Oral History Interview
With

N. Floyd McGowin

Chapman, Alabama
March 16, 1976

By Elwood R. Maunder
Forest History Foundation, Inc.

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Elwood R. Maunder: Could you give a little background on the family's origins? How did the McGowin family come to be located here in Chapman, Alabama?

N. Floyd McGowin: I don't know who the McGowins were Before my great grandfather [Samuel Lewis McGowin.] A great many of them came in from Georgia and South Carolina when this state was opened. My grandfather [Alexander McGowin] was born in Escambia County, Alabama, near Brewton. I remember him very well. He was a Confederate veteran, one of seven brothers who fought in the war.

ERM: Was your father born in Brewton, too?

NFM: No, he was born on one of the farms that my great-grandfather started near Brewton.

ERM: What kind of farms were they?

NFM: They grew corn, raised cattle, and they were cotton farmers as well. They were also in the lumber business. My grandfather's place was just a few miles from the Conecuh River that flowed down into Pensacola, Florida. My grandfather was one of several people who put up a sawmill there. They cut longleaf pine logs into square timbers which were then sold and shipped abroad.

ERM: Was that the first venture of your family into the lumber business?

NFM: As far as I know, if was.

ERM: Your father grew up with some real acquaintances with sawmilling.

NFM: I should think so. But I don't know how much. I heard him tell of how he drove a team of oxen from his father's home to Brewton to pick up supplies which were to be sold in a little family-run store on the farm. My father said that at the age of fifteen he was driving a team of oxen back and forth to Brewton. He'd have to spend a night on the road each way. But he survived that very well. He went to high school in Brewton. That was a great thing for him. Later on he did a short stint at a business school in Lexington, Kentucky. He cam back after that and joined his brother-in-law in the firm of Robbins & McGowin which was quite successful and, as a matter of fact, is still in existence in Brewton. Mr. Robbins married one of my father's sisters. The two older brothers of my father, Joseph and Alexander, jr., went into the lumber business as

very young men, first in Brewton and later in Mobile. They did very well. One of my aunts married Mr. W. E. Foshee. He came to Chapman in 1903 with his father and brothers and bought W. T. Smith Lumber Company. In 1905, my father's two older brothers and he bought a controlling interest in the company.

ERM: The W. T. Smith Lumber Company went through a great many changes of ownership.

NFM: In the beginning, you're right. But from 1905 to 1966 there was very little change in ownership except through family changes and inheritance.

ERM: What role did the Louisville & Nashville Railroad play in opening up this part of Alabama to lumbermen?

NFM: The railroad made it possible. I know my grandfather came through here by train en route to joining his company at the time of the Civil War.

ERM: This area must have been rather primitive until the railroad opened it up.

NFM: Of course, it was.

ERM: What was the economy based upon prior to 1883 and 1884 when K. L. Davis built the fist sawmill here?

NFM: Completely rural. It was farming for the most part. As I recall, eight out of every ten people still lived in the country. Every town of any size was a "trading center" for the surrounding area.

ERM: And that rural agriculture was carried on largely by the same migrant Scotch and Irish and English settlers of which the McGowins were a part.

NFM: That's right. They were largely slave owners. I remember the sons of slaves who had worked for our family and lived with us. I remember one incident very clearly. We were sitting around our dining room table. There must have been a dozen of us there when Uncle Charlie, well along in years, who was waiting on the table, came walking fast into the dining room and said to my father, "Old man Floyd dead." Old man Floyd was a slave and he stayed with us always. I tell this to show how close we were with the Blacks in our small community. Floyd, by the way, were my name comes from, derives from my grandmother's family name. There is a Floyd County in Georgia.

For some time Alabama was not open for colonization. When it was declared open, our people rode in as quickly as possible on horses and in wagons to stake land claims, most of which they had been over here looking at earlier.

ERM: Did the railroad offer any inducements to settlements here?

NFM: The mere fact that it was here answers that question.

ERM: Did the railroad own much of the land in Alabama?

NFM: I don't know that it amounted to much.

ERM: Do you know whether the Louisville & Nashville Railroad received alternate sections of land from the federal government for building a line through to the Gulf?

NFM: I've never heard of it.

ERM: How much do you know about K. L. Davis's successors who bought the mill here in Chapman in September 1887?*

NFM: Very little.

ERM: In 1891 the property was bought by Mr. W. T. Smith of Birmingham.

NFM: That's right. Mr. Smith was a prominent man in Alabama at the time. He was important to the Baptist church, if I'm not mistaken. He came here and bought the Rocky Creek Lumber Company, changed the name to W. T. Smith Lumber Company, and later he sold out to the Foshees.

ERM: That was S. J. Foshee and his three sons, S. S., L. J., and W. E. A nephew, Alexander McGowin, Jr., was also involved and all of these men were from Brewton. Alex McGowin was your uncle.

