

The Mabee House in Monteagle

Written by Jackie Layne Partin (2008)

The Mabee House, now known as High Point, holds an interesting spot in the history of Monteagle, Tennessee. The interest was heightened throughout the years by the extreme quiet it exuded during its heyday. So much, or maybe too little, was known or imagined about that extremely private home of Irene Mabee. Who was this lady? How did a child from such a large, financially challenged family get to own one of the biggest private homes at that time in Monteagle? Could all the stories of “what actually went on in that house” be true? Well, having descended from one of those “...*thrifty, sturdy* (Monteagle) *urchins that* (Patti Purnell said) *generally infest the doors of all these mountaineer cabins...*” and being one who calls Monteagle “**home**,” I have always wanted to know about the big house—**if I could know**. Inquisitively and attentively, I listened to the stories handed down and entwined them with my own memories and those of others.



The Mabee House, was it just another family home in Monteagle or a house filled with secrets?

Felicia Irene Mabee, born 09 September 1885, in Moffat Station/Mont Eagle, was a descendant of Oliver Dennis Mabee who was born in Ontario, Canada in **1817**; his father was a New Yorker and his mother from New Jersey. Oliver Dennis came to this area before it was known as Moffat Station, Mont Eagle or Monteagle. He had lastly married Mary Elizabeth Ward in Canada whose father was a New Yorker, but her mother was Canadian born. In the Monteagle Assembly book **Mountain Voices**, it is stated that Oliver D. Mabee arrived on the plateau with John Moffat; the two were business partners. This brings to mind that had Oliver been the more assertive partner, our little town might well have been named Mabee Station; although, assertiveness

probably had nothing to do with it but the amount of money, education or clout one possessed.

In the fall of 1870, when Oliver Dennis Mabee and John Moffat got off the little train known as the Mountain Goat and looked around the thousands of acres of mountainous land and beautiful natural wonders of the area that later would be known as Monteagle, they would have been hard pressed to have found someone with whom to share morning tea, a Canadian custom. The McCoys, Thompsons, Trussells, and 103-year-old Jane Cawthorn were scattered around the southern area of the plateau in Marion County, and “just a ways up the road,” the Hardbargers and a sprinkling of Laynes were eking out a living from the mountain soil. Then further up the way, Bazille Summers and his family had cleared fields that would later be known as the community of “Summer”field. Possibly a few Indians still traversed the plateau via the Nick-a-Jack Trail which was a good footpath in that area between Layne’s Cove and the top of the mountain, but it also extended on either end for many, many miles. Down under the northern bluffs in Hollinsworth/Layne’s Cove, there were families, many my own Layne ancestors, who no doubt, hunted, walked and played in the woods. To the west the little town of Sewanee was trying to pull itself together after the horrible interruption of the Civil War Between the States, so that it could continue work on establishing a church university. And then there was the Mountain Goat, *the little train that knew it could*, which made its trips to load coal being mined in that little town to the east called Tracy City. It alone was the connection that the Mabee family had with that other world—that one out there with houses, cities, shops and scurrying people.

The Mabees chose to settle down on the Marion County side of the railroad tracks that had only been extended through that area a little over a decade before. At first it was lonesome. If Oliver Dennis, Mary Elizabeth and son Charles Byron couldn’t find solace in the natural beauty of the plateau, boredom would have taken over; they would have been desperate to find any semblance of town life. On the other hand, there were houses to built, wells to dig, businesses to set in motion, ground to prepare for spring plantings and fences to stack. After all, they were pioneering this section of the Cumberland Plateau. Those Laynes, Meekses, and Paynes down in the coves around the plateau were eager to find work, and there was plenty to be done right here in the wilderness. After all, they had a town to build.

Before the area post office was at the Old Post House on the Grundy side of the tracks, it was on the Marion County side of the railroad tracks, and Oliver Dennis Mabee was the postmaster as early as January 1871 (**Mountain Voices**). He had been a postmaster and a dentist in Ontario, Canada before he moved to Tennessee. Soon after the **1870** Census was recorded, things began to happen in that spot on the plateau. We might say that present day Monteagle town got its start around the area where the CVS store is now. Little towns could grow up overnight when the potential was obvious. I believe that the first church was right there in Sawmill Hollow which may well be the

church spoken of in the book John Gamp in these words by Elizabeth Purnell on page 102, (these words probably were written around 1895-1900).

