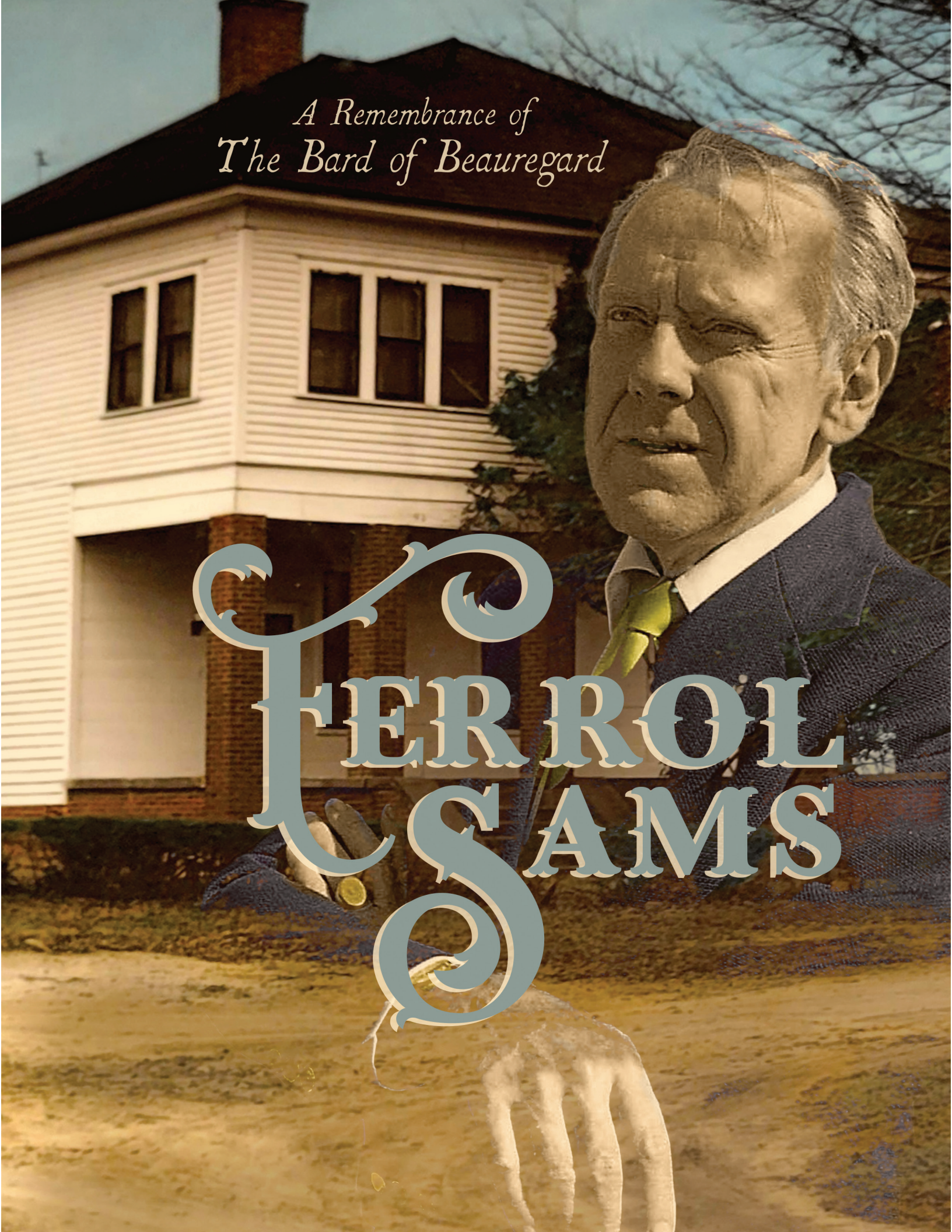

A Remembrance of
The Bard of Beauregard
FERROL SAMS

No. 72

BY DAN LANGFORD
(photographs & ephemera courtesy of Dan Langford)

In the fall of 1982, a newly published book began with the words, "In the beginning was the land. Shortly thereafter was the father." For purposes of our story today, we shall assume the next words were, "Then came the son, and Lord, what a ninety-year burst of energy, hilarity, and joy he would prove to be!"

Ferrol Aubrey Sams, Jr., was born on September 26, 1922, to attorney F. A. Sams (1892-1979) and Mildred Matthews Sams (1892-1980) in the ancestral home built by the counselor's grandfather Porter in 1853 on Antioch Road, out a piece from the village of Woolsey. Nicknamed "Sambo" by his dad, he had two older sisters, Jimmie Kate (1918-2004), who would marry a World War I friend of her father's, John W. Cole (1896-1967), and become a well-loved educator in Fayette County, and Marjorie Yvonne, who died in infancy a year before Sambo was born.

Two younger sisters completed the immediate family: Janice (1924-2006), who would marry J. C. Cole (1921-1956) from Delaware and become a teacher and nurse, and Sara (1925-2009), who married attorney Claude L. Goza (1917-1985) and became a teacher and school principal in Fayette. All three Sams sisters would live their lives within a stone's throw of the homeplace, while Sambo would eventually settle a few miles north in the county seat.

