suited to agriculture, with vast flat fields separated by meandering streams and wide river swamps. In the late nineteenth century the main Central of Georgia rail line between Atlanta and Savannah split the county, and other short-line railroads connecting to points north and south converged on the railroad town of Tennille, three miles south of Sandersville. Cheap labor, good transportation, a long growing season, and abundant natural resources of land, timber and water led to fortunes made in agriculture and manufacturing and the support services they required.

Rawlings's businesses thrived. A November 1899 issue of the Sandersville Progress noted he was selling 1,500 to 2,000 mules per year, or 30 to 40 per week. By the first decades of the new century, Rawlings reputedly owned up to 40,000 acres of land, plus livery stables and farm supply stores, a bank, a hotel, and a substantial interest in the Sandersville Railroad, a short-line, wide-gauge track that leased its rolling stock from the Central of Georgia, but boasted of owning one locomotive and one passenger car. In 1888, he married Tallulah Perkins, the 18-year old daughter of a well-respected lumberman. Over the next 18 years she provided him with four children.

Because the primary source of his wealth was agriculture, the majority of

Rawlings's land holdings were to the south of Sandersville in Johnson County. Besides being in the agricultural supply business, his personal farm operations took on a huge scale. A 1917 *Progress* article noted that his farms had produced more than 3,000 bales of cotton that year.* While quite profitable in good times, his direct involvement in such large-scale farming and lack of greater investment diversification would later pose a threat to his economic survival.

Parallel Lives

George Augustus Tarbutton, "Gus" to his friends and family, was Charlie Rawlings's first cousin, born in 1875. Gus's father died when he was five, followed by his mother two years later. At age 14, he came to live with his Aunt Soonie and Uncle Fred, Charlie's parents. His cousin Charlie, newly married and rising in the world of business, was appointed his legal guardian, later assuming the role of mentor and surrogate older brother. As court proceedings would later reveal, Charlie managed Gus's small inheritance, tried to keep him out of trouble and helped him get started

**Assuming a yield of a half bale per acre, this would suggest that he had at least 6,000 acres in cotton alone. In those days, one plowman and a mule could cultivate 30 acres. This would imply that he may have had as many as 200 plowmen. Again assuming one overseer per ten plowmen, he might have employed as many as 20 overseers.*



in farming once he had reached manhood.

Despite the differences in their ages, both men's lives took strangely parallel courses. Both lost brothers to violence in which they played a role. On July 15, 1893, Charlie's brother Fred died in a shootout on Sandersville's City Square. The root cause of the fight seemed to be a minor land dispute between Charlie and his brother-in-law, then mayor of the City. The dispute resulted in a lawsuit that had been decided in favor of the mayor in 1892. Marital ties notwithstanding, the case had created bad blood between the two families. Fred was overheard to say disparaging remarks about the mayor, and was confronted by the mayor's brother. They exchanged blows, then gunfire, each dying within minutes of being shot.

The exact details of the shootings were never clearly established, but Charlie and two other Rawlings cousins were observed on the scene "with weapons in their hands" immediately after the shooting. They were arrested, but in deference to his prominence in the community, Charlie was allowed to remain at his home under guard. A Coroner's Jury soon found that "Charles G. Rawlings only acted as a peacemaker." He was never formally charged with any crime.

The events that led to the death of Gus Tarbutton's older brother Herschel were also related to a land dispute. A man named Young had sold a 600-acre tract of land to J. Letcher Tyre, a "prominent Laurens County lumberman." According to Young, Tyre failed to make payments in a timely manner, and was

thus in default. Young then sold the land to Herschel Tarbutton. Tyre maintained he had a superior claim to the land and began logging operations. Gus Tarbutton,

apparently acting on behalf of Herschel, had Tyre's men arrested. The matter was pending in court in the fall of 1906 when word reached the Tarbutton brothers that Tyre was preparing to resume cutting on the land. Accompanied by Gus's brother-in-law, Joe Fluker, they rode on horseback to the property to confront Tyre and his men. Tyre had been squirrel hunting, and was carrying a shotgun. He exchanged words with Herschel, who shot him in the abdomen with a .44 caliber pistol. Tyre fired back, striking Tarbutton in the right eye. According to a newspaper report, Gus Tarbutton and Joe Fluker also fired their pistols, but it was the shots exchanged between Herschel and Tyre that proved fatal. Tyre died within a matter of hours, but not before implicating the Tarbuttons and Fluker to witnesses in a dying declaration. Herschel died the next day at the Rawlings Sanitarium in Sandersville, declaring he had been the first to be shot.

Gus Tarbutton and Joe Fluker were arrested in Sandersville on a charge of murder and taken to Dublin to stand trial in Laurens County. They were granted bail, and the trial scheduled for February 1907. Charlie Rawlings, stepping in to assist his cousin, helped assemble "perhaps the greatest league of defense attorneys ever to appear in a Laurens County courtroom." The star among them was the popular young Thomas W. Hardwick, Congressman from Georgia's 10th District, and future Governor and United States Senator. The irony of this choice would become evident later.

