

Austin Families Genealogical Society Files

RETIRED MAN HERE CALLS LAWN METAL PILE A GOLD MINE

by Ron Feinberg

Editor's Notes: Ron Feinberg was a Staff Writer for *Times-Union and Journal*, Jacksonville, Florida. This article appeared in that newspaper on 9 February 1975. John Northam Austin resided in Jacksonville, Florida with his wife Grace (Meredith) Austin. He had been Chief Steward of the union in the Supply Department at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, and retired for disability from Federal Civil Service in June 1973. John was a member of AOAGS from 1979 through 1984.

What's that four-foot square piece of rusting metal on John N. Austin's front lawn?

The retired federal employee's front yard on Sundown Drive is something of a showplace, what with a made-made pond, complete with two and three-foot Koi (carp), artesian well and strawberry plants.

The enigmatic hulk of metal rests on its bier of milk crates.

But once the question has been raised as to its function, the spry hobbyist and collector will no doubt grab the lead, and blurt out quickly that the rusting metal is his "gold mine."

Gold mine?

"Yep, it might be worth a gold mine, if more people knew about it, and the right people became interested," Austin says.

"It's a gallows... part of the old Citrus County Jail's gallows. I read it was for sale and I went down and bought it."

"I thought maybe I might be able to sell it to a museum or rent it to somebody," Austin confides.

Rent? Sell?

"Well, maybe a restaurant would buy it. Then they could rename the place the 'hangout,' he chuckles.

The "hangout"? Right...

Austin sits wearily down on the metal trap door of the gallows, runs a hand over a protruding handle of the apparatus, and reminisces about his find.

"A junk dealer was holding this in Citrus County. He didn't know what to do with it and wanted to get rid of it. I

really thought it might be worth something. You know, it really is part of our history.

"I did some studying, and learned that the gallows – the metal portion was fitted into the floor of a second-story room – was built by an Inverness blacksmith, C. H. Story, and was installed in the jail back in the late 1800s when the building was put up."

"I still don't know if this gallows was ever used. I think it may have been, but I'm not certain, and most folks who live in Inverness and were alive back then don't agree."

The question, a study in futility, has caused some consternation in the small town of Inverness, forty or so miles from Ocala.

The editor and publisher of the Citrus County Chronicle, David S. Arthurs, wrote last year:

"When he first acquired the gallows from Inverness junk dealer Fred Wightman, he (Austin) was under the impression it had not been used.

"Later, however, after studying a number of books of official records of Citrus County – which he also acquired from Wightman at \$2 each – he found a remark that a Silas Chisolm had been convicted of murder and was sentenced to hang on Nov. 18, 1916.

"But while there is a faint notation in the document that his sentence was commuted, there are enough folks around these parts living here at the time to add to the belief that Chisolm's life was spared. If, in fact, he was not hanged then there were no hangings on the gallows Austin owns."

Arthurs added in his page 2 editorial:

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“Notwithstanding the optimism of the current owner, the county probably didn’t sell a ‘gold mine’ when it let the unused gallows from the old jail go with the rest of the building last year.

“But they may have permitted a historical gold mine to get away from us when some of the county’s old records went along with the jail rubble.”

What about these old records?

Austin perks up at mention of the old books, trots over to a camper filling his driveway and beckons.

“You won’t believe this. I sure didn’t. I couldn’t believe a city would let such books go. I mean, I checked first with my attorney to see that everything was legal, and he told me that I had dealt with the situation in good faith and that besides possession is nine-tenths of the law,” Austin manages to say before pointing out his small but treasured library of Citrus County ledgers.

He runs his hands over the now rough surfaces of the four ledger books, and with reverence begins to open the first book.

Austin underlines with his finger two initials and a name written out in a fine, script handwriting.

“J. N. Austin.”

Those are my initials and my name... first thing we saw in the book. But I have a perfect alibi. That entry was made in April 1888,” he says, “and I wasn’t born until 1912.”

Interesting, but not exactly a gold mine.

“Well, just turn through these pages. I’ve found some really valuable and interesting entries,” like:

“J. E. Herring, enticing away labor, 90 days on bond, entry made in 1906; S. Bailard, riding on a train without a ticket, \$5 fine, 1906 entry; C. Robinson, Running Wild Weed (sic), \$5 fine, 1907 entry; and Sarah Scurry, selling cocaine, \$25 fine, 1910 entry.”

Austin says he’s willing to sell the books back to the city, \$2 each, but adds that so far there have been no buyers.

Meanwhile the books are collecting dust and the metal gallows rust.

“Write this up, maybe the wire services will pick it up and I’ll get some buyers,” he says.

“Put a head on the story like ‘Austin Gets Gallows,’ or maybe,” he pauses an instant, looking wistfully at the reddish-grey mass of metal on his lawn, “Austin hangs with gallows!”