NFM: That's right.

ERM: The other McGowins didn't come in until later. The Foshees bought this property in December 1902 from Smith. Then in 1905, Alex McGowin, Jr., J. F. McGowin, J. G. McGowin, W. E. Foshee, and W. M. McGowin all became partners in the venture. This was the entrance of your father into management of a lumber business, wasn't it?

NFM: He lived in Mobile before he came to Chapman. There he was with McGowin Lumber and Export Company.

ERM: What was the McGowin Lumber and Export Company? Was this the company started before the W. T. Smith Lumber Company came under McGowin family control?

NFM: Yes. I remember Uncle Joe had a sawmill of his own in Mobile. He'd buy logs and float them down the river to his mill. My father may have had something to do with that operation. I know he lived several years of his life in Mobile. My brother Julian was born there.

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*For fuller account of the origins of the W. T. Smith Lumber Company and the Rocky Creek Lumber Company see interview with Earl M. McGowin, pp. 30-31; 36.

ERM: Mobile was a big sawmill town at that time, and it depended on logs floated what river?

NFM: Various rivers that flowed into Mobile Bay.

ERM: What do you remember of what your father related about his early days in the lumber business?

NFM: My father insisted that we, as boys ten or eleven years old, take responsibilities. Even in the summertime when we had nothing to do, he'd make us water boys at the planing mill or put us to doing light work around the mill. He wanted everybody to have a definite job to do. I look back on it with much pleasure.

ERM: What kinds of jobs were you given to do in the plant?

NFM: Water boy was usually the first one you would have. You'd take the bucket over to a well, fill it, and bring it back to the workers in the mill.

ERM: This was during the early part of this century, from 1905 up to World War I. You were then just a youngster growing up.

NFM: I was born in 1900 and I must have been only about five years old when we came here to Chapman to live. I was the oldest of the children in the family. The first child had died when he was only a baby.

ERM: You were then the second son; Earl was the third; Julian was the fourth. Your sister, Estelle, came next, the only daughter. A fifth son, Nicholas, was the last born. That's quite a good-size family. Did you all live together here at one time, in Chapman?

NFM: We certainly did, yes.

ERM: At that time, you were living in what your father called a "sawmill house."

NFM: I suppose he called it that because it was one of the houses that came with the property.

ERM: What events caused the growth of the lumber industry back in those years between 1905 and the outbreak of World War I? Weren't there a number of things happening in the world that were influencing the growth of the lumber industry while you were growing up in Chapman?

NFM: More people were coming into the South to set up their businesses. The railroads and steamships attracted people.

ERM: There were some important changes in the area of transportation that influenced growth of your company then?

NFM: Very much so.

ERM: It wasn't just the railroads; automobiles were coming in.

NFM: Yes, of course. I remember the first automobiles which were here. My uncle, William Foshee, bought the first one, an Overland. My father bought a Ford and later a Franklin.

ERM: Didn't they greatly open up the world to you? They gave you an opportunity to reach out.

NFM: Not to the world, no. We used them only for local driving. The roads were poor. If it started raining, you had to stop.

ERM: How did you see the mill at Chapman prosper in those years? Was this a going concern or was it a time of hardship for the people in the business?

NFM: It was a going affair. It was doing well.

ERM: Chapman was a company town, wasn't it?

NFM: Yes.

ERM: When did it become a company town? From its very beginning or when your father took over?

NFM: When Mr. Smith had it. He provided housing, churches, and schools for his people.

ERM: Your father seems to have risen very swiftly to a leadership role in the company after he first moved to Chapman from Mobile in 1905.

NFM: That's true. He immediately became secretary and treasurer of the company and served in that capacity until he was elected president in January 1925.

ERM: Your father's older brothers were in a strong position in the early years.

NFM: Uncle Alex and Uncle Joe became stockholders in 1904 and Uncle Alex served as secretary. They were not residents of this community. Uncle Alex had homes in Brewton and Mobile. Uncle Joe lived in Mobile but he was active in management. In April 1905 Uncle Alex was elected president.

ERM: How did the company get its timber in the early days? It didn't own all the land at that stage.

NFM: No, but they owned enough land. They had enough to run the mill as far as they could see into the future. The fact that they were there meant that they had the acreage behind them. From the very beginning they bought adjoining properties. During the

early years they bought the Dunham Lumber Company, which was only six miles south of here, and the Empire Lumber Company in Andalusia, Alabama. I remember when I was about thirteen years old my father had to go to Detroit to negotiate for the purchase of a large tract of timber. He took my mother, a nurse, and all of us children with him. One of the big league baseball teams was staying in the same hotel and Earl and I rode up and down in the elevators just to be with the players. About 1929 they bought the Schuster Springs Lumber Company over in west Alabama.

