

The Newspaper

by George Williams

In early January, 1902 a very young Bays D. Cather, Sr. made a momentous decision that would change his life forever. That decision would ultimately create an indelible mark upon the pages of Pell City's history, and carve a niche for Cather in the publishing business of the South.

He had been born into a newspaper family, grew up in the print shop of the family paper, and for nine months had been gaining additional experience while working for James P. Montgomery at Vicksburg, Mississippi. He was homesick for St. Clair County, but more importantly he felt a growing need to establish his own identity and create an outlet for his youthful ambitions.

The new town of Pell City was rapidly gaining acclaim and was receiving much attention in the printed media. His father's newspaper The Southern Aegis of Ashville was being mailed to him regularly and numerous articles were appearing in those pages regarding Sumter Cogswell and his efforts to build a thriving community in the southern part of the county. Bays Cather decided that it was time for Pell City to have a newspaper, and he wanted to be its Publishing Editor.

Mr. Cogswell was faintly amused when he received the first inquiry from this brash young man who wanted to establish his newspaper in a community that was little more than a railroad junction at the time. His amusement gradually turned to more serious considerations when he realized that Bays Cather also had a dream. Cather could possibly be a tremendous compliment to Cogswell's own ambition.

Cogswell had become acquainted with the young man's father, George R. Cather of Ashville, and had developed a great respect for him. Mr. Cather had established a printing business and a newspaper at Ashville in 1873, and immediately set about the task of teaching his young sons the printing trade and building a first rate publication, The Southern Aegis, for St. Clair County. Aware of the family's expertise and experience in the business, Mr. Cogswell decided that the Cather connection and Pell City's own newspaper could make an invaluable contribution to his new town's growth and success. He immediately extended an invitation, through the mail, to young Mr. Cather with a promise of his utmost assistance in helping with the

establishment of the paper. Mr. Cather packed up his belongings, resigned from his Mississippi job, and headed back home to St. Clair County.

He borrowed equipment and material from his father's business, purchased other printing supplies, and in true pioneer fashion loaded all of it onto two two-horse wagons and left Ashville on a cold January afternoon on 1902.

Included in the equipment and supplies were cases, handset type, paper, ink and a Southern Alliance Nonpareil Job Press. The load was a tire-

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some burden for the mules, and the roads were in miserable condition. After double-teaming against Backbone Mountain, Bays spent the remainder of the night at Coal City. On a bright, sunlit but still cold, Sunday morning Cather arrived in Pell City, unhitched his mules at the local livery and walked the short distance to the Cogswell home where he received an official welcome from Sumter Cogswell and his wife, Lydia.

Cogswell had already made arrangements for its use, so Bays Cather set up shop in a vacant building behind the Pell City Drug Company on property where, ultimately, Pell City's Martin Clinic would be located. The young newspaperman busily engaged himself in the gathering of news, selling advertising, and getting acquainted with the community. He composed the articles, laid out the ads, set the type, inked up his press and the first issue of The Coosa Valleyan hit the streets of Pell City. It was an instant success, countywide, but was destined for hard times through the desperate years of 1903-04. The paper occupied that building for approximately nine months before moving to other quarters, but in that short time it gained historical prominence in numerous endeavors.

Bays Cather, like Sumter Cogswell, was a mover and a shaker of sorts, and was also a very serious

mindful and religious young man. Sensing the need for a spiritual direction in the new community, he talked with Mrs. Carol Alverson and with the assistance of W.H. and Fred Miller a Sunday school was soon established. Since no other building was available, the first meeting was held on a Sunday afternoon at The Coosa Valley and, like the paper itself, was an instant hit. That Sunday school class would set the stage for the organization and erection of numerous churches in the area, and would, ultimately, make the town known as truly "a city of churches" when compared to other municipalities of comparable size.

