

There Will Never Be Another Will Evans

Premier Fisherman, Boat Builder and Sportsmen's Guide

by Colleen Farrell

"It's too bad that someone did not write about Will Evans when he was still alive" mused Bill Holder, writer for *The Tennessean* in 1947.¹ If Will Evans were alive today a fishing trip with him might be featured on the television show *Tennessee Outdoors*, or receive mention in the state and national news when his fishing companions were the likes of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt or U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull. *"He must have been one of the best fishermen that ever lived."*²

According to Holder, those who went fishing with Will Evans might have looked for his third arm. His technique was to maneuver a paddle stationed under his left arm, rowing in easy circular motions, while fishing or hunting with his other hand at the same time. He could paddle his skiff along without a sound and glide a hunter to within a few feet of sitting ducks, at which time he would warn the hunters with a low soft whistle, alerting them to a good shot. Bill

Holder continued: *"According to the men who knew him, Will Evans was a quiet person of dignity and character. He fished and hunted according to a code of ethics, and the men who fished and hunted with him observed this code, too. He never worked a second time for anyone who fished without the proper license or exceeded the bag limit. He preferred to hunt or fish with three men in the boat, including himself. He would take out a boat with four men, but he did not like to do that. Neither did he like to fish with anyone who drank."*³

RESERVATIONS NEEDED WEEKS (EVEN MONTHS) IN ADVANCE

Will Evans might well have come by his talent for fishing and hunting naturally as his father, Sidney Miller Evans, was also a fisherman by trade and known as an "Indian Guide." Newspaper columnist W.D. Hastings remembered that *"I first started hunting duck and fishing on Old Duck River back in the 1890s with Will's father, Sid Evans, and after Sid passed away, or long before, I had Will . . . that is, if the other hunters and fishermen didn't already have him. In order to get Will you had to make a date far ahead, so as to be sure he wasn't grabbed by someone else ... I secured a date with Will nearly a month ahead of time, that was how popular he was ..."*⁴ Back in the days when Will and his customers were young, the weather did not stop a planned outing on the river. *"We would go rain or shine, snow, sleet or what have you, and we always got fish if we were fishing, and if hunting, we always got ducks, and most always got the limit, when it was permissible to take 20 per day. Will would kill just as many ducks, if not more than, the party he was pushing, and the same was also the case in fishing. He would paddle the boat with one hand and fish with the other, and seldom did he lose a strike. When a bass bit his minnow, it was almost a certainty that fish would soon find himself on the fish string."*⁵

KNOWN TO SPORTSMEN IN EVERY TOWN IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE

Will Evans began making his own living at the age of fourteen. He wrapped fishing poles, made his own nets and took men on the river fishing. Will's clientele included both white and African American men, anyone with the means to pay for his services. His granddaughter Sandra Seaton remembers hearing about him taking doctors from Meharry Medical College fishing as well as African Americans from Middle Tennessee communities.⁶ By the time of his death Will Evans was known to river men up-and-down the Tennessee



WILLIAM HENRY EVANS

Dec. 31, 1882 – Sep 7, 1945

He "fished and hunted according to a code of ethics ..."

¹ Holder, Bill, "They Didn't Know," *The Tennessean (Magazine Section)*, June 22, 1947, p. 84.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hastings, W.D., "The Rambler" newspaper column, *The Herald*, November 1945.

⁵ Hastings, W.D., "The Rambler" newspaper column, *The Herald*, November 1945.

⁶ Personal conversation with granddaughter Sandra Seaton, September 12, 2019.

River and to sportsmen in every town in middle Tennessee. They would begin calling him in February to book fishing dates in the spring and summer. Will did not use calendars or write down appointments but kept track of his busy schedule in his head. Even so, he never missed an appointment.

In the occupation of sportsman's guide, Will made a good living of \$5.00 per day, and he fished six days a week. On Saturdays he caught minnows. When taking a group out on the river, he provided the poles and bait, and they provided food and non-alcoholic beverages. Will baited all the hooks and removed all the fish as well as propelling and guiding the boat through the water. His granddaughter remembered that he set the rules and, as a part of his professional code, preferred not to take out anyone who was late, swore or smoked cigarettes.

