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THIS LAND

The Names Were Separated, Though the Lives Collided

By [DAN BARRY](#)

BUTLER, Ga.

The cool, busy lobby of the Taylor County courthouse features a bulletin board, a Dr Pepper vending machine and two framed rosters honoring local veterans of World War II. It is easy to spot the slight difference in wording that justifies displaying two plaques instead of one.

This list says “Whites,” and that list says “Colored.”

County officials explain that the segregated plaques continue to hang because state law says no publicly owned memorial dedicated to veterans of the United States — or of the Confederate States of America — shall be relocated, removed, concealed, et cetera, et cetera.

“Fifty-dash-three-dash-one, subparagraph B,” recites Edward N. Davis, the county attorney. It is up to the state legislature to change the law, he says. Besides, he and other county officials say, some people like the plaques the way they are, and not all those people are white.

The names on these honor rolls — from Adams, Guy Smith, on one plaque, to Woods, Jesse, on the other — call upon you to imagine the lives lived. For example: Who was this man listed among the “colored,” this Snipes, Maceo?

“Our favorite uncle,” says Lula Montfort, her hair white, her memory sharp. He stands before her still: in his mid-30s, with brown eyes, a powerful build and a sixth-grade education supplemented by experience.

In early 1943, Maceo Snipes set aside his civilian ways — categorized by the government as “Farm Hand General” — and joined the Army. He served 30 months, including six in the Pacific theater, was honorably discharged, and received \$100 in muster-out pay and \$9.35 in travel pay. He returned to his mother in Butler, and began summoning his dead father’s farm back to life. Cotton, peanuts and corn became his life again.

Ms. Montfort, whose family were sharecroppers on a nearby farm, remembers Uncle Mace’s challenge to embrace education: a trip to Macon, 40 miles to the northeast, if you got good grades. Soon, she says, she and her brother Ulysses were in the back of a bus bound for the big city.

Mr. Snipes reasoned that if he fought for this country, he should be able to vote in this country. On July 17, 1946, he was the only black person in his area to vote in the Democratic primary for governor — a bold move in a segregated state, where the candidate vowing to restore all-white primaries would eventually win.

The next day, white men in a pickup pulled up to the Snipes farmhouse, where even the floors, Ms. Montfort says,

were kept “bright and shiny.” They called for Maceo Snipes.

He came out. One of them, Edward Williamson, a fellow veteran who had stayed stateside, shot him. Then they drove off.

Ms. Montfort, then 13, remembers what she was told. Her favorite uncle stumbled back into the house. Bleeding from the abdomen, he walked miles to get help, alongside his mother — her grandmother, Lula, for whom she is named.

“Couple days later, they told us he was dead,” Ms. Montfort says.

Mr. Williamson, who was related to a politically powerful family in the county, told a coroner’s inquest that he had gone to collect a \$10 debt. He said Mr. Snipes pulled a knife. He said he grabbed a gun from the glove compartment and shot twice.

The ruling: self-defense.

“Oh, please,” Ms. Montfort says, 60 years later. “Really.”

Fear, then, thrived like a healthy crop. A few days after the coroner’s inquest, two married black couples were shot dead by a crowd of white men at the Moore’s Ford Bridge, about 140 miles north of here. So no funeral for this veteran, no public mourning; he was buried in the woods.

That fall, with the crops harvested and fear alive, Lula Montfort’s family said, Enough. They sneaked out of Butler, with Lula and other children hidden under canvas in the back of a truck, and went north, to Youngstown, Ohio.

The flow of time rubs against fact and memory. No one knows where Maceo Snipes is buried. Edward Williamson killed himself with a gunshot to the head in 1985, feeling bad about what he had done, or so some say.

And on Wednesday, an old farmer named Walter Snipes tried to share what he knew about his cousin’s killing. But with heart failing and speech affected by two strokes, he could not. As his sister Nonie Gardner wiped his brow with a wet cloth, about all he could say was: “Lord. Help. Poor. Me.”

His prayers for relief were answered the next day. He was 84.

As communal memory fades, vilification of the dead becomes easier. A county official who does not want to be identified — and who recently and mistakenly maintained that Mr. Williamson had served time for the killing — suggests the deadly dispute concerned gambling and moonshine, not voting. When pressed, the official says, by e-mail:

“Neither of them were exactly fine upstanding church-going citizens of the community.”

“Oh, please,” Ms. Montfort, a fine upstanding church-going citizen, says again. A citizen who took to heart an uncle’s emphasis on education, and now has four college graduates for daughters.

She and other family members, along with several civil rights activists, especially John Cole Vodicka, director of the Jail and Prison Project, are pushing to have the Snipes case reopened and those segregated plaques in the courthouse taken down.

Ms. Montfort, who returned to [Georgia](#) a few years ago, says the plaques may have been well intentioned; after all, the county could have chosen not to recognize black veterans at all. “But this is 2007,” she says. “If they’re historical, then put them in a museum.”

Last month, the three white and two black county commissioners came up with a compromise. They hung a third, integrated plaque beside the other two.

Now, among the hundreds listed together, are the names of Williamson and Snipes, two men who left one war to engage in another.

*Additional photos and audio on the killing of Maceo Snipes and controversy over courthouse plaques:
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