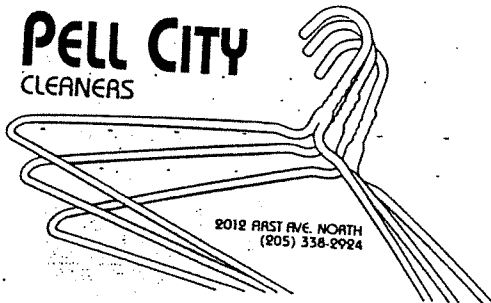
Cather was also an incurable romantic which is very much in evidence from the words he wrote in detailing his romance with a young lady who would become his beloved wife. In a letter to The Pell City News in 1944 he stated that, "Mr. T. J. Kilgroe, of Riverside, moved to Pell City about the time I did. He had a beautiful daughter, Miss Kaisy Kilgroe, and Pell City is where I first met her. Daisy and I were the first young Pell City couple who became sweethearts. These hills around town will always be sacred to our memory. For it was washere I wooed and won the heart of thje finest lady in all the world, where we, in 1904, became man and wife, and where we walked and roamed the fields and hills with our children born to us during the twenty-one years of our residence there."

In those twenty-one years Bays Cather would become of historical significance to the continued development of Cogswell's city, and would print many personal pages into its history. The Coosa Valley contributed, greatly, to the rebirth of Pell City, and through its pages the image of the additional development. Cather would serve two terms as Postmaster, help to establish a mercantile business, be instrumental in the organization of the first Methodist Church and, in later years of his residency, own and operate Pell City's first theatre.

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He would also edit a paper in Leeds, Alabama and during the years of World War II was Publishing Editor of The Dania Press, a weekly paper at Dania, Florida. Cather's efforts, in Pell City, would help to create a very favorable atmosphere for other newspapers that were to follow.

The very first paper to be published in the Pell City area was the Pell City Echo edited by W.S. Griffith. Apparently it did not weather the panic of 1893, and very little is currently known concerning its existence.

In 1908 The Progress was established and the name was later changed to The Pell City Progress.

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OLD PRINTING PRESS

Still in Use



This is an original hand operated Printing Press made by Peter Smith about 1822 and known as "The Smith Press."

Mr. Peter Smith was a carpenter and cabinet maker and used his talents to supply early American Printers with parts for their wooden presses. In 1803 Mr. Smith became connected with a Mr. Robert Hoe by Mr. Hoe's marriage to his sister and for a while they were in business together and upon Peter Smith's death the firm became R. Hoe & Co., Inc., now one of the leading manufacturers of newspaper presses in the world.

Little is known of this press from time of manufacture except it was first purchased in New York by F. S. Heiskell, of Knoxville, who used it three years and sold it to J. F. Grant, who removed it with new type and material, purchased in Philadelphia, to Jacksonville, Ala., in 1835 (Aegis of 1876), where it was first used in printing a Baptist paper when this town was first settled by J. F. Grant, who later became editor of "The Jacksonville Republican."

It is understood that this press was used only a few months in publishing the religious paper before Mr. Grant began using it to publish the Republican, where it remained in use until about 1860, when it was purchased by George R. Cather and taken to Ashville, Ala., and used in printing the St. Clair Diamond until about the last of July, 1861, when the paper was suspended, the office locked up, and every attache of the establishment entered the Confederate Army.

In the fall of 1863 the press was again put in operation and used in publishing the Ashville Vidette, and in 1864 fell into the hands of General Rousseau, of the United States Army who used it in printing orders and blanks, and in issuing one number of the paper with editorials by a member of the staff. His printers left the type and press undamaged.

Raids became so frequent, that, in the early part of 1865, the office was removed for safety to Oxford, Calhoun County, by W. P. Mangham, who continued the publication of the Vidette there until about the time Johnson surrendered. Just before the surren-

der a division of United States Cavalry made a descent upon Oxford and burned a few houses, and in doing so burned one of our type cases, which was in the telegraph office for the convenience of setting telegrams.