Will's knowledge about game was greater than any other man in this part of the country. *"He knew the habits of fish, where they could be found and what bait they would be likely to take. He had the best 'eye' in Middle Tennessee: he could see ducks and squirrels where no one else could, and spot them almost a hundred yards away."*⁷

Family of William Henry Evans & Emma Louish Webster Married on March 16, 1906 in Maury County, Tennessee Four children, William, Marietta and twins Westella and Estella died in infancy.	
EVANS, William Henry FATHER: Sidney Miller Evans MOTHER: Mollie Choate	BORN: Dec. 31, 1882 DIED: Sept 7, 1945
WEBSTER, Emma Louish FATHER: John B. Webster MOTHER: Emma Jane Hatcher	BORN: Nov. 19, 1883 DIED: March 1973
EVANS, Pauline Catherine MARRIED: Raymond Mitchell	BORN: June 14, 1907 DIED: Oct. 1, 1978
EVANS, Hattie Mary 1 st MARRIED: Albert Sampson Browne, Jr. 2 nd MARRIED: George B. Harris	BORN: Mar 19, 1912 DIED: July 10, 2001
EVANS, Gladys Douglas MARRIED: William H. Davis	BORN: Apr 16 1914 DIED: Feb. 26, 1991
EVANS, John Wesley MARRIED: Daisy Utterback	BORN: Jun 12, 1916 DIED: Aug. 23, 1986
EVANS, Willie Camille MARRIED: Randolph Howell	BORN: Feb 12, 1919 DIED: Dec 17, 2014
EVANS, Charles Morris 1 st MARRIED: Eloise L. Laird 2 nd MARRIED: Mattie B. Holmes	BORN: Feb. 5, 1922 DIED: April 6, 1984



This photo was sent to Emma Evans with a condolence letter from Charles W. Kelly, Pastor at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama.

BOAT MAKER

An additional talent of Will Evans was designing and crafting boats. People said his boats *"had a little flair"*⁸ that others could not duplicate. Many people in the Columbia area said they could spot one of Will Evans's boats on the river as far as the eye could see, because there was *"something about their lines that nobody can seem to duplicate."*⁹

ON THE RIVER WITH FRIENDS

According to his granddaughter, "Grandpa Will" and Will Ridley had developed a genuine friendship and often spent time together.¹⁰ On September 7, 1945, the two Wills went fishing at Pickwick Dam with Major Horace Frierson (who was the U.S.

⁷ Holder, Bill, "They Didn't Know," *The Tennessean Magazine*, June 22, 1947, p. 84.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Personal conversation with granddaughter Sandra Seaton, September 2018.

Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee at that time). During this successful bass fishing trip Will Evans experienced what he thought to be colic. After taking some paregoric syrup he felt better. When the three men arrived back at Will Ridley's home (*Clifton Place*), "Grandpa Will" went around to the back of the car to get the buckets out of the trunk. Instead, he pitched forward on his face suffering a massive heart attack and died suddenly at age 62.



WILLIAM P. RIDLEY

Friend of Will Evans and owner of Clifton Place (the home originally built for Gen. Gideon Pillow.) The three men arrived back at Clifton Place, where Will Evans unexpectedly died of a massive heart attack.

MANY MOURNED HIS LOSS

The sudden death of Will Evans on September 7, 1945, shocked and saddened sportsmen throughout Middle Tennessee. Writing about this in hindsight almost two years later, the following account was published in *The Tennessean Magazine* on June 22, 1947:

There were almost as many white people at his funeral as colored ... White men were glad to serve as honorary pallbearers for Will.

The move to mark Will's grave got underway soon after his death. "We just couldn't bear to think of Will lying out there without anything over his head," a Columbia fisherman said. Contributions came from Nashville, Murfreesboro, all around. The seven-and-a-half-foot stone which was finally raised over his grave was embossed with a cross and engraved with the words: "Erected by Sportsmen" and, under that, "In the Shadow of the Cross May They Find Peace." Below that is the name, William H. Evans 1882-1945.¹¹



MAJOR HORACE FRIERSON

After Admiral William Banks Caperton of Spring Hill, Tennessee, Horace was the next highest-ranking Maury Countian in World War I. He became the first commander of American Legion Post 19 in Columbia, Tennessee.



THE FAMILY OF WILL EVANS ON THE DAY OF HIS FUNERAL

Front row from left:

Widow Emma Louish Evans, granddaughter Sandra Cecelia Browne, and mother-in-law Emma Jane Hatcher Webster.

Standing from left:

Adult children of Will Evans: Pauline Catherine Evans, Camille Evans, John Wesley Evans, Hattie Mary Evans, and Gladys Douglas Evans.

Absent from picture:

Son Charles Morris Evans, who was away in military service.