ERM: In going through correspondence of the company which Olive Spann, your secretary, made available to me, I noted a number of things that I'd like you to comment upon. The company seems to have been closely related in its financial affairs with the Merchants National Bank of Mobile. When it needed to borrow money for any purpose, it turned to this bank. Were there any other banks you dealt with besides Merchants?

NFM: The First National Bank of Mobile was the largest bank in Mobile at the time. Naturally, we did lots of business with them. When the Merchants Bank was started, my uncle was one of the incorporators, I think. Up until my father's death, or maybe it was just a little before, we always kept an account with First National Bank of Mobile as well as First National in Montgomery, but as time went on, we gave more and more of our business to the Merchants. It was only in my time that we left the First altogether.

ERM: What percentage of the Merchants Bank stock was owned by your uncle?

NFM: He was a substantial stockholder.

ERM: Have you and your family become stockholders in that bank, too?

NFM: I don't like to say this but I'm one of the five or six largest stockholders in the Merchants Bank.

ERM: I note a short letter written by your father on February 21, 1931 to the Merchants National at Mobile in which he writes: "Gentlemen: It is our custom to send the banks we are doing business with once a year a condensed statement of our annual Auditor's report, and we are enclosing one herewith for you." In deeper probing of the records that seems to have been a regular procedure.

NFM: It was up until we sold the company.

ERM: Your father apparently played a very widespread and important role in the local community here. He was not only the general manager of the mill and later the president of the company, but his correspondence would indicate that he also had a rather vital role in the educational and religious life of the community. I wonder if you could comment on that. What part did he play in education of the local people?

NFM: He and my mother belonged to the Universalist Church as did all of their kinfolk. How much do you know about the Universalist Church?

ERM: I know it's closely allied to and became a part of the Unitarian Church.

NFM: That's true. We had a fine church in Brewton, with a nice parsonage. By the way, it is still there. that parsonage later was the house in which I was born.

ERM: Your father was an active churchman?

NFM: Oh, yes, he was an active churchman. The minister from Brewton came up to Chapman at least once a month to do Sunday preaching.

ERM: Who took services when he didn't come?

NFM: The Baptists and the Methodists. The church building was there for everybody. It was a community church. The building was owned by the company, of course, but the various denominations took turns in using it.

ERM: The community, therefore, was totally built and owned by the company.

NFM: Chapman was an incorporated town. The company owned almost 100 percent of the land and buildings W. T. Smith Lumber Company, most of the houses, the community house and the church were torn down. The town was unincorporated although there is still a post office. With automobiles and good roads, employees can drive to work from anywhere they choose to live.

When the church was torn down, they asked me if I wanted to buy the belfry and I took it. I have it preserved on my home premises.

ERM: As long as the McGowin family controlled the company, it did remain a company town?

NFM: Yes.

ERM: What could you say about the social relationships within the community in that kind of setting? You grew up in it. You worked in it. How did you see it as a community?

NFM: It was considered a fine community. There were good schools. In fact, when the county school system was operating on a six-month basis, the school in Chapman was operated nine months. The company subsidized it. There were churches, a swimming pool, tennis court, hotel, cleaning establishment, baseball diamonds, general store, barber shop—in other words, the needs of the people were met. There were even silent movies shown on Saturday nights. You must remember in those days transportation except by train was almost non- existent. As I told you, if one had an automobile, the roads were terrible. A trip to the county seat, fifteen miles away, took all day. My mother was very active in community affairs and took a lively interest in young people.

ERM: From where did you get your labor force for the mills and the woods?

NFM: Throughout the countryside.

ERM: How many mills did you have during the most active time in your manufacturing period?

NFM: We had three sawmills here at Chapman, one veneer mill and box factor, and two heading mills and a tight barrel stave mill. We had another sawmill and a planing mill at Greenville. We also had sawmills and planing mills in west Alabama in Ruthven, Fountain, and Linden.

ERM: Were those purchases made before your father's death, or afterwards?

NFM: All before his death. As I recall, we bought none of them after he died.

ERM: What were the conditions here after the end of World War I? Were any members of the family directly involved in World War I?

NFM: As far as the family was concerned, I was the only one. When I was eighteen years old and at the University of Alabama, I joined one of the earlier officer training programs and was sent to training school out at Little Rock, Arkansas. I was just on the point of being given a second lieutenant rating when the Armistice of 1918 was signed. Another two weeks and I would have had my bars. But then I was happy to get out.

ERM: What were the conditions here in Chapman as you recall them then? Your father was not yet president of the company. How would you describe him at that time physically and in other ways?

NFM: He was a man who would get up early every morning. He loved to walk all over the property. He would walk into each of the mills each morning and then come back home for breakfast. He made a habit of that. He could call the name of any employee there. Even to this day people all speak of him.

