

West Georgia's "Oracle of the Ages" told fortunes, invested in land, ran for political office and confounded her neighbors.

Mayhayley's Fortune

BY ANNA ROBERTSON

It was the season of goldenrod when I made the drive from the North Georgia mountains to the community of Roosterville. Dogs roamed free along the quiet county roads torched with brilliant yellow against the coming autumn sky. I was on a pilgrimage to find something of Mayhayley Lancaster. Her essence perhaps? I wasn't sure. The only signs of the famed fortune teller of west Georgia's Heard County were the pack of dogs unconcerned with passing traffic. Perhaps they were trying to sniff out their long-departed mistress, as well. Mayhayley regularly walked these roads during the early 20th century leading a parade of dogs, often matted with filth, behind her. She insisted customers pay a dollar and a dime to have their fortunes read. The dollar for her and the dime for her dogs.

I stopped my minivan on the red dirt shoulder of what is now Mayhayley Road and gazed across a large wrought iron fence into some planted pines and quickly found out that I am not the only person drawn to Mayhayley's homeplace. After about two minutes a local man in a truck pulled up asking me what I was up to. Being a rural southerner, I began by letting him know that I had no intention of trespassing on anyone's land or doing harm to the property. But he already knew my kind. He started to regale me with tales not of Mayhayley the woman, but of other women, just like me, almost always middle aged. They come in groups or sometimes alone. He had heard them speaking, their voices hushed, in the woods or found them tangled knee deep in brambles in the middle of the summer with walking sticks pounding the ground to scare the snakes away. They were all looking for

Mayhayley, claiming a cosmic connection to a woman known to the region as "The Oracle of the Ages."

A m a n d a
M a y h a y l e y
Lancaster was born in 1875, the third of 11 children, and died in 1955. She lived her entire life in and around Heard County.

Born with a veil-like caul over her face, Mayhayley was considered to have what folklore refers to as "second sight." For most who know about Mayhayley Lancaster, her name conjures familiar sto-



Earliest known photo of Mayhayley.

ries of a fortune teller with a reputation for remarkable accuracy. People came to ask her for help finding lost objects, farm animals, and people. Tallulah Bankhead reportedly visited Mayhayley for help finding a lost diamond ring. She would tell people where Confederate gold was buried or if a family member had been wounded overseas in wartime.

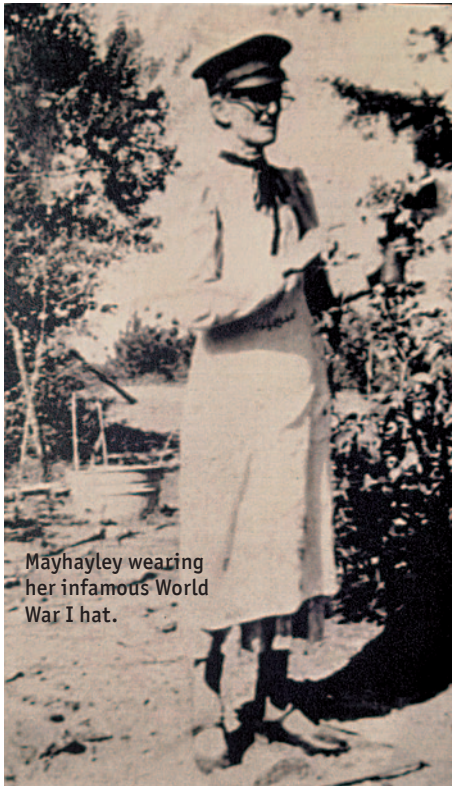
She worked as a schoolteacher, midwife, newspaper columnist, farmer, lawyer, politician, and was a lifelong member of Caney Head United Methodist Church, attending every Sunday. Mayhayley never married or had a partner or lover that anyone knew of. Customers regularly sought her counsel down a dirt road in the ramshackle log cabin where she was raised and that she later shared with her sister, Sallie. The yard was often filled with cars from all over and a line of customers from all different classes and races.

The best source on details about Mayhayley's life is *Oracle of the Ages: Reflections on the Curious Life of Fortune Teller Mayhayley Lancaster*, a book by Dot Moore, who knew Mayhayley from a distance as well as members of her family.

Mayhayley went all the way through school, winning academic awards, and then took to the profession of teaching for

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Mayhayley wearing her infamous World War I hat.

the next decade. During this period, she was also trading horses and mules and writing a weekly column for the local newspaper. Remembrances by her former pupils describe Mayhayley as someone who made sure less fortunate students did not go without.

But early on in her story, it was clear Mayhayley was far from a conventional woman and her path quickly diverged from

most women of her time. In 1911, she enrolled in law school at the Atlanta Law School (ALS). This was the same year that ALS graduated its first female lawyer in Georgia. It's unclear whether Mayhayley graduated, but there are records of her practicing law. Some have said that she worked on the trial of Leo Frank, the Jewish man accused of murdering Mary Phagan at the Atlanta Pencil Factory and who was later lynched by a mob in Cobb County. According to Steve Oney, who has written and researched the Frank case extensively, there is no written evidence linking Mayhayley to the Frank case. Given the timeframe and the fact that Mayhayley would have been a law student, it is feasible that she could have been in the courtroom in some support capacity for the case.