*“...With all there is to keep up with inside the Assembly, our walks and drives outside, it seems too much now to attempt to become familiar with the trials and tribulations of all these mountain people...Rome was not built in a day, neither will all the good that the Monteagle Assembly is to accomplish among these people be brought about at once...What of the churches in the village, Karl? ‘There is only one little **union church** back of the stores in the village;...Mr. Tucker is the superintendent of the village Sunday school, and for **many years** he has kept up this union church service’...”*



This is a picture of the church in Saw Mill Hollow and may have been the building that housed the first Monteagle School. The building stood in the area behind where the Diary Queen once stood.

If this be the case, in those early years between 1870 and 1880, Monteagle had a post office, a church and several prominent families living around this spot in the road which included the Mabee and Moffat families. William Shetters operated a store in the same area at the time with Emil Graenicher being possibly a clerk in said store. It is also my understanding that the church building was possibly used as the meeting place for the first Moffat Station/Mont Eagle children to learn their ABC's. I envision the first train stop being in that area instead of down by the present Assembly entrance. The local doctor was W. K. Bowling who had made his way to the mountain from Virginia and lived on the Marion side of the tracks. So we have it all brought together in one little whistle stop that would later become known as the town of Monteagle.

Let's not leave out my side of the railroad tracks in Grundy County. Just who may have had businesses or lived over there in the decade between 1870 and 1880? Well, if Oliver Dennis Mabee needed a photographer, he would have visited C. S. Judd, or if he wanted to draw up a deed or make a will, he would have sought out C. L. Keith or George W. Summers, magistrates for the area. Brown Mankin would have shod his

horses; John Francis could have sold him land or taken care of any real estate projects; his telegrams would have been whizzed out across the wires by John Gilliam Lowrie; if he needed a horse and buggy, the village hucksters were T. J. Tribble and D. S. Freeman. L. W. Stroud was a merchant by trade, so there is the possibility of a store on the Grundy side of town also. And there was a hotel in 1880 with a Mr. Degrosso as the landlord, but I am not certain what that facility would have been since the first Monteagle Hotel was not built until 1881.



Brown Mankin probably built this building and the ones behind it to use for his livery stable. After the Mankins used it, Samuel Gregory used it for a blacksmith shop. It stood on the southeast corner of King and College St. where the Greeter concrete works is now in operation. Behind it was the house that my Uncle Alex Benson Layne always called the Jennie Warren house, later the home of Fred and Ruby Kennedy.

Now to some other people of the new settlement—those who worked on the railroad, washed the clothes, cooked the meals, made the liquor, aka moonshine, mended the shoes, operated the boarding houses, etc.—those interesting people who were the support groups for the entrepreneurs who were busy making and losing money—what were some of their names? Did Oliver Dennis Mabee get to meet Cornelius Long, Absolom Stephens, D. L. Rollins, Martin Shetters, Samuel Gregory, James Bennett, George Barnes, Robert Weir, J. L. Ray, Stephen Metcalfe, William Wright, William Hands, Mary Hunt, George Seely, G. B. Lappin, Jane Huddleston, Elijah Shetters, Preston Lane, William Rollins, Mary Parson, Benjamin Reed, Israel Partin, G. H. Gilliam, Jacob Young, George King, William McCoy and Cinda Martin of **John Gamp** fame? In 1880 these were some of the hard-working folks of our new little village. Some were of color or mulatto, but they were all just as important a part in building the little village as were the business folks.

I assume that Oliver Dennis and Mary reared their family in the vicinity of where the now Monteagle School is located; it could, of course, have stood on or very near where the Highpoint Restaurant is today. Once I was told that the land, where the present Monteagle School now stands, was donated by someone in the Mabee family, but I can not substantiate that idea. For the sake of continuity in the Mabee family, let's get to know Oliver Dennis' son Charles Byron Mabee born 1856. According to the Grundy County marriage records, sixteen-year-old Charles Mabee married Mary Ann McGeorge on 26 Nov 1872 with W. L. Parks the acting justice of the peace; Isaac Lain

and Charles himself signed the bond. In the 1880 Census record Charles and his wife Maria E. Mabee are the parents of Oliver, Alice and Lissie. There seems to be some discrepancy about Charles wife's name. The only Mary McGeorge in and around Mont Eagle at that time (1880) was a divorced woman who was a servant in the James Posey home. Maria Evelyn Mabee was listed as being the mother of Carl Furman Mabee on her son's WWI registration papers in 1918, so unless there were two Charles Mabee's, at that time and place, I cannot explain the discrepancy. The questions to ponder are "Did Charles Byron Mabee marry Mary Ann McGeorge or Maria Evelyn Collins?" or Did he marry Mary Ann and divorce her to marry Maria Evelyn? This is an important topic for descendants who may or may not descend from one woman or the other. In 1880 Charles and Maria E. Mabee were living very near John Lane, his wife, and baby daughter named Maria E. Lane. There were Collins' family members living in the Mabee and Lane household. I find this interesting, especially the name Mariah E. for the young child. I lean toward the idea that Charles Byron Mabee married Mary Ann McGeorge; then quickly divorced her, and then married or took Maria Evelyn Collins to be his wife. I think this is probably the best explanation for the discrepancies until other evidence is brought forth.