¹¹ Holder, Bill, "They Didn't Know," *The Tennessean Magazine*, June 22, 1947, p. 84. Articles from the 1940s quoted or paraphrased here use the language of that time when identifying the race of individuals.

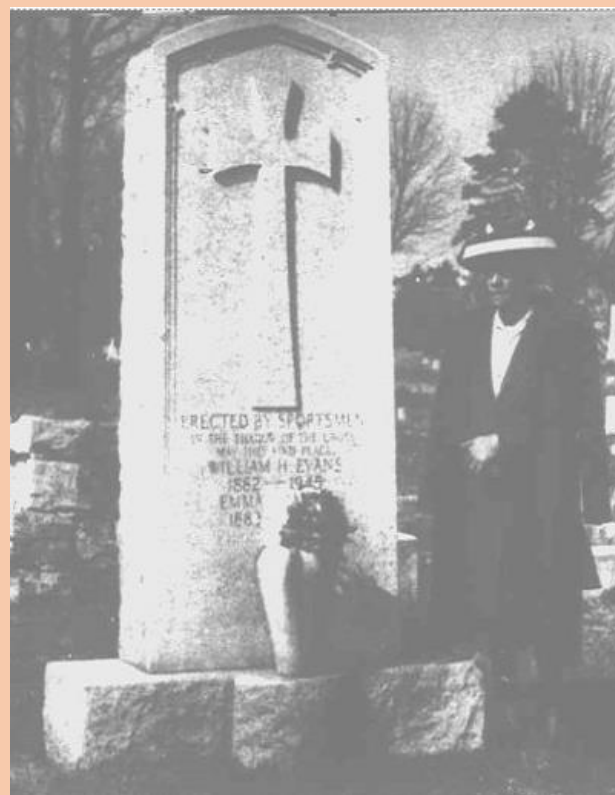
BAD NEWS ECLIPSED THE GOOD

In February 1946, six months after Will Evans died, Columbia became known nationwide as the site of a “race riot” that caused great damage to the African American business district. While these events were unfolding before the nation in widespread press coverage, the Sportsmen of Middle Tennessee were continuing their efforts to honor Will Evans with a memorial stone. It was dedicated at Rosemount Cemetery in the spring of 1946. *The Tennessean Magazine* article published June 22, 1947 continued:

“It is doubtful that the Northern newspapermen who came to Columbia last year heard about Will Evans. There was much bigger news to be reported, and the monument of pink Georgia marble was not erected out in Rosemount Cemetery until later in the spring. It is too bad. They might have written a fine story about the memorial...contributed by the white Sportsmen of Columbia and Middle Tennessee to a Negro fisherman.”¹²

LETTERS, CARDS, AND TRIBUTES

An outflow of tributes, flowers, cards and condolences letters began flowing in to the Evans family as soon as word of Will Evans’s untimely death became known. His life had deeply touched many persons throughout middle Tennessee and beyond.



ABOVE: Emma L. Evans at the dedication of her husband’s memorial in Rosemount Cemetery, Columbia, Tennessee. The 7½’ pink Georgia marble monument was placed in the spring of 1946 by the Sportsmen of Middle Tennessee in tribute to Will Evans.

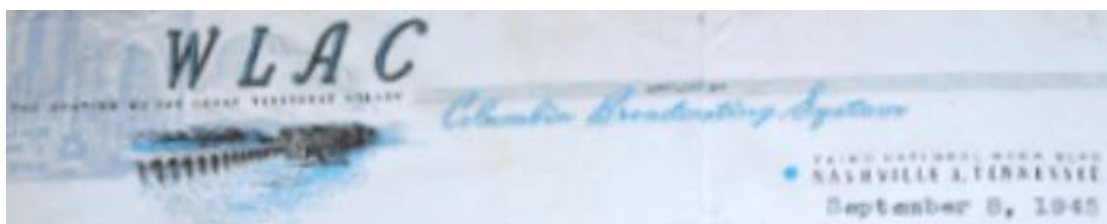
Photo above: *The Tennessean Magazine*



Emma Louish Webster Evans



FRANK C. SOWELL
Vice President and
General Manager of
WLAC 1510 AM radio.