ERM: In other words, he was a person who really wanted to be close to every aspect of the work that was being done in his mills.

NFM: That's right.

ERM: Did that involve a lot of travel to other mills that he owned?

NFM: He wouldn't go everyday, of course, but he'd go often enough to know what was going on.

ERM: And you feel that he knew the people there in the same way that he knew them here?

NFM: Oh, yes. He knew his management. He didn't know the labor except those that had been with him a long time.

ERM: What part did he have in the school system here?

NFM: He was it. There were two schools—one in the village of Chapman and the other on the outskirts at what was known as "Old Mill Hill," the site of the first mill. The people there joined the county in putting up a school. In Chapman we had one school just for the pupils who lived right around here. Schools had to be within walking distance.

ERM: Did all the children of the community go to that school, black and white?

NFM: No, no. We had black schools.

ERM: You had a black school.

NFM: Absolutely. And everywhere else in the South.

ERM: And a white school in Chapman.

NFM: Yes. The black schools generally were larger. They had more pupils. There was a black church, too.

ERM: You said that your father managed the affairs of the schools. Did he do it all himself or did he hire teachers?

NFM: He hired the teachers one at a time. He did not hire the black teachers, the black people did all that.

ERM: They chose their own teachers?

NFM: As far as I know they did, yes. Or maybe the county school board would do that, but as far as I know the white school was run by my father and those of us who succeeded him.

ERM: From the mid-1920s onward, things began to be a little hard in the lumber industry, didn't they?

NFM: Yes.

ERM: Was the Depression something that came early to the lumber business as compared to the rest of the Alabama economy?
NFM: No, it all went together.

ERM: It went down together following the stock market crash in 1929?

NFM: Yes.

ERM: What do you remember about your father's reaction to these sudden changes in the economic situation? You had had a relatively prosperous period of time prior to this. Now things became rather tough. How did he react to this?

NFM: He took it in his stride. It didn't bother him too much. He knew exactly what was going on. Then he began telling us that the federal government would begin taking over. He said to the rest of us, "This is what the law requires, now you watch and see that it gets don't that way."

ERM: Was he referring particularly to the Lumber Code Authority of the NIRA?*

NFM: Yes. "If you are supposed to get such and such a price, sell it at that. Don't sell it too low or too high."

ERM: Would you say he was a strict believer in the law and put his trust in a government of laws rather than a government of men?

NFM: I don't know what you mean by that. A government of men is what we are talking about—which is law, too. But he had respect for the law, too, you're right. It's not just what somebody wants to do, it's what the law tells him he has to do.

ERM: I interpret what you just said as evidence that your father believed, even though he didn't like some of this legislation, that everyone should abide by it until it was changed.

NFM: That's it exactly.

ERM: He was a man of very strong principles, I gather.

NFM: Yes, he was.

ERM: How did you see that demonstrated? Can you relate any anecdotes that show what kind of man he was?

NFM: Now that you ask, those things have escaped me. I certainly did witness a good many of them. I can't answer right now.

ERM: What was your father's relationship to his fellow lumbermen?

NFM: He like [sic] them. He belonged to all of the associations and the Southern Pine Association was the main one. Later we went into some others. But that gave him an opportunity to know and see all the other executives. It meant a lot to him. We'd go to New Orleans for the annual meeting and, of course, he'd go other places, too. But he liked to keep up with those things and the other men in the business.

ERM: Who would you say were his most intimate friends in the lumber business?

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*National Industrial Recovery Act of 16 June 1933, 48 Stat. 195. *See also* Appendix D, pp. 123-9.

NFM: There were so many, I don't know. But I remember Mr. E. L. More. You've seen some of their correspondence. Mr. More was a man much older than my father who married a young lady in Nashville. When they came home, they got off the train at Chapman and came over to our house where we entertained them for a day and a night, whatever it was. Mr. More was originally of a Tennessee family, evidently quite well-to-do. One morning my father was told that Mr. More had died. He motored down to Andalusia and when he got there, Mr. More surprisingly came to the door to greet him. Mr. More always liked to recall my father's surprise. He considered it a good joke.

ERM: It reminds me of a story of Mark Twain who under similar circumstances said, "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." You say your father was an active member of associations.

NFM: Southern Pine Association was one of the main ones.

ERM: Was he also active in the National Lumber Manufacturers Association?

NFM: No. He was never a member of the NLMA.

ERM: What about some of the other local or regional associations like the Sawmill Operators Association?

NFM: I don't know about the Sawmill Operators. Or course, you had the hardwood people that developed an association, finally. You had to belong to that. They you had the oak flooring people. You had to belong to that.

ERM: What percentage of your wood production was hardwood and what percentage was pine?