In **1880**, Charles Byron, Maria and their three children, Oliver, Alice and Lizzie were living next household to his parents. Doesn't this indicate at least two Mabee homes on the Marion County side of town? There were servants and boarders in their house at that time. This makes me believe that Charles and Maria may have built the larger house that would become known as the Mabee house. Oliver Dennis Mabee died in **1896** in Monteagle and was buried in the Monteagle Cemetery. Emil Graenicher took his place as the postmaster. By the **1900** Census, Oliver Dennis' wife Mary was listed as a physician (*she may have carried on any dentistry that her husband practiced*), and his daughter-in-law Maria was a widow with a house full of children. Maria stated in the **1910** Census record that she had twelve births, but only eleven were alive at the time. Since her youngest child Carl Furman Mabee was born 20 Jan 1899, we can assume that her husband Charles Byron had died between 1898 and 1900. Those living today may remember Carl Furman Mabee and his wife Julia as having been the family who lived behind the big Mabee house.

For those still in Monteagle who may remember the Mabees, I will list here the children of Maria and Charles Byron: **Oliver Charles** born 1874 (*moved to Birmingham, AL and then settled in Chattanooga; he is buried at Monteagle*); **Alice C.** born 1876 (*married Crawford Douglas in NY or Chattanooga, lived in Chattanooga, Birmingham, New York, widowed*); **Mary Elizabeth "Lizzie"** born 1878 (*married Will Thompson, Grundy, moved to Birmingham, AL*); **Emma Cecilia** born 1880 (*moved to Birmingham, AL with her brother James, married, had 3 children, widow*); **James Aaron** born 1882 (*moved to Birmingham, AL, then to California*); **William Alfred** born 1884 (*died 1904 at 20 years of age, buried at Monteagle Cemetery*); **Irene** born 1885 (*married, operated a business in Monteagle, buried in Monteagle Cemetery*); **Julia**

Virginia born 1887 (*moved to Birmingham, married three or four times, buried Monteagle*); **Bessie Lavinia** born 1889; **Cornelia F.** born 1891 (*moved to Chicago, married, had one son, divorced*); **George Edward** born 1894 (*moved to Birmingham, AL, married, then moved to California*); **John Truman** born 1896 a twin (*moved to Birmingham, AL, then Chicago, lived with sister Cornelia*); **Crawford Douglas** born 1896 a twin to John Truman (*moved to Birmingham, AL and died in Walker Co., GA, buried Monteagle Cemetery*) and **Carl Furman** born 1899 (*moved to Birmingham, then back to Monteagle later, died 1975, buried at Monteagle*). In this list of children we see the name of the owner of the rock house, **Irene Mabee**. This is the child who grew up to become the mysterious lady at the big rock house.

From this point on we will call her “Irene” as she was known to the Monteagle people. As stated before, she was born in 1885. The big rock version of the house came on the scene some time after 1911; however, a Mabee home may have existed on or near the spot before the rock version began to take form. Mrs. M. E. Mabee (Maria E. Mabee—Irene’s mother) operated a boarding/eatery house somewhere in that area where Assembly patrons were beckoned to lodge. Since Maria died in 1925, she operated the eatery before that time. She may have been the one who owned the house.

My friend Gladys Cox Williams who turned ninety-seven this year (2008) remembers when her father William H. Cox (pictured right) and her brother Charles Howard Cox helped get the mountain stone out of Layne’s Cove for the house. Since Howard was a young man when he helped his father, this tells me that the house was probably built or had an outer layer of mountainside stone added between 1920 and 1930 during Howard’s youth. There is no end to the stories about how the house came to be or the uses to which it was put. The house may have been built for Irene by friends.



It is hard to believe that her mother Maria would have left everything to her alone since she had so many siblings. By this time Irene would have been in her thirties or early forties

Local lore has it that Irene drove a large black Cadillac, which was beyond just about any Monteaglean’s means either pre- or post-depression years. Cadillacs seemed to multiply at the big rock house; on certain occasions three more shiny black ones would drive onto the grounds, and quietly, the occupants were allowed to disappear into the big house. Older ones tell of the stairs at the back of the house leading up to rooms that were rented mainly by outsiders. The local people kept their distance from the

goings on at the house; it seems that it just wasn't for local use. Irene had a female friend who was allowed to come and go at the big house, but other than she, patrons were not local. "What you didn't know, wouldn't hurt you!" However, what you did know just might get you riddled with bullets and put six feet under! But there would have been a pleasant side to your death in that there would probably have been a huge arrangement of flowers placed on your grave since that was practiced by Al Capone for his murder victims. Some swear by the tales; others laugh them off!