The trial began with much legal

wrangling. A request from the defense for a continuance was granted on multiple grounds, including a question of exactly where the homicide had occurred. Tarbutton and Fluker were under indictment in Laurens County, but the exact line demarking the boundary with Johnson County had never been clearly established.

Governor J. M. Terrell appointed an Atlanta civil engineer to mark the county line based on the original legislative act of 1857. In doing so, it was discovered that Tyre was in fact killed in Johnson County, effectively nullifying the Laurens County indictment. The venue was thus moved to what could only be considered a friendlier political environment, and the case was never brought to trial.

A Question of Character

In spite of various bumps in the economic road, the half century marked by the end of the First World War was generally one of growth and prosperity in Georgia. This era came to a sudden and crashing halt with the economic recession of 1921. Perhaps little remembered because of the lengthier Great Depression that began less than a decade later, it delivered a body-blow to the agrarian economy of the South. The most striking event was deflation, evidenced by a 37% drop in wholesale prices over the course of a year, the sharpest decline since the American Revolution nearly a century-and-a-half earlier. The proximate causes were economic changes brought on by the end of the Great War, but the local result was a dramatic decline in prices paid for agricultural commodities and a near collapse of the farm economy.

As if the deflationary recession were not enough, the boll weevil first appeared in south Georgia in 1915, spreading rapidly through cotton producing areas of the state. From a high 2.8 million bales produced in Georgia the year before, the yield fell rapidly to a low of only 600,000 bales in 1923. By January 1925, the *Sandersville Progress* noted things had



scarcely improved “as farming has become too risky [since] the boll weevil appeared to eat up all the profits of the cotton crop.” They opined hopefully that the arrival of a new shipment of mules signaled an upturn in the farm outlook.

Neither of these events could have been reliably predicted, but both must have had devastating effects on the fortunes of Charlie Rawlings. But there were other events whose very nature must also have affected him deeply. Two of his three daughters had married and moved away. His mother, Susan, who was living in his home after the death of his father, died at the age of 91 in 1919. His brother B.T. died of cancer in November 1921, followed two weeks later by the unexpected death of Charlie’s 51-year-old wife. The details of her apparent sudden fatal illness are unclear. Rather than listing a cause of death, the certificate – signed by a physician who was in practice with Charlie’s brother – states, “Was called Dec. 10, 7:30 PM. Found her dying. She expired in a few minutes.”

The friends, enemies and contemporaries of Charlie Rawlings are no longer here to give the interested reader their opinion of him as a man, but there were persistent rumors of marital infidelity and tales of suspicious fires that destroyed well-insured properties. None of these can be confirmed with accuracy. As of February 1925, Rawlings had been a highly successful businessman with a career of nearly a half century behind him. The events that followed may have been driven by desperation, but may also have reflected Rawlings’s underlying character. The act that subsequently

thrust his name on the front pages of newspapers statewide so altered perceptions of him that statements about his character and personality are often tinged with prejudice. For a more objective viewpoint, a reader might consider a Georgia Supreme Court decision issued more than a decade earlier.

In 1908, Rawlings was approached by a family of three siblings who owed him, and others, debts they were unable to pay. They owned two tracts of property worth several thousand dollars and asked him to loan them money to pay their obligations, using the land as collateral. According to the court, they were “unlearned in legal matters,” and looked to Rawlings for help with their situation. “He professed great friendship for [them] on account of his friendship for their father, and said that he would treat them fairly and properly in the matter.” He did, however, insist on an absolute deed to the property, which he prepared and they signed.

Two years later, the three discovered that Rawlings claimed to be the owner of their land. They realized they had been tricked into signing a deed confirming the fact, giving him full title to the property for a mere fraction of its true value. The siblings offered to pay him back, but Rawlings refused, stating he was now the rightful owner. They sued, and eventually the case was appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled against Rawlings on procedural issues. Charlie Rawlings may have grown wealthy through his business dealings, but he was clearly willing to ignore ethical considerations if the outcome was to his benefit.

A Terrible Accident

The year 1924 ended with a bleak outlook. The economic engines that had so reliably provided steady growth over the prior decades had weakened, and future prospects were uncertain at best. Local newspapers speculated that a proposed road project might bring travelers and new commerce. One bright spot reported by the *Progress* in late December was the optioning by a New York corporation of 2,000 acres in Wilkinson County for the mining of “bauxite” to be used in the production of crockery. As an entrepreneur, as well as one of the largest landowners in several counties, Charlie Rawlings no doubt sensed a possible solution to his current financial situation. He had test pits dug on several of his farms, focusing on those near the Oconee River adjacent to Wilkinson County.

