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Locals to remember 'The Bottle' in dedication

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Posted: Thursday, April 23, 2015 10:38 am | Updated: 9:53 am, Mon Apr 27, 2015.

Katy Thorson - katy@auburnvillager.com | 0 comments

Today, it's merely home to an overlooked patch of trees, but in its heyday, the lot across the way from the Chevron gas station at the corner of Alabama Highway 147 and U.S. Highway 280 used to hold a landmark of epic proportions.

On April 25 at 2:30 p.m., the public is invited to a historic marker dedication from the Auburn Heritage Association (AHA) for this area of land, which is called "The Bottle" due to a 64-foot-high, bright orange, wooden Nehi soda bottle that used to sit on it in the 1920s and 1930s.

Anne Booth said her grandfather, John Frederick Williams, never realized his bottle would become so "amazingly different."



Contributed by the Auburn Heritage Association

'The Bottle'

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In The Zone: A Series Exploring Zoning In Auburn

Primer on zoning in Auburn

The dedication of "The Bottle" will be held April 25 at 2:30 p.m.



Williams originally built "The Bottle" strictly to advertise Nehi orange soda, as he was the owner of the Nehi Bottling Company in Opelika.

"People were just beginning to travel that road that eventually became (Highway) 280 from Birmingham — it wasn't even paved," Booth said. "People were beginning to drive (it) occasionally, and he saw the future and thought it would be a really great

advertisement."

Williams — whose nickname was "Chero-cola," but whom Booth knew as "Jack" or "Big Daddy"— was born in Maryland in 1882.

Williams later moved to Opelika and built the six-story bottle, which was also known as the "Twist Inn," in 1924. The structure housed a service station, grocery store and living space, with a spiral staircase running up through the center.

The columns for the service station were smaller Chero-Cola bottles, and the bottle's neck had windows just below the bottle cap, which doubled as an observation deck.

Williams' great niece, Jill Sybalsky, who has sifted through a number of census records and old newspaper articles about "The Bottle" for a book she wrote on her family's history, said it had an accompanying barbecue stand, and the second floor of the bottle had an open-air porch for dancing.

Sybalsky also mentioned that "The Bottle" was known as a " 'man's world,' (where) they gathered around a pot-bellied stove and talked of cows and crops and swapped stories and yarns."

Booth, who is now almost 84 years old, recalled going to the "Twist Inn" as a 5-year-old and being heckled by workers.

"I can remember going out there several times and them teasing me because I always wanted a NuGrape (soft drink) rather than a Nehi," Booth said. "They'd say, 'Here comes that lady that won't buy Nehi's.' I was 5 years old — I didn't know I was supposed to get a Nehi."

While a few details as to when and why "The Bottle" burned have been proposed throughout the years, conflicting accounts leave its demise in a smoky haze.

Sybalsky found that the majority of records cite 1936 as the year it burned down — the year that Booth also believes it to have burned.

Williams eventually lost his Nehi franchise, due to his son — Booth's father John "Nehi" Williams — selling candy off the back of a company truck, but he had a number of successful operations that followed.

"He loved to start businesses, and then he'd get bored and do something else," Booth said.

Williams opened multiple shops in Downtown Opelika, including the Williams Book and Gift Shop on South Railroad Avenue and the "It" Store on the corner of North Railroad Avenue and North 8th Street.

According to Sybalsky, the "It" Store closed in 1960, and Williams worked as a framer until his death in 1966.

Though most of Williams' projects are a thing of the past, "The Bottle" is still listed as a location on Alabama maps. And with the help of the AHA, it will live on in Auburn lore.

The dedication ceremony will take place at 2:30 p.m. at "The Bottle" site, and the first 50 guests will receive a Nehi orange commemorative bottle.

Booth said her grandfather would be "absolutely charmed" if he knew the historic marker was going up for his creation.

"He would just die laughing that they're finally going to remember his bottle," Booth said.

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Online Poll

Should the historic Auburn Train Depot be painted a red-brick color?

At last week's Auburn Historic Preservation Commission meeting, owners of the train depot requested the approval an "iron-ore gray" base color for the building. That request was tabled until the HPC meeting in June. One commission member adamantly stated that the depot should be painted red.

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

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