NFM: That's pretty hard for me to say but I'd guess that at least 70 percent was in pine.

ERM: What were you cutting mainly in the first quarter of this century, old growth or second growth?

NFM: Old growth.

ERM: When did your old growth reach its end?

NFM: Sometime around 1912, 1914, or 1915.

ERM: This then was before you had grown to manhood and had become part of the company.

NFM: We were still cutting some fine old timber as late as 1920. I remember a few cases of that. You had to wait until you could get a railroad track to it or until you could build a road for trucks.

ERM: What do you recall about changes in technology? I believe you can recall ox teams. They you got into railroad logging. Truck logging came along eventually.

NFM: That's right and that was good for us. The trucks could go anywhere and we didn't have to lay railroad or build and maintain railroad beds. That is very expensive to do. My brother Julian was one of the people who knew a great deal about that, particularly about logging in the back places.

ERM: Were you boys trained differently? Did you perform different jobs within the company?

NFM: With years of various job assignments behind us, after the death of our father, I handled production, Earl was in charge of sales, and Julian had the Responsibility of growing and harvesting the trees.

ERM: Each one had a diversified knowledge of the business.

NFM: Yes, we did.

ERM: And you were more involved with what?

NFM: I started in charge of the veneer mill, box factory, and slack barrel heading mill. My first assignment was to manage these. I was told to take over and that was it.

ERM: When you talk about a heading mill, you are talking about the caps that are put on barrels, aren't you?

NFM: Yes. The barrel has got an end to it and we knew it as heading.

ERM: Did you make the whole barrel or just the headings?

NFM: We made only the pine headings which went largely into slack barrels. We also had a stave mill which manufactured white and red oak staves. The better white oak staves were shipped to whiskey distillers in Kentucky. The red oak staves went to oil companies in the East. Remember that lubricants were shipped in barrels in those days.

ERM: You talked about the box business. Was that a business your father developed?

NFM: Our company wasn't alone in developing this. Most of the southern timber industry people had something of the sort. The idea was to use pieces that you couldn't sell otherwise. For instance, at our planning mill the boards were twelve, sixteen, and twenty feet long and maybe they'd cut off parts of these. We picked up the short pieces and took them down to the box factory where they would be cut up into box lengths. These would go into celery boxes or pineapple boxes we sent to the islands. We did a thriving business with vegetable shippers of New York State.

ERM: How was that market established? Did you have your own salesmen or did you operate through wholesale lumbermen in New York?

NFM: We had a man in New York with some experience who was our agent.

I have a story to tell you. Along in the early 1930s, I found myself in Cincinnati. We all did a good deal of traveling then on various accounts. I walked up to register in the hotel and told the clerk who I was. He said, "I know who you are. You don't have to tell me who you are." I said, "How is that?" He said, "A few years ago when I was a very young boy, I went to the Universalist Church in Brewton, Alabama and I remember your mother playing the violin. I thought she was the most wonderful woman in the world." You see that's how they felt about her.

ERM: Your father and mother were both interested in cultural things. Tell me, how was this revealed to you as a young boy growing up?

NFM: I don't know just how to answer you on that. We traveled a good deal. We were musicians and we all read a great deal and we had lots of guests.

ERM: What encouragement were you given to read as a boy?

NFM: A great deal, as I recall. Living with us was my mother's eldest sister, Stella, who was never married. She taught kindergarten at Chapman. We all went to her in our early age. She taught private kindergarten for a few families when we were all very, very young.

ERM: Was this true for all the children of the McGowin family?

NFM: Yes, and there were some others in the community that would come, too, by invitation. My aunt also taught Sunday school, but that she did with most everybody. We went to school in a building which is still standing. W. T. Smith had built it originally as a servants' house. It was no longer used, so my aunt set it up as a kindergarten. From there I went to grade school in Chapman and then to the Greenville High School when I was thirteen or fourteen years old.

ERM: Was your father solely responsible for hiring and firing teachers then?

NFM: I think he was.

ERM: He was the school board.

NFM: I think so, yes. That's my recollection.

ERM: He was also the main deacon or elder of the church then, too, I would imagine.

NFM: As far as the Universalist Church, yes.

ERM: Was the Universalist Church composed of a wide spectrum of people in this local community?

NFM: No, most of the local people were Baptists or Methodists.
Although many people did come into the Universalist Church in our town. The ministers that came up from Brewton and other places were much easier to listen to than the fire-and-brimstone boys.