February 17, 1925 was warm for the season, with temperatures rising to the mid-60s despite overcast skies and intermittent rain. The events of nearly two decades earlier now forgotten, Gus Tarbutton had risen to prominence as a wealthy farmer closely associated in his business dealings with his older cousin Charlie. So it came as a shock when word reached town near dusk that day that Gus had been killed in a horrific accident at Ring Jaw Bluff on the Oconee River. The initial accounts had it that toward the latter part of the afternoon, Charlie and his driver, accompanied by Rawlings’s overseer, J. J. Tanner, picked up Tarbutton and drove to the Page Place, a large tract on the river nominally owned by the firm of Tarbutton & Rawlings. Test pits had been dug looking

for bauxite, and Charlie and Gus wanted to see what they'd found.

They were not alone in the woods. A man named Alexander who was looking at some timber met them and exchanged a few words with the three men before heading back to his vehicle. A few moments later, he heard a shotgun blast, but thought little of it as it was hunting season. The story emerged that the three men had just arrived at the Bluff and were going down a slight incline toward the river. As was his custom when walking in the woods, Tanner carried a double-barreled hammerless shotgun to shoot snakes or other varmints. Apparently tripping on a root, he pitched forward and the gun discharged, striking Tarbutton squarely in the back of his head, killing him instantly. Helped by Rawlings's chauffeur who was waiting with the car, the men loaded the body in the back of Rawlings's vehicle and drove to Tarbutton's house to report the tragedy.

Widowed for more than a year, Gus Tarbutton shared a home with his only surviving offspring, his 23-year-old son, Fluker. As friends began to gather, Fluker expressed belief that the so-called accident had been staged and that his father had been killed in cold blood. He sought out the sheriff and demanded an inquiry.

The following morning, the county coroner assembled a jury and convened an inquest. Sworn statements were heard, with members of the jury traveling to Ring Jaw Bluff where measurements were made in an attempt to corroborate the story given by Tanner and Rawlings. The news of the death of a wealthy farmer while in the company of an even wealthier banker made front page headlines across the state. *The Atlanta Constitution* reported, "Rawlings told an impressive and plausible story at the inquest," not failing to mention he was a "member of one of the most prominent families...in middle Georgia" in case any readers might have doubts about the significance of the story.

While Tarbutton's death might have appeared accidental on the surface, the jury also heard testimony that Rawlings

was in a financial bind and stood to benefit from several large insurance policies taken out on his cousin. Furthermore, Rawlings testified Tarbutton, "considered one of the wealthiest landowners in the county, did not own an acre of property when he died, and in fact, never had. He (Rawlings) owned it all."

The jury reached the conclusion that Gus Tarbutton's death was the result of willful homicide, and gave the recommendation that Rawlings and Tanner be taken into custody on a charge of murder. On the night of February 18, Rawlings was arrested at his home in Sandersville. J. J. Tanner and two negroes, the latter charged as material witnesses, were arrested in Wrightsville. As befitting his status, Rawlings was held under guard in a hotel, while the other three were locked up in the Johnson County jail.

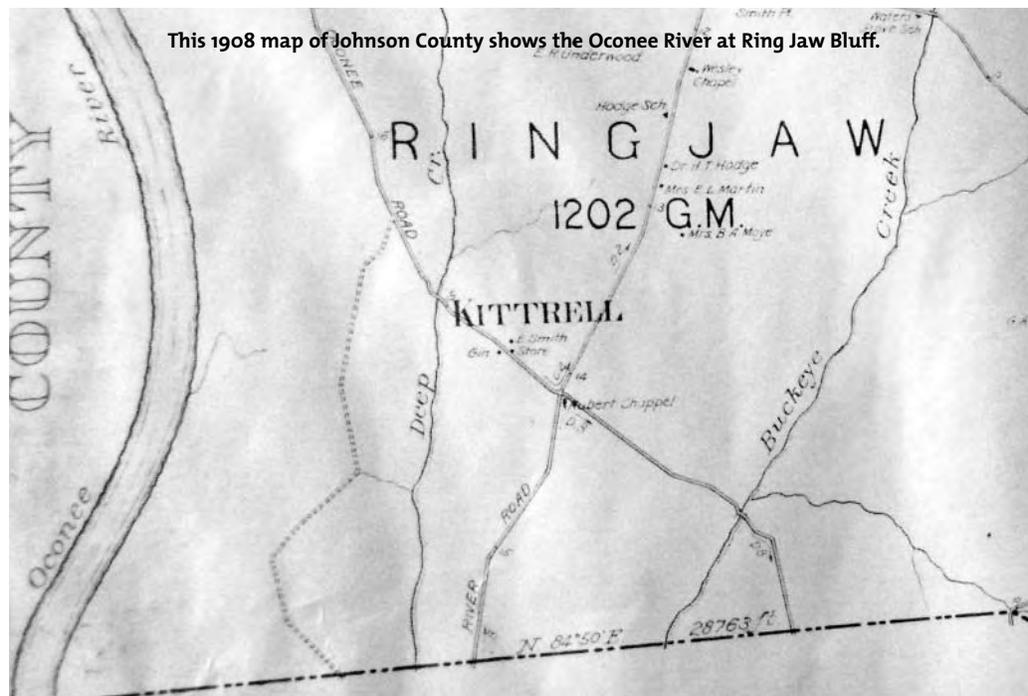
The populace and local press rapidly took sides. The *Wrightsville Headlight*, clearly supporting the murder conspiracy theory against a local citizen, wondered, "Was Gus Tarbutton killed in cold blood by accident, or was it a case of wanton murder?" The *Sandersville Progress* meanwhile was supportive of Rawlings, declaring with a headline that "Rawlings Wants Early Hearing - 'I Am Innocent' He Tells

Reporters." The article further asserted, "[He] is expected to be exonerated on any connection with the horrible crime which is charged against him."