Rumor has it that the big man from Chicago built the house for Irene. Big Al Capone—that's the man who made his journeys from Chicago across this mountain through our little town of Monteagle on his way to Florida where he had another home. Some whispered that he was Irene's lover; he was nearly fifteen years younger than she, but would that have made a difference to the big man or to Irene? At some point in time Irene had married William Dickson, but I can find no one who remembers him. One source told me that Irene had married three times. We are talking about the period of prohibition when alcohol was at its greatest demand, and Capone was infamous for his gambling, prostitution and whiskey businesses. Was Irene's house his choice of lodging when he came to the mountain, or was all this just talk? Was there something sinister about the goings on in the big house? Somehow all the Capone writers thankfully missed our little town in the pages of history—well, with the exception of the book **Mountain Voices** wherein on page 66 we read,

"It seems that one bitter winter day while cutting timber below Warren's Point he (Pewter Garner) noticed an automobile in the ditch on the highway. Pewter drove his team of oxen down and silently hooked them to the front axle. When he had pulled the car back on the road, the man reached for his wallet and asked the local Samaritan how much he owed. Pewter told him that in this area men didn't take money for helping folks in trouble. The stranger offered Pewter a cigar and said: "My name's Al Capone. Call on me any time." And it really was Capone, the most notorious gangster of the Prohibition Era, 1920-1933."

It is said that Mr. Clarence Schaerer, the local barber at the time, once cut Big Al's hair. Maybe our town wasn't written about because all of this wasn't really happening, or maybe it was happening and a great cover up was going on. But maybe, just maybe, Irene was whiling away her time on this earth with her knitting and quilting just like many other women her age in Monteagle.

But what about those irregular, crazy, protruding stones which look like stepping stones at the rock house? Rumor has it that that was just what they were—stepping stones for the men from the black Cadillacs and any other out-of-town patrons who needed to quickly leave the upstairs windows in their get away from the law. "What law?" some would ask. "The local law would have never challenged Big Al; they

would have turned a blind eye to such goings on, or better yet, helped him safely on his way.” And those stairs to the rooms in the back, could they have been for use in Al’s prostitution business? And all that supposed copper in the basement--my wondering mind wants to know who was making the whiskey in the basement if it was actually being brewed there. Maybe some of my Layne ancestors were in on the brewing process. The basement was supposedly lined with copper stills for use in the whiskey business. Moonshine was supposedly loaded into the Cadillacs; then “thunder road” was traveled.

Then the most told story is of the tunnel under the house which led to the little road behind the rock house assuring a fast get away from “the law,” not the local law, but those big guys from Chicago. Many old timers believed the stories of the whiskey stills in the basement, but one man told me that he played in that house with little Tommy Shoemate as a boy and never saw a tunnel. Of course, this was during the years when Clare Shoemate had taken over the big house and used it for fine dining. If there had been a tunnel, it would have long been gone by the time of the Shoemate era.

Before Irene died, her nephew and his wife talked with her in Monteagle at the end of WWII. It was the first time that the wife had met “Aunt Irene,” so one would have thought that she would have been hospitable and invited her relatives inside her big house. She did not. The family thought this to be strange, but because they did not live in Monteagle, they were not certain as to why they were treated so. Irene died in the mid forties, and the man whispered about as being the man who built the house for her died not long after in 1947. And the big house moved into other hands.

As a child Johnnie Louise Meeks helped her mother Mattie clean the big house during the 1930’s. This afforded her the opportunity to be in the house many times. As she recalled the house was used as a rooming house. Her mother did the washing and kept the beds fresh for the patrons. To the small child, the Mabee house was just a big, beautiful and interesting house. Johnnie remembers nothing strange about the day-to-day life in the house.

How many of these stories are real will always be mere speculation, but they make for an interesting evening of gab. Sometimes we say, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire!” So many stories of Mafia-like behavior being active in our little town would lead one to believe that some of the gab is true. Until the time comes, with proof in hand one way or the other, we will all just have to make the decision to listen with great belief or roll our eyes in doubt. The only ones who could bring the truth forward and maybe stop the rumors are Irene Mabee and Al Capone, and they “ain’t talking!”

Note: I have no photos of any of the Mabee family. If anyone has any corrections, stories or photos to add to the story, please contact me at jackiepartin@blomand.net.