I want to tell you another story. My mother and father lived in Brewton, Alabama, as I told you. There they had cousins and friends, all of them in the Universalist Church. One day it happens the town was having one of those week-long revivals at the Baptist Church and the traveling evangelist who was doing all the talking handed out some printed flyers on which were printed the words, "Hell in Brewton." He urged everyone to come to the revival and he'd tell them what kind of hell was being visited on them. Everybody was interested to know, of course. So everybody in town went to the Baptist Church that evening, including my parents and their cousins and all. They were them among the most prominent people in the town. When this evangelist fellow got around in his sermon to telling about the hell in Brewton, he identified it as the Universalist Church. When he said that, Mr. T. R. Miller who was one of the town's leading citizens and a good Universalist got up and along with my father and all seven of eight of his kinfolks, including their wives, just plain walked out. At that time the Universalist Church had a very small wooden building in which to hold services, but shortly after this incident, a very nice new church was built.

ERM: Were the McMillans in the community at that time, or did they come later?

NFM: They had always lived there. I think Ed Leigh McMillan's father was sheriff. He married into the Miller family. In fact, some of my cousins are married to McMillans. The Millers and my grandfather came up together.

ERM: There was a very closely knit community of families in the lumber industry through these parts, I would gather from what you tell. Does this remain rather close?

NFM: I would say nothing like it was. For instance, now Bill Harrigan is one of the main ones that we know because of the lumber business. He's one of our friends because we were in the same business. That's how we happen to know him. Bill and I are great friends. We've gone abroad several times together.

ERM: You've all been associated, too, in other activities within the trade associations.

NFM: You are quite right.

ERM: Going back to your father's relations with the church, I ran into a letter of his dated April 8, 1927 and addressed to a Dr. E. C. Moore of Brewton. He was trying to discourage Dr. Moore from coming up to preach the following Sunday because there was too much other activity of the Baptists and the Methodists going on.

NFM: I don't remember him.

ERM: Your father was eulogized on January 20, 1934 in *The Universalist Herald* of the Universalist Church on the occasion of his death.* Lyman Ward, the writer of that particular obituary, was most high in his praise.

NFM: Oh, yes. I remember him. He ran a private school in Camp Hill, Alabama.

ERM: What sort of health did your father have during his life?

NFM: Excellent. He was always in good health. He did have a serious operation, however, in 1928, appendicitis. He recovered from that, but later developed adhesions and had to return to the hospital for another operation in December 1933. After two weeks in the hospital, he developed pneumonia and died. He had been doing so well our mother had gone to visit our sister in the East. She came back as soon as she could, and was in the room with him. I was there, too.

ERM: He had been writing to your mother.**

NFM: Yes, he had told her of visiting the other mills and except for a cold was feeling well.

ERM: You have mentioned E. L. More of the Horseshoe Lumber Company in River Falls, Alabama. On one occasion your father sent a little mare down to be bred with a stallion at the More estate. Your father suggested a fancy name for it in writing to Mr. More.

NFM: I remember that very well. The foal was a fine horse and we youngsters rode it quite a bit. I don't remember a fancy name but I do know that we called it Fox.

ERM: What did your father like to do with his leisure time? Was he a hunter or fisherman?

NFM: When other people mentioned hobbies, he referred to his farm as his recreation. He had bought some property near Chapman, dammed up a small stream and built a large lake. He built a small cabin and a boathouse where he kept several rowboats. He loved to fish with a rod and reel. He bought some swans but after a few years they fell prey to shooters and natural enemies despite all he could do. Here at the farm he kept his horses, peacock, deer, guineas, turkeys, and raise cattle. His crops included sugar cane and every fall he made syrup. He had fig trees, pecan trees, pear trees, and peach trees. He particularly took pleasure in sending peaches to his friends when he had a bountiful crop. We all spent time at the farm riding, swimming, hiking, and enjoying the many pursuits

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*James Greeley McGowin died January 1, 1934. For a copy of this article see Appendix C, p. 120.

**For a copy of the last recorded letter J. G. McGowin wrote to Essie Stallworth McGowin, see Appendix B, pp. 117-118.

it provided. While my father did occasionally go quail shooting, he was not what you would call a hunter.

ERM: He wasn't taking you youngsters out all the time and training you to be crack shots?

NFM: Oh, no. Everybody did his own thing.

ERM: What do you remember most fondly about things you did with your father when you were a boy?

NFM: As I told you, I personally remember my walking around the mills every morning before breakfast with him. I did that for a long time. We had a very normal, happy way of doing that. He was so kind to us. He wanted us to go to the best schools. Earl had received a Rhodes Scholarship after completing his senior year at the University of Alabama. He, my father, and I were talking about that one day when my father said to me, "Why don't you go, too?" I was two years older than Earl, had graduated from the University of Alabama, and had already started work in our company. I immediately told him that I would be delighted to go. later my brothers Julian and Nick were also sent to study at Oxford. It was the best thing he ever did for us. He died while Nick was in Spain on vacation from Oxford. He sent all four sons to Oxford but he was never abroad himself. He'd been to Mexico and Canada but had never gone to Europe.