Not missing an opportunity to defend the honor of a wealthy local citizen, the *Progress* reported that Rawlings "stated that his heart was crushed because he was charged with planning the death of a man who had almost been a son to him." Referring to the Tyre murder years earlier, he continued, "Why, I raised the boy. I started him off in life. I loved him as my own child and I have stood by him in fair weather and foul. I spent thousands of dollars on him when he was on trial for murder. Tarbutton knew that in my heart I never had anything but the highest and best feeling for him."

A commitment hearing was scheduled for February 27. With local sentiment in Wrightsville running strongly against Rawlings, he was moved from the comfort of a local hotel to the county jail in Swainsboro, some 26 miles distant. Unaccompanied by guards, the local sheriff drove him there in his personal vehicle, where he was kept under loose guard pending the hearing.

As the day for the hearing approached, rumors of a secret witness to the crime began to circulate in



This 1908 map of Johnson County shows the Oconee River at Ring Jaw Bluff.

Wrightsville. "A thousand people" were expected to attend. The site of the killing became a popular tourist spot. The *Headlight* reported, "Great streams of the populace from 5 counties...pushed their way to the banks of the Oconee [creating] a beaten path and open route to this dismal, secluded spot that marked the fate of Johnson's beloved citizen." There were rumors of lynch mobs which required the sheriff to post extra guards at the jail. Despite all this, the *Headlight* assured readers, "No color is attempted or desired in this story, one way or the other, and our people are and have been cool and level-headed all the while regardless of the wild reports to the contrary since the tragic death of Mr. Tarbutton."

A Surprise Witness

The Johnson County solicitor, Fred Kea, decided to hold separate commitment hearings; Rawlings first, then Tanner. Rawlings's defense team was composed of seven of the best lawyers money could buy, led by Georgia's venerable ex-Senator and ex-Governor Thomas W. Hardwick, the same man who two decades earlier had defended Tarbutton against his own charge of murder. Three local Justices of the Peace presided over the spectacle, attended by "hundreds" of curious townsfolk. Hal Hooks, Rawlings's chauffeur, was the first witness, recounting how he heard the shot, then rushed to the scene to find his employer "crying and wringing his hands" over Tarbutton's body. The *Sandersville Progress*, ever supportive, reported, "During Hook's testimony Mr. Rawlings openly wept in court and seemed deeply affected by Hook's recital of the scenes leading up to the killing of his first cousin."

The state's goal was to provide enough evidence of a crime to warrant holding Rawlings in custody. Witnesses cast doubt on the origin of the bauxite samples Rawlings said had come from Ring Jaw Bluff. Evidence was presented that the War Finance Corporation was suing both Rawlings and his bank for



The Johnson County Courthouse in Wrightsville has changed little since the 1925 Rawlings trial.

unpaid debts. Insurance agents testified Tarbutton's life was insured for more than \$200,000, part of it payable to Rawlings and part to his bank. Two physicians who had examined the body and viewed the death scene opined Tarbutton's wounds suggested he was shot directly from behind, rather than from a lower angle as would be expected if the gun had gone off as Tanner fell.

The most damning testimony came from Noah Covington, the state's surprise witness. He said on the day of the killing he had been nearby on the river's edge, drinking from a spring. Unseen by Tanner and Rawlings, he observed the shooting first-hand. The three men were walking single file, Tarbutton in front, with Tanner and Rawlings close behind. Covington stated he saw Tanner look back at Rawlings, then raise the gun to his shoulder and fire, hitting Tarbutton squarely in the back of his head. Fearing for his life, Covington fled through the swamp, then waited several days before contacting the sheriff with his tale of deliberate murder. Despite the defense's efforts to discredit him, Covington stuck to his story.

Rawlings spoke in his own defense, basically repeating his version of the now-familiar events of the accident, explaining the insurance was "taken out to help my credit and to help Mr. Tarbutton's credit." Again, he wept on the stand.

Both sides made lengthy closing arguments. The *Headlight*, clearly believing a murder had been committed, reported

Solicitor Kea's "appeal to the three justices was one of the best speeches ever delivered in this courthouse here in the trial of any case, many said. He drew down from the house an applause seldom heard." The *Progress*, on the other hand, stated simply Kea made "a very strong plea for the state," while ex-Gov. Hardwick "made a brilliant plea for his client." The latter was apparently enough to sway the justices; Rawlings was ordered released pending further action by a grand jury. Solicitor Kea seemed shocked and "stammered" when asked to read the verdict to the court.

