

Writer weaves memories into book

By Jeff McDonald

If you have occasion to ask Elexene Cox about Jessamine County history, be prepared to be drenched in a rapid-fire flood of dates, names and places. She's the proverbial walking encyclopedia of history.

"This is the place where I grew up," said Cox, who has spent 75 of her 86 years in Jessamine County. "As a child I skated on every street corner in Nicholasville. I was inside every shop on Main Street. And I've spent many an evening hanging out in front of the court house watching people stroll by."



A little over a year ago Cox got a notion to collect memories of her beloved Jessamine County into a book. The result, "Jessamine's Patchwork," is a lively collection of 45 stories with tantalizing chapter titles like "The Bride Wore a Toilet," "The Pauper was a Princess," "Bread's Still Bakin'," "Summoned by the Generalissimo," and "Murder at Almahurst."

The flashpoint of inspiration for the book came in November 2005 when Cox's daughter picked up an odd piece of china at an estate sale -- a souvenir toothpick holder decorated with an image of a brick schoolhouse titled "Graded School, Nicholasville, Ky."

Although Cox was quite familiar with the history of schools in the county, she did not recognize the structure. The mystery became a challenge for Cox, and soon she was sifting

through old newspapers, pouring over old deeds in the county clerk's office, and interviewing descendants of longstanding families in the area.

Along the way Cox got some encouragement from County Judge Executive Neal Cassity. "He asked me to keep an eye out for anything of historical value relating

to the Main Street buildings that were damaged by fire in 2004,” said Cox. The county is in the process of repurposing the buildings for a County Attorney’s Office.

Cox began putting pen to paper in her Nicholasville home, seated at her favorite writing spot -- a well-worn cherry table in her living room. Daughter Judy and Sister Winifred were enlisted to re-type up the author’s longhand pages on their home computers.

Photography was handled by granddaughter Ashleigh. Many of the illustrations were drawn by the author herself, but to flesh out the book she persuaded local artist Howard Fain to donate his pen-and-ink drawings of local architectural landmarks.



Cox had previously established herself as a chronicler of Jessamine County history with the “Paul Sawyer Story” drama, which Cox wrote and produced at the tender age of 82. She also made the costumes, painted the sets, did the casting, selected the music, and directed the play. The drama, based on the life of the Kentucky artist, has been running seasonally in Jessamine County since 2003, and

is vying for a place alongside other Kentucky outdoor dramas like “The Stephen Foster Story,” “Jenny Wiley Story,” and “Daniel Boone: The Man and the Legend.”

It was important to Cox that proceeds from the “Paul Sawyer Story” be recycled back in the community. Jessamine County high school seniors who were interested in pursuing art, music or drama have so far received \$4,500 in scholarships. And the historic Hall Church has been provided with much-needed heating and air-conditioning. “Now the facility can be used year-round for meetings, small concerts, dramatic readings and of course worship,” Cox said.

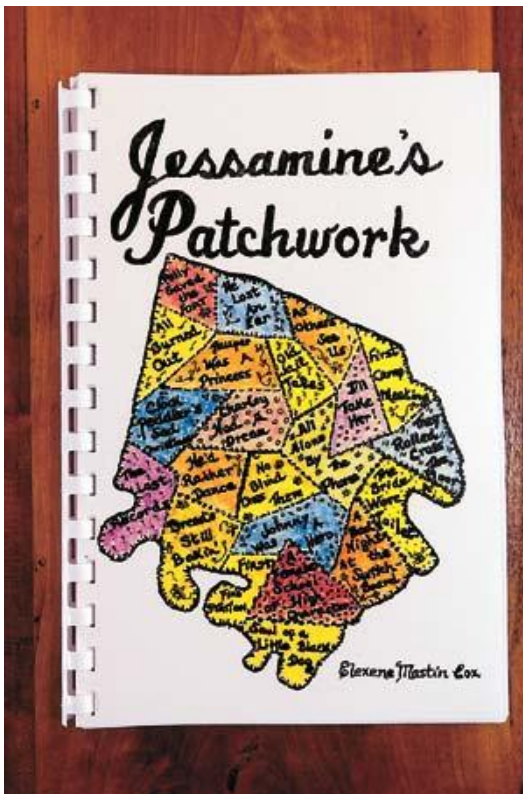
Money raised from the drama also went to erect a historic marker at Paul Sawyer’s boyhood home in downtown Frankfort.

“I have always been amazed at her endless energy, creativity and abundance of talent,” said Ben Brown, president of Citizen’s National Bank in Jessamine County, who has worked with Cox on a number of community projects since the early 1970s. “She is a true friend of the community.”

Cox credits her father, Winfield Mastin, with instilling in her a curiosity about life. By day he was a mechanic who in the 1920s worked on a newfangled contraption known as the automobile. But on evenings and weekends he was an aspiring inventor tinkering in his home workshop and studying his stash of Popular Mechanics magazines.

“Before we moved to Nicholasville, we had a home in Woodford County,” remembers Cox. “Daddy’s workshop was in a loft up over the family kitchen. It was accessible only by ladder. The area was off limits to me and my five sisters.”

Her father caused a sensation in Midway when he cobbled together his own radio in the 1920s. “At the time no one in town had a radio,” Cox said. “It seemed like everyone in town was packed in to our house to take a turn at listening to the broadcast on the earphones.”