ERM: Did you and Earl live together in the same digs at Oxford?

NFM: Yes, after Earl was accepted at Pembroke College, I applied and was also accepted. I did a great deal of reading in English literature. We had a sitting room, very large, and off of it were two very small bedrooms. Most students quarters were just single rooms but we, being a pair, were looked out for very well.

ERM: Did you take all your meals in the commons?

NFM: No. The scout brought breakfast and lunch on a tray toyour room. We lived in a pretty high way. In the evening we would dine in the great hall. Everybody went there, including the Master.

ERM: Your father believed greatly in giving you boys and your sister the very finest education?

NFM: Yes, that was his object.

ERM: I know he wrote his friends E. L. More, when Mr. More was ill, that he would like to come and visit him but that he couldn't because he was committed to going to your sister's graduation at Vassar. I presume he attended the exercises at which you were graduated from Alabama?

NFM: I don't think so. Mother was there but I don't think he was. He probably had some reason he could not be there.

ERM: What stirred your interest in music?

NFM: My mother was a musician. She went to Barton Academy on Government Street in Mobile. She played the violin very well. She taught music in Brewton and that's where my father met her.

ERM: Tell me about her family background.

NFM: Her grandparents came from the Edgefield District of South Carolina and settled in Monroe County, where her father, Nicholas Stallworth, was born. He married there in 1858 and some year later moved to Ennis, Texas, where he went into the mercantile business and where my mother was born. After a couple of years, he moved on to New Mexico where he bought a silver mine in Indian territory. My mother and Aunt Stella were just little girls. They traveled from Texas to New Mexico by train. They lived on a ranch in the mountains fifteen miles from the nearest town and twelve miles from the nearest ranch.

After they had been there about a year, her mother died in childbirth and the baby died, too. It was shortly after this that Geronimo and his braves left the reservation and went on the warpath. They attacked the ranch and all day long her father and the ranch hands fought off the Indians. The next morning it was quiet but the Indians had stolen all the horses and they had no way of escaping. They waited three days before some horsemen appeared. Mother said they had come to bury them as they knew they could not survive. Warnings had been sent to all the ranches that Geronimo was on the warpath but the Indians reached the ranch before the couriers. They had to wait until darkness fell to make their escape over the mountains and it took them all night to reach the nearest little town. Mother and Aunt Stella had some fascinating stories about that night. They had to wait three weeks before joining a wagon train to reach the railroad in safety. Eventually they made their way back to Alabama. All during our boyhood they told us stories about this experience in their childhood.*

ERM: I can imagine those were among your favorite stories.

NFM: Yes.

ERM: Do you recall any stories your father told to you about his father?

NFM: My grandfather was a great man. He was very old when I first remember him but I have never forgotten talking to him. He was small in stature and had a very decided brogue, and was a dynamic character. He farmed and ran a country store. He also taught school at one time. He was a great student of the Bible, knowing many passages, and liked to argue religion. He was a Universalist. He was also a student of English grammar, was a stickler for proper pronunciation, correct phrasing, and spelling. He was a very

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*For Essie Stallworth McGowin's personal account of the episode see Appendix A, pp. 92-100.

meticulous person, having a place for everything and everything in its place. It was said that he could hitch a horse or do any chores around the barn in the dark as he knew exactly where to put his hands on every article there. He was industrious and thrifty. The family would always tell me that I was like him and that my penchant for grammar, proper pronunciation, et cetera, came from him. I remember on one of his visits to Chapman I said to him, "Grandpa, they are building a new depot for us across the tracks." He replied, "How will the trains get by?" In the last month of his life, when it was obvious that he was very sick, Uncle Joe took him to Mobile. In that great, beautiful house he had, as you walked into a wide entry, a big room on the right. My cousin Joe Alex was scared to death of Grandpa. He told me that one afternoon he walked in and was trying to slip by so grandfather wouldn't see him, but grandfather did see him and said, "Come here, come here." Joe Alex went and Grandfather said, "Come, sit down, parse sit."

ERM: Your father was a much more mild-mannered person, I take it. He wasn't quite as flamboyant as your grandfather.

NFM: I wouldn't say that. My grandfather wasn't flamboyant. He was just a smart fellow. He knew what was going on. I always enjoyed hearing him talk about words.

ERM: What activities did the family share together? What did you do as a family growing up?

NFM: We usually did a lot of reading, and my mother taught us how to read music.

ERM: Did you read books aloud to each other?

NFM: Yes, we did. My Aunt Stella, of course, was always reading to us.

ERM: Is that where you became acquainted with great literature?

NFM: Possibly so. You don't remember just how those things creep up on you.

ERM: I was wondering if you read any of the classics as a family or whether you read novels.

NFM: We did all of that. We had a good library. My mother saw to that.