Now free, Charlie Rawlings headed to Sandersville, where "quite a number of his friends gathered at his home to congratulate him." He then disappeared from public view.

Back in Johnson County, the commitment hearing for J. J. Tanner began on Wednesday, March 4, after some delay in finding three new justices to hear the case. The original three from the Rawlings hearing had refused to render judgment a second time. With the exception of ex-Gov. Hardwick who took on the role of observer, Tanner's attorneys were the same as those hired to defend Rawlings. The same evidence was presented once again, with Covington as the star witness. The defense presented new evidence that the shooting could have occurred as the accused testified. The justices took "only fifteen minutes" to determine that Tanner should be held in jail pending indictment and trial.

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J. J. Tanner on trial for murder.

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Waiting for the Other Shoe to Drop

For more than two weeks, Charlie Rawlings's whereabouts were unknown. Rumors and speculation swirled back and forth. A reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* contacted C.G.'s daughter in Monroe, North Carolina, looking for him. She said she hadn't been in contact with her father. An insurance investigator was in town looking into the policies that were involved with Tarbutton's death. It was reported he was worth more than \$270,000 dead, including at least one double-indemnity policy that increased the value if his death was "accidental." Of these funds, "a very small amount" was payable to the estate of Gus Tarbutton, with the remainder going to the Citizens Bank of Sandersville, and "the surviving partner of the firm of Rawlings & Tarbutton, viz., Mr. C. G. Rawlings." Rawlings's creditors began to file liens on the future proceeds of the policies, if and when they were paid. The *Progress*, now seeing the handwriting on the wall, reported, "It is freely predicted here that both Tanner and Rawlings will be indicted by the Grand Jury."

On March 17, arrest warrants were issued for J. J. Tanner and C. G. Rawlings on a joint indictment for murder. Judge Earl Camp, who would be presiding over the trial, was praised by the *Wrightsville Headlight* for his charge to the Grand Jury stating, "He is starting off well." The trial date was set for Monday, March 23. Tanner remained in jail. Rawlings remained in hiding.

The trial of *The State vs. C. G. Rawlings and J. J. Tanner* began as scheduled on Monday morning, six days after the indictments were issued. Rawlings appeared on time in the company of his lawyers and was promptly arrested. As Rawlings and Tanner had been jointly indicted, Rawlings's attorneys moved for severance, which was granted. A motion for bail was denied. The state declared its intention to try Tanner first, a logical choice since he was the accused triggerman. The facts in evidence would be the same for either case, but a conviction for Tanner would pave the way for the conviction of the alleged mastermind, Charlie Rawlings. Ex-Gov. Hardwick withdrew once more to resume his role of observer of the Tanner proceedings, with A. W. Evans of Sandersville taking over as Tanner's lead counsel. Rawlings was taken to the county jail to await his fate as the legal circus began in the Johnson County courthouse's second floor courtroom.

The Trial

It was clear from the outset that while J. J. Tanner, the illiterate overseer dressed in his Sunday best, was on trial for his life, the state's real goal was the conviction of C. G. Rawlings. Since Tanner had pulled the trigger, it would take proof of a conspiracy to get a jury to convict Rawlings of murder, and Rawlings was the only one who stood to gain directly from Gus Tarbutton's death. The legal maneuvering by the state and Tanner's high-priced attorneys was to be a dry run for the real battle to come later at Rawlings's trial.

The state opened with a series of witnesses who testified as to the sequence of



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Thomas W. Hardwick was the star of the legal team defending C.G. Rawlings.

events surrounding Gus Tarbutton's death. Even though he was not on trial, much of the questioning focused on the actions and demeanor of C. G. Rawlings, frequently punctuated by the objections from A. W. Evans, Tanner's attorney. Judge Camp rarely agreed with the defense's concerns, stating it was up to the jury to sort out what facts or lines of questioning were appropriate. Two physicians who had examined the body and participated in the coroner's inquest testified the gunshot wound to Tarbutton's head seemed to have struck from directly behind him, but neither saw evidence of powder burns. In contrast, the undertaker who embalmed the body insisted that he found "powder burns" on the dead man's neck.

A friend of Tanner's testified Rawlings wanted Tanner to do something – the implication being that it was criminal – that would mean "big money for Rawlings." Despite the fact that this "something" seemed to refer to a disputed case of fire insurance pending in South Carolina, Judge Camp allowed the testimony, stating the jury should "give it just such weight and credit as they think it is entitled to receive."

Next to testify was Noah Covington, the man who said he'd witnessed the shooting at Ring Jaw Bluff. His account was simple and direct. He'd spent the entire day along the river, looking for a place to fish. He was getting a drink of

water from a small spring at the base of the bluff when Tarbutton, Tanner and Rawlings came into view. Referring to Tanner, he stated, "he looked around that way toward Rawlings, which was behind him, and then threw the gun up and shot Tarbutton right in the back of the head." Fearing for his life, Covington said he ran downriver until he came to a road, then walked all night to reach home, some 20 miles away.