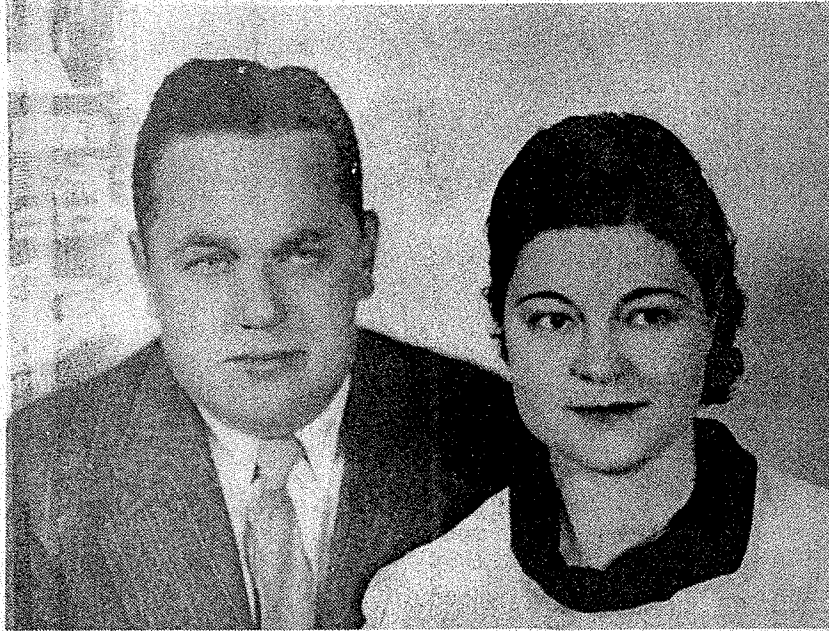
In July, 1865, the material was sold to R. E. Neeld, who removed it to Selma and started a paper—Republican in politics, we think—but we do not remember its title or how long it continued. We next heard of the press in Demopolis in 1866-67, and next in Montgomery where it was used in printing the Star (we cannot give dates). From Montgomery it went to Montevallo and then back to Ashville to the very same location it had been before. From there it was taken to Attalla and from there to Gadsden, where it was subsequently purchased by the present owner (This refers to George R. Cather, who purchased the press in 1872). It was brought back to Ashville and put to its original and legitimate use of printing a Democratic paper, which is ably and fearlessly conducted and is doing noble service in the cause of honesty and reform. (Rayville, La. Beacon, 1876).

In this good year of 1913, this same press is printing the Southern Aegis, which it has done faithfully for forty years, having never missed an issue, and while the above record makes it 81 years in use, it is today doing as good, if not better work than other presses on the market. W. C. Dodson, founder and president of the Dodson Printer's Supply Company of Atlanta was with this press on one of its trips to Ashville, and Lafayette Bowlin living near here (Ashville) hauled the press to Ashville on two of its trips, once from Calhoun County in 1866-67 and then from Whitney, December 1872, for the present editor. (Reprinted from Aegis, 1913)

The press is now on display at the A. H. Cather Publishing Co., at 2501 7th Avenue So., Birmingham, Alabama.

It is still in sound and excellent condition. Its massive frame is a one piece solid sand casting and has no bolts, and is decorated around the top and side with the original 13 stars. It is belt-hand-power driven and still has all the original parts.

Blairs published paper for 33 years



THE BLAIRS—Edmund and Ethel Blair were two very important people in the history of the *St. Clair News-Aegis*. The Blairs published the paper for 34 years and were responsible for merging the *Pell City News* and the *Southern Aegis* into what is now known as the *St. Clair News-Aegis*. In the picture below, Mr. Blair is standing in front of the original office on 1st. Ave.

By **CINDY WARNER**
News-Aegis News Editor

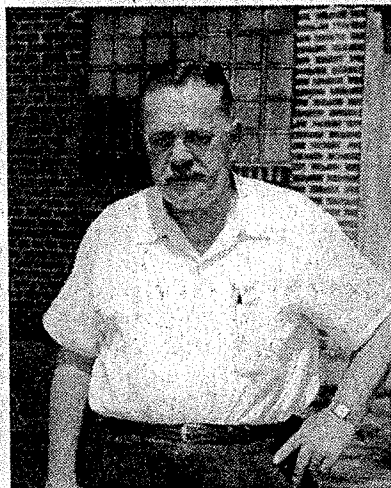
PELL CITY—The front page of the *St. Clair News-Aegis* on April 13, 1972 was a farewell to a very important man in the paper's history, Edmund R. Blair.