ERM: Was this something that the children entered into with enthusiasm?

NFM: More or less, yes.

ERM: Your own interest in literature has flourished in recent years.

NFM: It always has. I started that at the University of Alabama. I became a good friend of Professor Hudson Strode under whom I took my freshman English classes. Later I studied Shakespeare under him. He is still around and his class was one of the best. I occasionally see some of my old college friends and we talk about Hudson and what he

was able to do. He put on the school play once a year. I was in the cast once. He was the one responsible for so many of us liking Shakespeare and many of the others.

ERM: When did you get interested in Johnson?

NFM: When I was at Oxford, where Johnson had attended Pembroke College. I knew something about him before but I had never before taken his writings seriously. I've spent much time happily reading Samuel Johnson.

ERM: I see you have an extremely fine library of Johnson first editions. That, I presume you have developed in recent years.

NFM: During the last twenty. I've come to know many other people who collect his works.

ERM: I wonder if there is anything about your father that you recall that might be useful to add. I have a note here on his relations with his customers. On February 18, 1927, he wrote to Moseley & Gaines of Mobile:

I was over at our Ruthven mill yesterday and noticed that you have not paid them for shipments made January 7th. I told you sometime ago that I wanted to sell you, but I couldn't unless you paid cash for your purchases. I also note that you still owe some here at Chapman that should have been paid before now. I have written to you about this before, but do not seem to get any answers from you. I would like to help you boys out until you get back on your feet again, but you understand I can't afford to sell you unless you can make some arrangements to pay cash for your stock. Be very candid and write to me about these accounts.

NFM: I didn't know there was such a letter. Did they write him anything?

ERM: They never responded, to my knowledge.

NFM: I remember Gaines.

ERM: They evidently were in the retail lumber business.

NFM: I would think they would be in the wholesale or export business. I remember Gaines. I think he must have paid his bills.

ERM: Was this indicative of how your father operated? His letters are always rather short except when he writes to members of the family or to intimate friends, then he writes long letters. His business letters are very tightly drawn and straight to the point. He never was one to mince words. He got right to the point. How do you recall his relations with customers?

NFM: He didn't do any selling himself. He always had a sales manager.

ERM: Back in the twenties, still in your father's lifetime, there was considerable conflict between the people who were farmers in the area and those who were lumbermen over grazing and fire in the woods. How did your father deal with that?

NFM: I don't remember.

ERM: You don't remember that in the earlier days, the farmers burned the woods to bring on the new grass for their cattle?

NFM: I do remember that but I don't remember any details.

ERM: Did your father have any part at all in getting the highway to come through here in 1928?

NFM: I don't think he had anything to do with it.

ERM: That was a state or federal project. How did the coming of the highway affect you all here?

NFM: It made travel much more convenient. That's all.

ERM: Your father sent paid subscriptions to Alabama's principal newspapers to his sons and daughter while they were away attending college, either here or abroad. Do you remember that?

NFM: I remember some being sent to me.

ERM: The *Montgomery Advertiser* and the Mobile paper were very frequently subscribed to in your names.
I have here a few letters that your father wrote during the last years of his life. In these he sets forth some of his philosophy. He describes conditions in the industry as he saw them, especially as they obtained in those early Depression years. I think they are interesting. Here is one that he wrote to A. G. T. Moore of the Southern Pine Association.*

NFM: I remember that man. He was known, I believe, as "Toby" Moore by his friends.

ERM: Mr. S. E. Moreton of the J. J. Newman Lumber Company of Brookhaven, Mississippi was curious to know how the W. T. Smith Lumber Company was able to keep up its sales during the Depression years and he wrote to your father asking him a number of questions bearing on that subject. In response to Mr. Moreton, your father wrote on May 10, 1932:

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*J. G. McGowin to A. G. T. Moore, 14 September 1933, W. T. Smith Lumber Company files, Chapman, Alabama. For a copy of this letter see Appendix D, p. 126.

> I have your letter of the 3rd. I was away from home the latter part of last week, over in Atlanta and Louisville. Everything is most discouraging. We have been able to get probably a little better average by shipping all the export saps and cutting of timbers that we can possibly get orders for, but the wages we are paying look as if it is ridiculous, still it is either that or shut down and if we shut down there is nowhere for our men to make a living. There has been a mill running here for forty-five years or more and a lot of people living here have never worked anywhere else.**

Was that letter indicative of your father's feeling of responsibility to the people of this community?

NFM: Yes.

ERM: I think we've pretty well covered the waterfront this morning, Floyd. Thank you for your time.

**S. E. Moreton to J. G. McGowin, 3 May 1932; J. G. McGowin to S. E. Moreton, 10 May 1932, W. T. Smith Lumber Company files, Chapman, Alabama. For copies of these letters see Appendix D, pp. 123-5.