Noah Covington was an interesting character. In the cross-examination that followed, and based on the testimony of subsequent witnesses, his cut-and-dried story of deliberate murder took on a new light. He was 70 years old at the time, an itinerant farm hand by trade, and in poor health for the three years prior to the trial. He readily admitted to a history of doing time on the chain gang for bootlegging, and a conviction for "cheating and swindling" (although he pointed out he'd been acquitted of "hog stealing"). A month earlier, witnesses had seen him on the platform of the train station in Bartow, not far from Wrightsville, dressed in a convict's striped uniform, preaching on how he'd spent seven years in a Mississippi prison on a charge of murder, but had since found the Lord. Under cross-examination he admitted the prison story was not true, but he made a few dollars by passing the hat after his sermon. He had a history of morphine addiction, describing himself as a "dope fiend" until the Harrison Narcotic Act thwarted his ability to buy the drug.

Toward the end of the week after witnessing the killing, Covington wrote an anonymous letter to the sheriff of Johnson County saying there had been a witness to Tarbutton's killing. The next week he presented himself to the sheriff, admitting he was that person, but initially denying writing the letter.

Cross-examination established that Tarbutton's death took place between 5:00 and 5:30 in the afternoon. There was intermittent rain, and it would have been dark by 6:00 or shortly thereafter. Covington said he'd fled "four or five

miles down the river swamp" but managed to do so before night fell. To accomplish such a feat in broad daylight would have been difficult; to do so at twilight, nearly impossible. In a final blow to his credibility, it was established that at the time of the trial, Covington was living with and being supported by the family of Gus Tarbutton.

Insurance agents once again testified about the policies taken out on Gus

Tarbutton & Rawlings partnership, and implied that since the crash of the farm economy in 1921, Rawlings had taken advantage of his father. The name of Jim Tanner, the poor farm overseer who was on trial for his life, was rarely mentioned.

Before resting its case, the state called a series of witnesses to confirm that the exact details of the shooting could not have occurred as Tanner and Rawlings had previously alleged. Battered by



The courtroom where C.G. Rawlings stood trial in 1925 remains unchanged.

Tarbutton's life, but cross-examination confirmed that he was aware of them and had signed the policy applications. None were payable to C. G. Rawlings directly, rather to the Citizens Bank, of which Rawlings was the majority shareholder, or the partnership of Tarbutton & Rawlings, which carried substantial debt in both men's name.

Fluker Tarbutton, Gus's son, testified for the state. He had instigated the investigation into his father's death, and according to newspaper accounts often sat at the prosecution's table during the trial. Fluker stated that as his father's only offspring and sole heir, he was entitled to the proceeds of any insurance policies on his father's life. Reacting hostilely to cross-examination by Tanner's attorney, he denied there had ever been a

intense cross-examination, the testimony soon turned into a litany of uncertain facts, conflicting theories, and speculative opinions. The only persons in court who claimed to know the truth were J. J. Tanner and Noah Covington. One of them was a liar.

The defense had no exculpatory evidence to present, so its case consisted chiefly of casting doubt on the character and veracity of the state's witnesses against Tanner (and Rawlings). Witness after witness swore that those who'd testified for the state were of poor character and couldn't be believed under oath, each citing nothing more in support of this than his opinion.

In dealing with Covington, however, the witnesses were more specific. Elisha Coleman, who had been jailed in

Soperton on a charge of murder, swore that Covington had approached him and offered to “swear him out” of jail for a price. He testified that Covington told him “he didn’t know anything, but if I would pay him he would know something.” Another witness testified he’d spoken to Covington the day following the Tarbutton killing and that was the first time he’d heard of it. Most tellingly, four seemingly credible witnesses placed

was Covington’s son, to support his story. Covington’s daughter, with whom he allegedly had spent the night after the incident, had been subpoenaed but disappeared and could not be found.

The defendant, J. J. Tanner, made a brief unsworn statement to the court, again stating the killing was an accident and proclaiming his innocence. Given the confusing nature of the forensic evidence about how the accident might

life in prison. Charlie Rawlings’s case was scheduled to begin the following Monday, March 30.

Tanner’s conviction dimmed whatever chances Rawlings might have had for acquittal, especially in Johnson County. When his case was called on the 30th, ex-Gov. Hardwick filed a motion asking bail for his client and a change of venue for the trial. Both were denied at a hearing in early April, and the slow process of appeals began. His trial was rescheduled for the June session of court.

An Empire Teeters...

While Charlie Rawlings sat in the Johnson County jail, his business empire was unraveling. A week after denial of his bail his creditors filed a petition in Washington County Superior Court to appoint a receiver for his assets. The court picked Lake B. Holt, a prominent businessman and banker from Sandersville. He reported that Rawlings’s debts totaled about \$200,000 to two banks and “a number of other creditors,” while his assets were estimated “to be from \$700,000 to \$1,000,000, consisting chiefly of farm property in Washington and Johnson counties.” The *Progress* noted with some awe, “The petition which was filed aggregates in dollars and cents the largest sum that has ever been filed in the courts of this county.”

