

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND FORESTRY

2800 N. Lincoln Boulevard, Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4912

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Chief Agent Jerry Flowers, Jerry.Flowers@ag.ok.gov, (405) 522-6102.

Above and beyond service

Exemplified by Investigative Services Unit

Above and beyond service to the public can come in many forms.

For example, it's an old green trunk – 2 ½ feet wide and about 1 ¼ feet deep – with leather strap handles on either end.

Within this family treasure trove is a school memories book signed by classmates in the winter of 1930; a two-horse coach music box that still plays an easy melody; a 40mm antiaircraft shell casing dated 1943; a couple of well-kept war medallions and a mini black and white 1948 Kelloggs PEP football card of George McAfee, halfback, Chicago Bears, and much more.

Service above and beyond is seeing that this trunk and these items, as well as a few dozen others, were returned from two individuals arrested on drug and theft complaints to a family that can now enjoy the wealth of memories stored within the trunk for decades.

Earlier this year, Chief Agent Jerry Flowers and Special Agent Eddie Davenport of the Investigative Services Unit of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry (ODAFF) investigated two individuals who had reportedly broken into barns and stolen property from land owners in Garvin, McClain and Murray counties. The investigation led them to a travel trailer that had been stolen and then located near Dibble. It was there that the agents arrested the suspects and found the trunk.

“The old trunk did not belong to the suspects and was assumed stolen,” Flowers said.

Flowers – a clean-cut man with a horseshoe mustache and more salt than pepper left in his hair, a white felt cowboy hat on his head, a badge over his heart and a .45 on his right hip –

started looking through the trunk. Then with cell phone in hand, he made calls as time permitted.

Because of that persistence, on Wednesday, above and beyond service to the public took on yet another look, that of tender emotions as members of the family – granddaughters Jean Ann Rich Jones of Wagoner and Julie Rich Walton of Ada and their father Ray Jarrell of Stratford – gathered at the ODAFF Building, 2800 N Lincoln Blvd. in Oklahoma City, to claim the trunk. As they gently lifted items, tears welled in their eyes much like spring rains fill a stock pond. Jones and Walton were introduced through this trunk to the original owners, their grandparents Hoyt Rayfield Rich and wife Henry Louella Noles Rich.

“Without getting too lengthy, we’ve had a lot of loss in our lives and so to survive that we just kind of kept moving forward,” Jones said. “There are a lot of emotions that are flooding back in reference to all this, but it’s all good.”

THE COWBOY WAY

When Flowers originally started looking through the trunk he found photos and documents that dated back nearly 100 years. Between searches for cattle and equipment thieves, Flowers conducted an extensive investigation in an attempt to locate the descendants of the family identified from photos and records in the trunk.

“The day I found this old trunk inside that travel trailer that was stolen, the trunk stood out over everything else, it was basically screaming at me, it didn’t belong there,” Flowers said. “When I opened it up, the items in that trunk were so old, there were pictures from the 1920s. I told the male suspect, ‘You need to do the right thing, because these things in this trunk represent a family and you and I owe it to them to get it back to them where it rightly belongs because it’s something that would have been lost forever.’ This outlaw looked at me and he started crying and he said, ‘I really want to get it back to them, but I can’t tell you where I stole it because I don’t remember.’”

In making calls, one link would lead Flowers to the next. The Chief Agent knew from items in the trunk that the couple who had placed items in there had lived in north Texas. He also learned from the calls that years later some family members had moved to Oklahoma.

“I was raised that the old cowboy way was that you have an obligation to people,” Flowers said. “We have an obligation to our fellow man to care for those who can’t take care of themselves and that was so important to me.”

In his search, Flowers found the granddaughters to the couple that had been identified as owners of the old trunk. The couple was born in 1911 and 1913 and had died many years ago in

Texas. When Flowers learned the granddaughters live in Oklahoma, he contacted one of them and told her what had been found.

Over the phone, Flowers heard weeping. She was so excited about the find and began planning a visit to ODAFF to get the trunk. She called her sister.

“They could have just said, ‘Ok this belongs to somebody, but I don’t have time to mess with it.’ They could have just put it on the backburner and moved on to their next case,” Jones said.

“They didn’t do that. I’m so glad they didn’t just move on because it gives us a contact with who we are that we had kind of left behind. I do believe Jerry and Eddie went above and beyond. In this day and time with all the criminal activity they could have just went, ‘Whatever,’ but they didn’t.”

THE TREASURES WITHIN

What is in the trunk?

There’s a small hard-cover bank balance book with entries such as: \$10.25 for the purchase of a tractor battery from “Sears Roebuck” on February 13, 1957, \$3 to the paper man on June 6, 1957 and at some point that year, the individual paid for the combining of 14 acres (crop not mentioned) at \$3.50 per acre.

There’s a small green “Class Autographs” book packed with school day memories. Among those, a classmate wrote on Jan. 14, 1930, “I am so glad to get to write in your little memory book...When you are an ‘old lady’ I want you to look over and read these few lines which I have written in this book and think of me as your truest friend in the World.”

Also inside is a small, but thick old Webster’s Dictionary held together by tape at the top of the spine. A portion of the dictionary is titled “Dictionary of Radio and Wireless Words, Terms, And Phrases.”

There are several pieces of mail including an envelope from the United States Department Of Agriculture, Agricultural Stabilization And Conservation Committee. Inside was a “Notice of Farm Acreage Allotment And Marketing Quota For The 1954 Crop of Upland Cotton.”

Tucked in between other items are several black and white pictures in a fragile photo book, including one photo of two boys at a service station in front of a pump. That’s not why this photo of the boys clad in overalls stands out. It catches the attention because one of them is holding a banjo with fingers ready to pick.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Jones' and Walton's biological parents were Ray Gene Rich and Joan Hamm Rich. Ray passed away and Joan later married Jarrell, who Jones and Walton both refer to as their father. Joan passed away almost two years ago.

Through Flowers' investigation he learned the trunk had been stored near Stratford in a vacant house Jarrell owned that hadn't been checked on for some time. The Chief Agent informed Jarrell that he had the trunk, so the owner went to the house and found that the back door had been kicked in.

"This was meant to be because no one even knew that the old trunk had been stolen," Flowers said. "There were no police reports on it, nothing. There had to be an old cowboy angel who stepped down and led me to the right people for me to know where that old trunk ever came from."

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Photo caption: Chief Agent Jerry Flowers and Special Agent Eddie Davenport of the Investigative Services Unit of the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, from left, are shown with Julie Rich Walton of Ada and her sister Jean Ann Rich Jones of Wagoner and their father Ray Jarrell of Stratford. Flowers and Davenport found the stolen trunk during an investigation. Flowers searched extensively and located Walton and Jones, granddaughters of the original owners Hoyt Rayfield Rich and wife Henry Louella Noles Rich.