In 1926, Mayhayley ran for the Georgia state senate and is believed to be the first woman in Georgia to do so. She lost, only receiving 35 votes.

Mayhayley was also involved in "the bug," an underground numbers racketeering ring that swept out of Atlanta through Georgia during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. Word got out that Mayhayley could predict the numbers for the bug and gamblers began to come to her to buy information. Her customers were primarily a black clientele, while the white clientele typically sought out her service in telling fortunes. Mayhayley charged more for numbers and paid young black boys to scribble random numbers on slips of paper behind her house, which she then doled out to customers. If they won, she asked them to split their winnings with her, and people did so out of loyalty or perhaps fear. Of course, any mathematician can tell you that the more business she had the better the chances of some of her numbers hitting, and each time that happened her notoriety grew.

Mayhayley amassed a great deal of wealth during this time

and proved herself to be a canny investor. She purchased her family's log cabin and lived there as an adult with her sister Sallie. She also began bidding on property sold on the courthouse steps of surrounding counties. Most counties had sheriff sales and Mayhayley would go to town squares and set up a card table, tell fortunes, and purchase land that went up for auction. She acquired property for pennies on the dollar and then sold timber off the land to begin recouping her investment. She also followed the stock market and loved to talk about stocks regularly with her clients who were in banking and finance.

As Mayhayley got older, her garb and looks shifted from a more Victorian, garish look to wearing dirty feed-sack dresses and a World War I cap. Some described her as looking more masculine during this time and certainly more unkempt. At some point in her life, she lost an eye, and she was often seen wearing a patch, a glass eye, or a hand-painted marble in the socket. This added to the stories of her unattractive appearance. One observer was quoted as saying, "When she was poor, she dressed rich and when she was rich, she dressed poor."

The true-crime story that made Mayhayley nationally famous began in 1948. A prominent landowner named John Wallace who was a regular customer of Mayhayley's murdered his employee, Wilson Turner, a sharecropper. Turner, unhappy with his treatment by Wallace, had stolen some of Wallace's cattle. Wallace went to see Mayhayley about the missing cattle and she told him that Turner had them in a pasture in Carrollton.



Mayhayley reading a lady's palm, a skill she may have developed as a teen.

Wallace killed Turner in a very public beating at a tourist camp and drove away with the body.

Wallace then returned to Mayhayley and told her that he had dumped Turner's body on his land but could not remember exactly where and was concerned the law would find it first. Mayhayley told him that the body was in an abandoned well with green flies on it. Wallace took two of his hired men, found the body, and had them burn it and dump the ashes in a creek on Wallace's property.

Mayhayley frequently assisted law enforcement in surrounding counties, so it didn't take long for officers to come to her about the case. When the Heard County sheriff asked Mayhayley if she knew where the body of Wilson Turner was located, she stated "fire" multiple times. A few months later, after the sheriff secured the testimony of Wallace's two hired hands and put them in protective custody, his team found the bone fragments.

This made for an interesting case on many levels. Aside from the spectacle of having a fortune teller on the stand as a witness, this was a case in which a rich landowner was sent to the electric chair on the testimony of two black men.

In 1983, Mayhayley's character and the story were featured in the movie *Murder in Coweta County*, which was based on a book by the same name by Margaret Ann Barnes. The movie starred Johnny Cash, Andy Griffith, and June Carter Cash as Mayhayley Lancaster.

Once her notoriety reached a national level with her role in the Wallace murder trial, Mayhayley and Sallie were regularly robbed in their home due to the stories that she hoarded her cash. At one point she reported being robbed 30 times in three years. The robberies became more violent and caught the attention of local law enforcement. The sheriff approached Mayhayley with the proposition to have multiple lawmen search her property for all the money she had hidden away, photograph it, and then take her and the money to the bank to deposit it. Pictures would be published in the newspaper so that potential robbers would know the hidden cash was gone.

Mayhayley, who loved money and loved attention even more, agreed to the plan. The publicity stunt unearthed quite a load of cash. When the carloads of cash arrived at the bank, the bills were filthy with animal feces and dirt since she hid her money in hog troughs, chicken coops, rotting hay bales and buried in the ground. The bank president refused to accept the bills until they were cleaned. So, the money was taken across the street and prepared for deposit. The total cash hidden on her property was reported to be anywhere from \$5,000 to \$32,000, which today would be worth somewhere between \$65,000 and \$350,000.

The cemetery at Caney Head Methodist Church is a meticulously kept grounds funded by offerings still left on Mayhayley's grave, which sits prominently toward the front. During my visit, I sit and listen to the soft wind, wondering if some part of this unconventional woman will come to me in this



Mayhayley during her political campaign in 1926.

quiet place. But all I catch are the whiff of those dogs I passed driving up the county road. I begin to ask myself why I am so drawn to her story.