For Rawlings, the bad news kept coming. On April 21, 1925, the Georgia Court of Appeals rejected his demand for a change of venue. The matter was appealed to the state Supreme Court. On April 23, it was announced that the Citizens Bank of Sandersville was being placed in the hands of the state banking department and would be liquidated. On April 28, Prudential Insurance filed a claim in Federal Court in Augusta asking that the policies on Gus Tarbutton’s life be declared void on the basis of fraud and conspiracy.

In late May, Judge Camp heard an appeal for a new trial for J. J. Tanner. The defense filed a total of 25 motions, the principal one supported by affidavits from three of Noah Covington’s children that he “swore falsely” at Tanner’s trial.



Covington more than 20 miles away on the day Tarbutton was killed.

Given the calumny that was being heaped on the head of its star witness, the state took an equally aggressive stance. One defense witness who had worked with Covington said he could not be believed under any circumstances. In response, he was asked if he agreed that “if a man is black today as far as sin is concerned, and tomorrow is made as white as snow, or do you deny the Divinity of Christ?” Forced to confirm his Christian beliefs, the witness was then asked if he thought Noah Covington had been forgiven. He replied, “No, sir. If he has, it’s been lately.”

Hoping to undo the damage done to their witness, the state managed to produce two new witnesses, one of whom

have happened, the defense requested that the jury be allowed to visit Ring Jaw Bluff. Judge Camp dismissed the motion “on the ground of the inconvenience, expenses, and the fact that there is evidence in the record thoroughly describing the scene of the homicide.” He had heard enough, even if the defense thought the jury hadn’t.

After closing arguments the case was given to the jury at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, March 26, after less than three days’ testimony. The twelve men deliberated for four hours undecided, and met again the next morning to deliberate another six. Finally, the jury reached a decision. “There was a death-like silence as the foreman read the verdict” of guilty with a recommendation of mercy. The judge immediately sentenced Tanner to

Georgia, Johnson County, *Merely Adjudged Guilty*
The State } *Verdict of Guilty.*
C. G. Rawlings } *Recommendation to*
Charged with Murder. } *Mercy.*

Whereupon it is adjudged by the court that the defendant, C. G. Rawlings, be remanded to the common jail of Johnson County and there safely kept till a guard shall be sent from the principal keeper of the Penitentiary of this State and then delivered to said guard, with by it safely conveyed and delivered to said principal keeper, and that said defendant be imprisoned at labor in said penitentiary, or elsewhere in this State as the Governor thereof may direct, for and during the full term of his Natural Life year to be computed from the date of his delivery to said principal keeper, and these fully completed.

Verdict signed and filed August 21 - 1925
 R. Earl Camp.

The handwritten guilty verdict against Rawlings.

The son, who earlier had testified in support of his father, now averred he had been recovering from an illness and his earlier testimony was in error. Two other children, including the missing daughter who had been subpoenaed for the trial, gave sworn statements that their father was lying and that he could not have been at Ring Jaw Bluff on the day of the killing. They described him as “a dope fiend.” Nevertheless, Camp denied the various defense motions.

By the first of June, the trial and its aftermath were becoming old news. On June 10, Fluker Tarbutton filed suit against Tanner and Rawlings for \$250,000. The *Headlight* advised that it was uncertain whether Rawlings’s trial would get underway as scheduled on June 22, but that “the safest thing to do if an interested party or witness is to be in the city Monday morning.”

By late June the summer doldrums had set in. Rawlings’s appeal was still pending and the trial was once more deferred to August. Despite two gory sawmill accidents, the *Sandersville Progress* complained that there was “nothing much of general interest” happening and asked readers to submit news that is “out of the ordinary.” (They were rewarded some weeks later with a report of a mother of 13 who was gored to death by a cow.) Meanwhile, in Wrightsville, the sheriff reported that Rawlings was “whiling away his time in jail and has for his only companionship his Bible and J. J. Tanner, his former farm overseer who constantly aids and consoles him.”

In mid-July, the Supreme Court denied the appeal for a change of venue. The *Headlight*, apparently hoping to respark interest in the case, noted in a mid-August headline that “Rawlings Likely to Face Jury Monday: Aged Banker and Wealthy Farmer Will Appear in Court on High Charge of Murder.” Despite the fact that the state had promised “new and startling evidence against Charles G. Rawlings,” the *Progress* reported that “farmers are busy and interest in the case is waning.”

Conviction

The trial began on Monday morning, August 17, exactly six months after Tarbutton’s killing. Jury selection was not completed until the following day. When asked for his plea, Rawlings replied, “I’m not guilty, of course.” The crowds were smaller this time, owing in part to the farming season and in part to the hundred-degree heat which blanketed the state. As with Tanner’s trial, this one was also closely watched by reporters for the state’s daily and weekly papers.