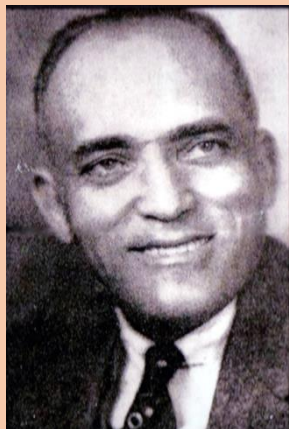


One of the first to respond was Frank C. Sowell, the Vice President and General Manager of *W L A C*, the popular Nashville radio station of the Columbia Broadcasting System. Quoting from his letter to Emma Evans:

*“Dear Mrs. Evans,
It is impossible to put into words just how great a shock it was to me to learn of Will’s passing. Like my brother Ashley, I have said many times that “no man ever gave me more pleasure in*

¹² Holder, Bill, “They Didn’t Know,” *The Tennessean Magazine*, June 22, 1947, p. 84. Articles from the 1940s quoted or paraphrased here use the language of that time when identifying the race of individuals.

life than Will Evans," and his loss is a very personal thing to me. A fishing trip will never be the same without Will along. Of course, all of us who knew him appreciated him for his courtesy, gentlemanly conduct and comradeship even more than for his fishing ability. He was one of the finest characters I ever had the pleasure of knowing ... It must be a source of much consolation to you to know that he was so highly regarded by so many people in all walks of life."



CHARLES W. KELLY
Pastor of Tuskegee, Alabama
Greenwood Missionary Baptist
Church from 1920-1953.

Another personal letter addressed to Mrs. Emma Webster Evans came from Charles Wilson Kelly, Pastor at Greenwood Missionary Baptist at Tuskegee Institute, Alabama.¹³ It conveys the respect and esteem in which Will Evans was held by his contemporaries:

"Dear Sister Evans:

Your telegram yesterday advising me of the passing of Will Evans, your beloved husband, came as a real shock, and especially since we knew not that he had been ill."

"Will Evans lived a life of constant service to his fellowman. ... His knowledge of the streams, creeks and rivers and where the fish abound and when they bite; his ability to find and secure minnows and bait, without which fishing is impossible; his sturdy and hardy body with endurance made him a person whose services could not be measured in terms of wages paid to him. His clientele or patrons knew that in Will

Evans they had a friend and helper which made him one who was ... indispensable in their fishing retreats and diversions after the hard day's work in the shop and in the field. We shall ever have pleasant memories of him, as he went about in his quiet, unassuming and earnest manner, and thinking never of himself so much as of those he served. And so his life and his memory shall be a benediction."

Enclosed in his letter, Charles Kelly sent the picture of Will Evans in his canoe, a very special memory for the family.

THE EVANS FAMILY LEGACY

William Evans, first cousin of Flournoy E. Miller, Broadway luminary and Columbia native, married Emma Louish Webster (a Maury County school teacher) on March 16, 1906. Six of their ten children grew to adulthood. Three daughters became teachers in the public schools, and two sons served in the U.S. Army during World War II. His youngest son Charles took up the profession of fisherman after his father's death.



Pauline Catherine Evans
- Taught school in Maury County
- moved to California and worked
for the Federal government.



Hattye Mary Evans
- Taught school in Maury Co.
- worked for the Federal
government in Chicago, IL



Gladys Douglas Evans
- Sunday School Superintendent
for over 50 years at St. Paul
A.M.E. Church in Columbia, TN



Charles Morris Evans
- World War II veteran
- gifted sportsman & fisherman
- worked for the Journal Courier
newspaper in Louisville, KY



John Wesley Evans
- World War II veteran
- Attended Tennessee A & I
(on football team)
- resided in Detroit, MI

¹³ In 1917-1918 Rev. Charles W. Kelly was the Pastor at Mt. Lebanon Missionary Baptist Church in Columbia, Tennessee.



WILLIE CAMILLE EVANS
was named after her father.

Camille Howell Day!

Daughter Camille Evans Howell became a highly beloved woman in Maury County. After completing a forty year career in the field of education, Camille remained actively involved in the community. Participating in both church and civic organizations, she sat on many leadership boards in the community. Her level of civic involvement was so highly regarded that the City of Columbia, Tennessee, honored her by proclaiming March 21, 2013 "*Camille Howell Day*." She died in 2014 at age 95, leaving a legacy of forty years in education, civic involvement, and church leadership at St. Catherine Catholic Church in Columbia, Tennessee, that is rarely seen in one person.



