

CHASING SHADOWS

What became of Popham's 'oyster factory'

By Pam Richardson
Special to the Times

William Lee Popham, born in 1885 in Kentucky, was a poet, evangelist, romance novelist, and wheeler-dealer real estate promoter who found his way to Apalachicola in 1916.

Discovering St. George Island, he dreamed and schemed about developing a utopian community there that would support itself with oysters. Toward that end, he planted 100,000 barrels of live oysters and shells in Apalachicola Bay and began leasing bay bottom to investors, assuring them of a lifetime income.

In 1923, the smooth-talking, charismatic, and flamboyant Popham, aka "the Oyster King," was elected mayor of Apalachicola. That same year, in anticipation of an oyster bonanza, he hired a young local man, Adolph Maddox, to build a two-story, 61,000-square-foot building on Apalachicola's riverfront. When finished, he opened it with a gala ball and a fly-over by seaplanes from the Pensacola Naval Air Station. "Popham's Oyster Factory No. 1" was spelled out in oyster shells across the front of the building. Inside, its ceilings and walls were made of yellow heart pine with a 3-inch bead, and the floors on both stories were covered in interlocking pieces of heart pine, six-inch wide and two-inch thick.

However, Popham's plum was not to be; instead, the Oyster King was found guilty of income tax evasion and mail fraud and sentenced to four years in a federal penitentiary. He served two of those years and then returned to Apalachicola, all fired up to make another go at even more elaborate plans, but he couldn't get those off the ground either.

Finally, in 1938, up to his ears in debt, he admitted defeat and left for Los Angeles. To this day, he remains a controversial character, some believing he was a shyster, others convinced he was a victim of others' jealousy.

As for Popham's building, it was used, as intended, for processing local oysters and shrimp until it fell into disrepair and, finally, disuse. When Apalachicola native Fred Sawyer, Jr. bought the building in 1948, the middle section of the roof had caved in. Undaunted, Fred cut the building in half, restored the two sections, and installed a ways between them. Fred established his own Sawyer Boat Works in the southern half of the building and rented out the northern half to Roy Smith, a builder of wooden speedboats.

The ways, designed and built by Fred, was the first cradle-lift in this area. If he wanted to work on a boat under cover, he employed an ingenious combination of tracks, wheels, cables, rollers, and a block-and-tackle to maneuver the boat off the ways and into the building for repairs. With a barge and crane, Fred pulled out the dozens of old pilings that had supported the original docks off the back of the building, and then dug out the area to a depth of eight feet, enabling him to erect the nine-stall wet storage structure still seen today.

In a recent conversation with Fred Buck Sawyer, Fred Jr.'s now 83-year-old son explained that before Fred



This painting of the Sawyer Boat Works by Fred Sawyer Jr.'s wife, Doris Buck Sawyer, shows wet storage in foreground, and the Bonita, a 35-foot shrimp boat Sawyer rebuilt, at right.



Fred Sawyer Jr. in the 22-foot boat he built. [PHOTO COURTESY FRED BUCK SAWYER]

Jr. set up shop in Popham's building, he was one of the handful of men who kept the city's electricity operative. The Florida Power Corporation had hired Elgin Wefing to run the generating plant on Water Street (next to the ice house) and Wefing hired a crew that included both Fred Sawyer Jr. and Roy Smith.

The crew worked round the clock to keep the plant running, often on a wing and a prayer, as Fred B. says, especially during the war years. Lucius Allen, the machinist across the street, "performed miracles on a daily basis," making and repairing all sorts of parts. When the power company finally built transmission lines across the bay, Fred Jr., in partnership with his close friend, Homer Marks, bought and ran the ice house which serviced the seafood industry, businesses, the air base during the war, and private residences.

When Fred B. was in his teens, he worked for his father at the ice house, and remembers loading a truck with 25-pound blocks of ice and delivering them to local grocery stores, clubs - like the Blue Goose on the Hill - and homes with iceboxes. But with the advent of small, efficient ice machines,

which sold ice more conveniently and at less cost, Fred Jr. wisely decided to get out of the ice business and devote himself exclusively to his boat works.

Fred B. said his father could "build and fix anything having to do with boats" - which he quickly amended to "build and fix anything." And Fred Jr.'s skills were not limited to woodworking; he also had much mechanical know-how and repaired hundreds of boat engines. If there was something he couldn't figure out, he read up on it or, as in the case of diesel engines, he took a correspondence course.

In business for over 30 years, Fred Jr. designed, built, repaired, and rebuilt a huge number of boats, including a barge for the National Wildlife Refuge on St. Vincent Island. Fred B. remembers the Bonita, a 35-foot shrimp boat his father completely rebuilt - everything but the keel and some of its timbers - because he loved its lines.

"In those days," Fred B. said, "a boat builder would go to Wefings Marine for all his construction supplies. Mr. Elgin Wefing could get you anything you wanted; it was the best marine supply place in the area." But for

one particular 22-foot cabin boat that Fred Jr built from scratch, he made the strut and rudder himself so that they would precisely fit the boat.

Fred B. speculates that a defining experience of his father's life may have been his apprenticeship, during his teenage years, with Rudolph Marshall, son of one of the highly respected Marshall brothers.

In 1885, Rudolph's grandmother, Wilhelmina "Minnie" Marshall, came with her five boys from Baltimore to Apalachicola after the death of her Azores-born sailor husband. The boys all became building contractors, and later many of their sons followed in their fathers' footsteps. The various Marshall carpenter/contractors contributed enormously to the character of Apalachicola by building a large number of its homes, many of them stately.

Fred B. remembers that the second generation of Marshall boys also owned businesses associated with the building trades. For example, Dwight Marshall had a lumber and building supply company, Neuman Marshall had a concrete business and could do just about anything with concrete, John Marshall Jr.



Fred Sawyer, Jr.

was a cabinet-maker and city engineer, and Rudolph Marshall built speedboats of exceptional quality and speed.

Rudolph, born in 1891 to George and Mary Eliza Marshall, grew up on 15th Street in Apalachicola. In 1910, he was already working as a carpenter, probably helping his father on his many house construction contracts, and for the next 20 years in Apalachicola he built both houses and boats. The bungalow-style home on Avenue B across from Lafayette Park is one example of a house built by Rudolph Marshall.

His boats were runabouts - open boats with no cabins. They were skillfully crafted, highly varnished and beautiful, built of Philippine mahogany and local white cedar ("juniper") from the Blountstown area. Fred B. says "they were built like the finest piece of furniture you ever saw."

And they were fast. After World War I, Rudolph bought surplus airplane engines to install in his boats, making it possible for them to run at astonishing speeds. The Lady Popham, a boat Rudolph built for William Lee Popham, clocked out at 60 mph, which rivaled the speed of a Model A Ford. On at least one occasion, Rudolph loaded one of his runabouts onto a flatbed rail car and had it hauled up to the Great Lakes where he competed in races with men such as Guy Lombardo and

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