The trial basically followed the same course as that of J. J. Tanner. The state’s “new and startling evidence” was testimony from Ray Hewitt, another inmate in the Johnson County jail. Hewitt testified “he heard Tanner upbraid Rawlings for ‘not doing what he promised to do,’ and the reply from Rawlings that ‘he would fulfill his promise when he got the insurance money all straight.’”

Other than Charlie Rawlings who testified on his own behalf, the defense offered no witnesses. The *Headlight*, still convinced of his guilt, reported “Rawlings sat on a chair just in front of the jury and told his version of it all, at one time breaking down and weeping. His story was about the same, only longer and covered more than the former statement at the commitment.” The jury deliberated five and one-half hours before finding him guilty, with a recommendation of mercy. Judge Camp immediately sentenced him to life in prison.

The Aftermath

With both Rawlings and Tanner convicted, the cases were soon forgotten except by the attorneys and those who had a financial interest in one or another of the various aspects of the matter. The lawsuits multiplied. Two days after Rawlings’s conviction Lake Holt filed suit demanding \$143,750 in payments for legal fees and his work as court-appointed receiver. This and various other cases were settled in November 1925 with the awarding of \$17,000 in insurance proceeds to Fluker Tarbutton as the executor of his father’s estate. With a touch of coincidental irony, the same day the Supreme Court denied Rawlings’s request for a new trial while granting Tanner one on grounds that the *Headlight* referred to as “strictly technical.” In December, several of the insurance companies and those suing Rawlings and his receiver reached an out-of-court settlement for an undisclosed amount.

Tanner’s retrial began on March 25, 1926. Judge Earl Camp once again presided. The trial, by newspaper reports a reprise of his earlier one, ended three days later when he was found guilty “soon after deliberation began.” The attorneys immediately filed another motion for a new trial.

In December 1926, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that a Federal judge in Atlanta ruled that Gus Tarbutton “did not come to his death by

accident,” thus thwarting Lake Holt’s attempt to collect on the double-indemnity life insurance policy.

With their appeals exhausted, Rawlings and Tanner were transferred to the state prison in Milledgeville to begin serving their life sentences on February 17, 1927, two years to the day after the incident on Ring Jaw Bluff. In small notices in 1928 and 1929, the *Constitution* reported the State Prison Commission’s rejections of Charlie Rawlings’s pleas for clemency. The last lawsuit involving Rawlings’s estate was settled by the United States Fifth District Federal Court in New Orleans in June 1935.

The “bauxite” deposits that drew the three men to Ring Jaw Bluff were in fact kaolin. In the decades that followed, its mining and processing became a multi-billion dollar industry, creating fortunes for many large landowners.

Perspective

Every family has its secrets, those embarrassing incidents and shady relations consigned to the dustbins of history and best left unmentioned in polite company. For my father and grandfather’s generation it was the killing that took place on Ring Jaw Bluff on that overcast day in the winter of 1925. Charlie Rawlings was my great-uncle, my

grandfather’s brother. He died long before I was born, and all I knew of him as a small boy were the tales told by men of his generation overheard in the barber shop and cafes of the small town where I grew up and still live. Little else was left. His once-stately home had become a faded down-at-the-heels boarding house named The Magnolia Inn, his hotel pulled down to make way for a filling station and grocery store.

I assumed what my grandmother told me was true: Charlie Rawlings was an evil man, so motivated by material greed that he committed the ultimate crime, the murder of a close relative. Now I am not so sure. The question remains, was Gus Tarbutton’s death an accident or a murder? The juries saw the matter one way, and that has become history’s record. But to me it became clear that Noah Covington, the state’s star witness, was lying. He repeated in unsophisticated detail the publicly known facts of the killing, turning it from an accident to murder and thus confirming what everyone believed to be true: Charlie Rawlings was not a good man. Wealth had corrupted him. If he didn’t stage the accident on Ring Jaw Bluff, it was something he might have done, and for that he deserved punishment.

Charlie Rawlings was eventually

Charlie Rawlings is buried in an unmarked grave in his family plot in Sandersville’s Old Cemetery.



**TWO BAGS for 15 cents
100 cigarettes for 15 cents**



released from prison in the mid-1930s, having served the minimum seven years to make him eligible for parole. He spent the last few years of his life living on his niece’s comfortable plantation to the north of town, and was occasionally seen hanging out on the benches of the City Square with other old men whose productive lives were behind them. In those days, many smoked Bull Durham tobacco, rolling their own cigarettes from a drawstring pouch sealed with a folding metal clip about the size of a dime. The streets were littered with these discarded clips, appearing to the casual observer as lost coins in the gutter. One man, a relative of both families, sadly recalls Charlie as a bent old man with a cane poking at the discarded clips in hopes of finding a bit of change. Charlie Rawlings died at age 80 in November 1938 and is buried in an unmarked grave in Sandersville’s City Cemetery.

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William Rawlings (www.williamrawlings.com) lives in Sandersville, Georgia.

