

“Pop Goes the Weasel,” Sarah Speegle and Saxby Chambliss

Written by Jackie Layne Partin

A few years ago I was at the Monteagle School on the Marion County side of the railroad tracks before it got the much-needed renovations. Slowly I wandered around the halls and classrooms until I reached the auditorium door. There just inside the door was a huge crate with something black in it. I thought, “Could that be what I think it is? Yes, it certainly was!” How sad—“it” was being moved! Suddenly the veil of many, many years was torn away and from out of nowhere in the silence I heard a thunderous bang coming from the front of the auditorium down to the left of the stage. Immediately I realized it was the first chord struck by Mrs. Sarah Speegle on the huge, black, grand piano as she called me and all the other students who were standing in the hallways to attention. We knew then to “shutup,” get control of ourselves and put our best foot forward, for the best part of our day was about to start.



Sarah Speegle and husband Lyle “Preacher”



Sarah and son Kenneth “Speedy” Speegle

Mrs. Speegle knew her stuff. She had the personality to go with the “big bang” on the piano—tough, determined, disciplined, alert and dominating—and it all broke through early in the weekday mornings like the sun from behind a dark cloud. Yep! She knew how to make our day shine. As she banged on that old piano, we all wound around and around the row of seats until we reached our destination—filling up the entire auditorium one row at a time. Cautiously we watched for our turn to stand in

front of our chosen place and wait for that other “big bang” that told us that everyone was in place and it was time to “sit down.” Not often, but occasionally, someone got caught without a seat—someone who wasn’t paying attention. Oh! The embarrassment of it all! “You should have watched what you were doing. Now go to the back of the auditorium!” exclaimed a teacher.

We sang songs that were meant to encourage us to become good citizens, good patriots, good Christians and hopefully wonderful students. Mostly we sang those songs pertaining to Christian values and the love of God and country. And believe it or not, the Bible was read every day, “Yes, that wonderful soul-directing book from God,” was opened for everyone to see and hear. Now, dear reader, you are not going to believe what happened next, **we prayed**—yes, we really, really, did pray to God—“Our **Father**, Who art in Heaven...In **Jesus** name, Amen.” This was followed by announcements, then admonitions, praise, and/or criticisms, or whatever the occasion warranted.

As the students, knowing what was coming next, all looked toward the big black piano, Mrs. Speegle raised her hands about a foot above the keyboard and then came down with that final “big bang” of the morning. Up we rose from our seats—like Jesus from the grave—standing at attention—He before His Father and we before Mrs. Speegle. About face, the march began; around and around we climbed up and out of the auditorium not looking forward to what lay ahead. Occasionally, Mrs. Speegle tired of playing the march over and over, and she would stop, leaving the last row having to march out without any music. I recall that it just didn’t seem the same without the music—almost like my feet didn’t want to go forward.

On rainy days, the auditorium was used as a place to exercise the students. For the most part, it was another opportunity for Mrs. Speegle and her piano to keep us all in tow. She would organize us into groups of three for the game set to music called, “Pop goes the weasel!” One student, the weasel, in each group would be in front of the other two and reached back to join hands with them. As the small group skipped forward around the outside of the large auditorium while holding hands, Mrs. Speegle played the tune. When the music came to the part in the song which said, “Pop goes the weasel,” the leader/weasel of the group popped under the hands of the other two to join up with the group behind them. This enabled the “weasels” in each group to move along and hold hands with all other students in the activity. Now that’s where the “weasel” and Saxby Chambliss fit into the story.

When the Chambliss family came to Monteagle, and their two sons, Alfred and Saxby entered elementary school at Monteagle, I know of no young girl of Saxby’s age who didn’t just swoon over his sandy, reddish hair and his feckled face. We all fell in love with this young fellow, even we older girls. Of course, for the most part this love was not reciprocated. The only hope we love-stricken girls had to get close to Saxby, was to hope that he was a “weasel” and he’d pop right back into our little group; this

meant we could hold hands with him. And it did work, at least for me; I did get to hold his hand on a couple of occasions, but alas, the thrill was short-lived—the little “weasel” popped right on back into the hands of other waiting girls. Mrs. Speegle had other games to play with us on rainy days, but this was one of the favorites.



Saxby Chambliss is now a U. S. Senator from Georgia.

Mrs. Sarah Speegle was a talented pianist. One only needed to hand her a sheet of music to observe her musical abilities. She played whatever was thrown her way for the many musical plays presented at the school. Some of my greatest thrills came when I was chosen to be in plays often directed by Mrs. Katie Goforth Fults with, as always, Mrs. Speegle at the piano. To be chosen for a play one had to be a student who finished his/her work and never missed school. I fit into both of those categories. Once I was given the opportunity to be the “Queen Bee” with a group of little bees all around. I had to wear a bee costume, so my mother Clara Layne and a wonderful neighbor lady Alene Griffith Wooten made my costume. The bodice was gray with yellow and black rickrack sewn around it for bee stripes. Large wings were made from wire and netting. I was barefoot and wore my antennas with pride. The best part for me, but maybe not for the audience, was being allowed to sing my solo with Mrs. Speegle at her faithful post. For those few minutes in time, I felt mighty important.

On one occasion, several female students including myself participated in a negro minstrel. The show also included some jazz music played skillfully by Mrs. Speegle on her piano. If my memory hasn't failed me, I believe that a lady named Geneva Lyons directed the play. I was not reared in a home full of prejudices, but looking back on this little play that was performed on our school stage, I guess we all had some prejudices. As a child I did not recognize this as such, but as an adult now, I can fully accept that

that was just what it was. We dressed the part of our characters and sang the songs sung in the South to fit the needs of the play. I had fun and remember it so well. The little purple dress and ribbons I wore were special to me for years.



A school play put on by eighth graders in 1957: pictured L to R: Joe Malone, Ed Asher, David Layne, Velvin Hamby and Suzanne Asher.



Some familiar faces in this group: Tommy Anderson, Betty Lynn Grooms, James Dillion Short, Mae Wanda McFarland, Mitchell Lawson, Glenda Faye Johnson, Ruby Holder, Geneva Lautzenheiser, Mildred Gipson, George Thomas, David Layne, Doris Campbell, Velvin Hamby, Suzanne Asher, Kenny Elridge, Ed Asher, Joe Malone and others whose faces I remember but names I cannot.

On other occasions the stage and auditorium were filled with square dancers, jazz singers, womanless weddings, and many other entertainments. The auditorium was used for the polio prevention program. We walked across the stage for our polio drops. We had our promotional ceremonies on that stage as our parents watched from the auditorium with pride. My mother packed lunches from time to time for the box lunch sales. She always put home cooked items like fried chicken, biscuits and chocolate cake in the boxes. Then there were the times the auditorium and Mrs. Speegle's talent were used for the much "looked-forward-to" cake walks. My mother always baked a couple of homemade, heavy with sugar and lard, cakes for that school function.

Slowly I brought my thoughts back to the present as I looked down at that large crate with the huge black object in it; there it was—the old black piano, dismantled and packed into the crate like a suitcase packed for travel. The grand piano wasn't so grand anymore. Where was it going? What happened to its Master, Mrs. Speegle? Sadly I walked on down through the auditorium and out into a gymnasium and looking around asked myself, "Now, how in the world did this thing get here?"

For additions, corrections or comments write to me at jackiepartin@blomand.net or P. O. Box 295, Monteagle, TN 37356.