CAMILLE EVANS HOWELL
1919-2014

SON-IN-LAW HONORED - Yet another big family honor came to a son-in-law of Will Evans. Randolph Howell, husband of his daughter Camille, was an educator who in 1939 earned a B.S. Degree from A&I State University in Building Trades. He taught for several years in Lincoln, Shelby and Davidson counties before volunteering for military service in World War II. He spent four years in the European Theater (England, France and Germany) in the 583rd Ordnance Amm. Company as Sgt. and 1st Sgt. Upon returning to civilian life in the fall of 1946, he worked first with his dad refinishing furniture. When Carver Smith High School was built in 1948-1949 in Columbia, Randolph Howell was the building director. He was assisted by other veterans including Waddell Johnson, Jack Johnson and Ollie Whitaker. He taught at Carver Smith until 1969 when integration of schools was established, and then he was transferred to Central High School where he taught the first Building Trades Class there. His classes built five houses and also the Ambulance Building at Maury Regional Hospital. Randolph Howell and his wife were active in the community. He became a member of the Maury County Board of Education, St. Catherine Church Board of Directors, United Giver's Fund Board of Directors, Columbia State Community College Foundation Board, Maury Regional Hospital Board of Trustees, and First Farmers & Merchants National Bank Advisory Board of Directors.

HIGH HONORS FROM THE CHURCH - The *Knights of Columbus F. Randolph Howell Assembly 2163* was named in his honor by the Catholic Church. Additionally, Randolph Howell was named "Knight of the Year for the State of Tennessee" and the Howells were also honored subsequently as "Family of the Year."



FREDERICK RANDOLPH HOWELL
Sept. 15, 1917 - Oct. 17, 1984



RANDOLPH HOWELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL – A lasting tribute
In 1999, fifteen years after her husband's death Camille Evans Howell officiated at the grand opening ceremony of Randolph Howell Elementary School on Bear Creek Pike in Columbia, Tennessee. Camille remained very active at the school as long as her health allowed.

GLADYS DOUGLAS EVANS DAVIS

A Lifetime of Church and Community Service in Maury County

Gladys Douglas Evans Davis, daughter of Will and Emma Evans, was the Sunday School Superintendent at St. Paul A.M.E. Church in Columbia, Tennessee, for over 50 years until her passing in 1991.

Always committed to her community, as a young woman she served as a nurse at the Colored Hospital in Columbia. When Carver Smith High School opened directly across the street from her home on East End Street, she began a lifelong career there as a highly praised cook in the footsteps of her grandfather John, the chef at the Bethell House Hotel. Students at Carver Smith knew her as their guardian angel; she made sure that every student had a meal, and if necessary, clothes to wear to school. If the sick and elderly in Columbia needed help, Gladys Davis was there to lend a hand. Her other church activities included President of the Celia Wingfield Circle, Senior Choir, Trustee Board, Maury County Church Women, and Gladys Evans Davis Missionary Society, so named posthumously in her honor. In retirement, she catered social events and volunteered with United Way, Volunteers for Neighbors Concerned, and Meals on Wheels.



GLADYS EVANS DAVIS
1914-1991

THE FOUR OTHER CHILDREN OF WILL AND EMMA EVANS

Although Hattye, Pauline, John and Charles Evans did not spend the remainder of their adult lives in Columbia, each of them had full careers elsewhere. Pauline Evans, however, returned to Columbia after she retired.

HATTYE EVANS HARRIS - After earning a teaching certificate from Tennessee A & I, Hattye taught for a number of years at College Hill School in Columbia. Subsequently, Hattye moved to Chicago, where she worked for and received awards from the federal government. She was Superintendent of the Sunday School at Mandell United Methodist Church for over 25 years and held many statewide positions with UMC and the United Methodist Women.

PAULINE EVANS MITCHELL - Upon graduation from Tennessee A & I University, Pauline taught for a number of years at College Hill School in Columbia. She then left to live in California where she worked for the federal government in Los Angeles until she retired and returned to Columbia.

JOHN WESLEY EVANS - Prior to serving in the Army during World War II, John received a teaching certificate from Tennessee A & I where he played on their football team. John was a memoirist and gifted spoken word poet. After the war he moved to Detroit, Michigan, and developed a number of small businesses.

CHARLES MORRIS EVANS was a highly regarded sportsman in his own right. He served in the Marines in WWII before taking up his father's fishing trade after the war. Subsequently, he moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where he worked first for the American Tobacco Company prior to a long career at the *Courier Journal* newspaper.



Spearheaded by Will Evans's granddaughter, Sandra Seaton, and with the help of several other family members, the newspaper articles, photos and other information used in this article were brought together in tribute to her beloved "Grandpa Will."