Mayhayley was an agrarian woman with ambition and aspirations that were far more common for the men of her time. The rural South has plenty of stories of "outsider" or eccentric types who lived non-traditional lives. Most of these folks at some point moved from their rural beginnings to places like Atlanta or up north or out west. But Mayhayley remained home in Heard County and never left the South. She built a land empire and a profession as a lawyer in addition to her notoriety as a psychic. Later in her life, her family tried to have her declared insane, perhaps to gain control of her fortune. A lunacy hearing was held, and the judge ruled in her favor.

Her sister Sallie was reportedly "touched" mentally, and the two women lived in a manner that today is associated with hoarders. After Mayhayley's death, Sallie was committed to the psychiatric hospital in Milledgeville and later died there. It is not completely out of the realm of possibility that Mayhayley might have suffered from some form of mental illness herself. If so, it

did not hinder her financial success or clairvoyant tendencies.

Melissa Dickson Jackson, a faculty member at University of West Georgia and regional expert on Mayhayley lore, has studied Mayhayley and developed her own theory about her motivations. Jackson noticed that the Lancaster family had a commitment to education and literacy. Among the many documented oral histories of Mayhayley are stories of her family having books and of Mayhayley regularly getting books through mail order, mostly to learn about the law and government. Jackson theorizes that Mayhayley might have been impacted by *Language of the Hand*, written by a Dublin-born author named Chiero and published in 1894, around the time Mayhayley was a teenager. This classic tome is a how-to for all things related to palm reading. This, Jackson proposes, may have informed Mayhayley's work as a soothsayer.

Additionally, Jackson theorizes that when Mayhayley was coming of age, another female eccentric named Victoria Woodhull might have influenced her. Woodhull was a presidential candidate on the women's rights ticket. Woodhull believed a woman should have the right to choose whether to marry or remain single. Woodhull also blended her political activism with what was referred to as the "spiritualist movement" and has been referred to as a "medical prophet," at one time serving as spiritual advisor to Cornelius Vanderbilt. Woodhull passed away about the time that Mayhayley was coming of age, and Professor Jackson proposes that Mayhayley may have modeled her own life after Woodhull's.

Sitting on the bench at the Caney Head Methodist church cemetery, I am reminded of my own family story about Mayhayley; a story that has driven me south to study the past in hopes of understanding my own future.

Dorothy Dodson worked for the Farmer's Home Administration in Chambers County, Alabama, shortly before World War II. She was my grandmother. She was dating her co-worker, Bill, in secret because it was against the rules for co-workers to date. Dorothy had a friend who knew that Mayhayley was in the area giving fortunes and asked Dorothy if she wanted to go. Dorothy was a child of the Depression and a Christian and thought the whole idea of clairvoyance was nonsense. My grandmother told me that she sat in front of Mayhayley, who examined her palm and asked, "Who is Isaac?" Dorothy didn't know anyone named Isaac. "Well, you're going to marry a man named Isaac and y'all are going to be married a long time." Grandmother dismissed the entire experience and forgot about it. Bill went off to war and they corresponded while he was away. When he returned, they married in Washington, D.C.

The day she told me this story, she said she couldn't recall the exact moment that she realized that my grandfather's full name was William Isaac Barnes. After she and granddaddy moved back to Chambers County, they were talking with another local couple who mentioned the notorious fortune teller, and Grandmother recalled her visit and her fortune.

Once, when I mentioned Mayhayley's story in an academic environment, she was quickly given the label of "eco-feminist." I had never heard this term and considered it to be an awfully highfalutin word for a woman who hid her money in a chicken coop. Then I remembered my Grandmother Dorothy. Despite having a bachelor's degree from Auburn University and a career in the chemistry lab at West Point Pepperell Mills, she still didn't blink an eye grabbing up a chicken from the backyard and wringing its neck to cook for supper after work. And Isaac? Well, Mayhayley was correct. My grandparents were happily married for 60 years.

It was a few months before his death when Grandmother told me this story. Granddaddy was in his final decline, sleeping in the bedroom, and she was lying on the couch in the living room, weary of the duties of caregiver. After we finished our visit and she dozed off, I listened to the ticking clock on the mantle pierce the quiet and wondered: *If I had the chance to learn how it's all going to turn out, would I really want to know?* Twenty-five years later I still wonder about that while I place my four quarters and dime on Mayhayley's gravestone.

As a southern woman Mayhayley forged her own path socially, economically, and spiritually and held fast to the community that formed her. She made money, she made friends, she made enemies. She did not make excuses for her looks, her housekeeping, or her choices. Through her 79 years on earth, in a time when women were having to fight for the right to even exist outside of the shadow of a man, her shrewdness made her sought after by both men and women. There will never be another Mayhayley Lancaster.

But that doesn't stop women like me from trying to find parts of her deep in those woods and deep within ourselves. ▀

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