“Jessamine’s Patchwork” by Elexene Mastin Cox, 90 pages, Self-published

During the 1950s and 1960s Cox was a contributor to the Lexington Herald. “There was a column by Bob Fain called ‘Cornered’ that ran in the lower left of the front page,” Cox said. “It was little bits of happenings in the surrounding counties and light-hearted folksy news. Once a week Bob would come by my house and pick up my handwritten notes.” Cox’s sister, Bettye Lee Mastin, was a long-time Herald-Leader Home section editor.

One of the stories in the new book places Cox herself in the pantheon of Kentucky history during the American Revolution. “Polly Saves the Fort,” is set in 1782 at a time when British soldiers and Indians had surrounded and cut off supply routes into Bryan Station. With the fort’s food and water supply exhausted and the settlers facing dehydration and starvation, Cox’s sixth great-grandmother, Polly Hawkins Craig, heroically led a group of women and children outside for a trip to the spring.

The origin of “Elexene,” the author’s not-so-common name, is a story that is not included in the book. “During WWI my father was on a troop train that made a stop in Maysville,” Cox explains. “A group of women boarded the train to serve coffee and doughnuts. Daddy was young and single and was smitten by a pretty young girl whose name turned out to be Elexene Russell. They exchanged letters

for time. I've still got a picture of her that she sent, and we still keep in touch with her family."

The first copies of "Jessamine's Patchwork" went on sale in November 2006. Cox says she is encouraged by the positive response she has received about the book. "We sold out the first batch of 100 and now we've reprinted another 100. People read it, and they are glad that I've taken the time to write this all down. They want their children to appreciate and remember it too."

To deliver the new book into the hands of eager readers, Cox has developed a simple but effective distribution network. "The book is for sale for \$15.00 in Nicholasville at Jessamine Hair Styling and Antiques on Main and in Wilmore at Jody's Beauty Shop," said Cox. She also has a supply of books at her home (859-885-4225).

Jessamine County Judge Executive Neal Cassity has worked along-side Cox on many projects, including the restoration of the Old Jail, the Jessamine County Bicentennial, and the restoration of Camp Nelson. "She has been a great asset and has brought a new emphasis on history and arts to our county. I really appreciate her husband John for sharing her with us." Cassity said. "There will never be another like her."

Excerpts from Jessamine's Patchwork

1. He lost an ear and the town got stocks.

On August 2, 1798, Kentucky Legislature's act to authorize a new county took effect. Governor Garrard named eleven "Gentlemen Justices" who held the first meeting at the Fisher Rice Tavern (which stood where Sam Corman lives on Strawberry Lane) on March 25, 1798

On October 28-29, 1799, the "Public Crier," Bartholomew Kindred, sold the first 40 lots. Thirteen were reserved for Chelsey Gates and Tom Caldwell, who had donated the twenty acres for the town. The highest priced lot was where the Planning and Zoning Office and the Circuit Clerk's Office now stand; sold to Peter Tristler for 42 pounds. The two second highest-priced lots were where Von Grunigen hardware was and the Walker Hotel (County Attorney's Office) is for 32 pounds 15 shillings each. Benjamin Netherland, who already owned Mingo Tavern (now the Old Jail), bought where the Baptist Church now stands for 32 pounds, 5 shillings.

Twenty-nine people bought lots without incident, but one bad fight occurred! Thomas Allison lost part of his ear in a fight with William Brumfield! At the next

court session, John Carroll was allowed 10 pounds 9 shillings to build “stocks and a pillory” in case future fights took place.

2. Old jail tales.

The Walker Hotel was famous for its potato soup. Free soup and supper was included in the room rate. Once a traveling salesman stopped at the hotel overnight. He took his bags upstairs and came down for his free supper.

“Sir, try a bowl of our soup,” the waitress said. “No thanks, just give me coffee and the meal,” he answered. She brought his coffee and thinking he was unaware of their famous potato soup, she asked again and was refused. Being a good waitress, she made one more pitch for the soup. He said, “I HATE potato soup!”

He went upstairs to bed and was awakened at 4 a.m. when a person in the next room became violently ill. They called the man’s wife and a doctor. The wife told the doctor, “This happens often. Only thing that helps is an enema. He’ll resist, he’ll fight, but he won’t get better till you give him the enema. The doctor wasn’t happy at being called out a 4 a.m. and decided to follow the wife’s advice, so he could get back home to bed. He went upstairs and went to the wrong room! With the traveling salesman yelling and fighting, the big burly doctor gave him the enema.

The salesman was back home later and a friend on his way to Nicholasville asked how was the Walker Hotel. The salesman said, “The building’s nice, the rooms are nice, but whatever you do – take the potato soup with the meal!”

3. A bad night at the switchboard.

Jimmie Goss Higgs and Lula Peel were busy at the switchboard upstairs over the Sunset Cottage restaurant on South Main Street. It was a warm August night in 1934. Suddenly the two heard shouts in the street below. Two men were in a heated argument and one ran up the stairs to his apartment and just as quickly ran down again with a gun, heading up the street toward the corner across from the courthouse.

Frightened, the two ladies lowered the window shades, not wishing to witness anything bad. Shots rang out and before their shift had ended, Jimmie and Lula knew that Harry Hughes has been shot by William “Son” Earl, Jr. Hughes died a few hours later on August 13 at Good Samaritan Hospital. Earl, a restaurant operator, was charged with malicious shooting.

4. They rolled cross the floor.

Jesse Lunsford's Dry Goods Store at Main and Maple carried every household article a family could need. Miss Lou Braden and her brother Jim were employed as clerks. Mr. Jim was bald as a cue ball. One day as he sat on his stool fitting shoes on a lady customer, she looked down at his bald head. Thinking it was her knee, she threw her long shirt over his head! Together they rolled across the floor trying to disentangle.