Blair passed away on April 9. He had been the publisher of the paper for 33 years.

Blair purchased the *Pell City News* in 1939, at which time consisted of only two pages. He later purchased the *Southern Aegis* from Bays Cather of Ashville. In 1950, Blair merged the two papers into the *St. Clair News-Aegis* where he served as editor and publisher until the time of his death.

Blair also owned the *Leeds News*. Linda Abercrombie, Blair's niece, said for many years the paper was located at 1811 1st Ave. South, across from Harmon's Farm Supply.

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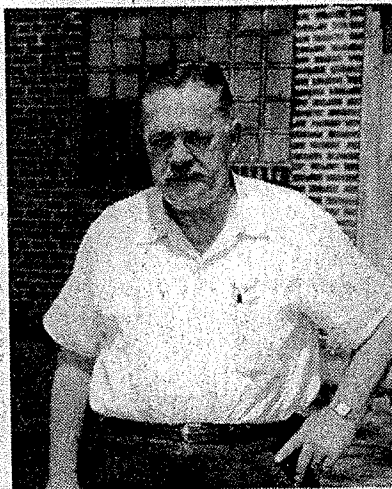
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After Blair's death, his wife and partner, Ethel Blair, took over full responsibility for the paper. Until then, the Blairs had always run the paper together, Abercrombie said.

In 1973, Mrs. Blair sold the paper to its present owner, Robert Bryan of Bryan Publications.

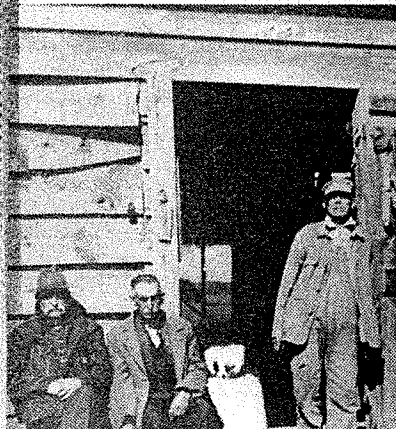
"I was there the day she sold the paper," Abercrombie said. "I took my aunt to meet Mr. Bryan that day. He was always so good to my aunt. He was very respectful and she really appreciated that."

Today, the papers in the Bryan Publication chain include the *St. Clair News-Aegis*, the *Leeds News*, the *North Jefferson News*, the *Athens News Courier* (daily) and the *Cullman Times* (daily).

The Linotype machines of Blair's day have been replaced by computers. The *Cullman Times* is the headquarters of all the papers in the chain and is responsible for the final layout and printing of the paper.

The copy is sent to the home office each week with the help of a modem that links the *News-Aegis* computers with the computers in Cullman.

Things have changed a little since the paper was first established, but hopefully we will continue to give you, the reader, what you want: that being, the very best local news coverage possible. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to serve you better.



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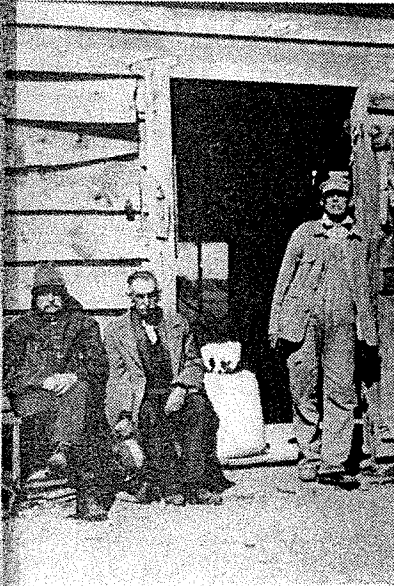
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MILLING THE TIME AWAY—Wright McLaughlin, George Tucker and Crowe Hardin are pictured circa 1920 in front of Hardin's Grist Mill. Hardin had the distinction of owning Odenville's first automobile.

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