A major event in the Sams family chronicle occurred when the senior Ferrol was elected Superintendent of Fayette County Schools in 1924. He would serve in that role for nearly four decades, albeit with a couple of years off in the 1940s to serve in the state legislature. In his public role, he was known for his courtly manner, his fiscal conservatism, and his ever-so-Southern-gentlemanly white linen suits.

Sambo started at the Woolsey School, a red brick structure that stood a bit toward Woolsey Creek from where the Sams family worshipped at the old, white-framed Woolsey Baptist Church in the center of the village. A precocious child blessed with a quick wit, a mischievous nature, and as it turned out, a nearly photographic memory, Sambo quickly made a mark, mentally taking notes as he went.

He remembered, for instance, the old lady in church who was opposed to the pastor a majority of the congregation had voted to call. She stood up on his maiden Sunday and prayed, "Dear Lord, if it be not Thy will that this man come and serve our church, and I personally think that it ain't, then we pray Thou will place obstacles in his path."

Or riding on rainy days to school with No-Legged Joe, a tenant on the Sams farm who had two artificial legs from about mid-thigh. No-Legged Joe's job on such days was to navigate rain-swollen Woolsey Creek ahead of the Sams car to make sure it was not so deep it would cause the car to stall out.

Or the boy who came to school with a broken arm and answered upon inquiry that he'd broken it eating breakfast. "How do you break an arm eating breakfast?" came the amazed question from Sambo and other classmates. "I fell out of the persimmon tree," the young man replied laconically.

Sambo transferred to the Fayetteville school for third grade, experiencing the shock all country children in Fayette felt when they eventually transferred from their small, rural schoolhouses to the county seat and encountered the much more sophisticated town children. As he was to write many years later, "The class became divided into town and country, and the division, despite bridging friendships, lasted throughout the school career."

Your commentator's great-aunt, Ara Stinchcomb Callaway (1921-2017), was in Sambo's class in Fayetteville and warmly remembered that he once teased the waist sash on her dress untied while sitting behind her in class, then re-tied it around the back of the desk, so she couldn't get up. Another time he dipped her pigtails into his inkwell. Near the end of her life, she laughed and told your commentator, "Sambo made me the class crybaby in *Run with the Horsemen* (referred to hereafter as *Horsemen*); 'Marie Vodenbacker,' he called me. But many years later I developed an abscessed tooth and had to get a root canal, and I wouldn't let them give me any anesthetic. I told Sambo the next time I saw him I reckoned I wasn't such a crybaby after all, and he said he reckoned not!"

A somewhat lackadaisical student he called "Rooster Holcomb" (whose real name was Clarence Rivers, who lived from 1919 till 1992 and owned and farmed the land where Trilith now stands) almost proved to be Sambo's undoing one day at Fayette County. The class was studying local government and the teacher was quizzing students where various county officials' offices were. She asked Clarence where the Ordinary's office was. He shrugged his shoulders. She then asked where Sheriff Ben Adams's office was. He shrugged again (which is ironic because he would marry Sheriff Adams's only daughter some years later.) The teacher then said, "What about our school superintendent, Mr. Ferrol Sams? Everyone knows him and where his office is. C'mon, Clarence, surely you know that!"

Clarence grinned like a possum, cut his eyes over toward Sambo, and said, "In the back of Seawright's Drug Store," a pronouncement which exploded in the room like a shotgun blast. Everybody knew, but no one ever mentioned, that the senior Sams did tend to spend many evenings in the back of the drugstore, where firewater is rumored to have flowed rather freely. For Sambo, it was akin to the Andersen parable in which the little child proclaimed, "The Emperor has no clothes!" Filled to the brim with stories such as these, *Horsemen*, Sambo's first book, carries the reader through Sambo's 1938 graduation from Fayette County High School.

He matriculated at Mercer University in Macon that fall, where he would spend his undergraduate career. The second book of his Porter Osborne trilogy, *The Whisper of the River* (referred to hereafter as *Whisper*), published in 1984, covers those years and experiences.

Soon after Whisper was published, a physician in coastal Georgia named Darnell Brawner supposedly mumbled gruffly he was going to have to drive up to Fayette County and kick the town physician's…uh…behind…for his portrayal as the bellicose Clarence Spangler in that book. Former classmates Leanita Blount and Evelyn Neel (Amalita Hunt and Sarah Belle Steele, respectively) were apparently much more pleased with their portrayals therein than Dr. Brawner had been with his own. The rollicking tales of these students of bygone days still delight the reader and resonate well with nearly everyone; *Whisper* is required reading for all Mercer students today.

A memorable character vignette in *Whisper* is that of Lila Hadley, who confronted an obnoxious campus troublemaker most dramatically in the co-op one day. In recounting the improbable event immediately afterward, one of Sambo's friends mused that Lila Hadley didn't march to the beat of a drum like everyone else, but instead heard tambourines, to which one can only dance.

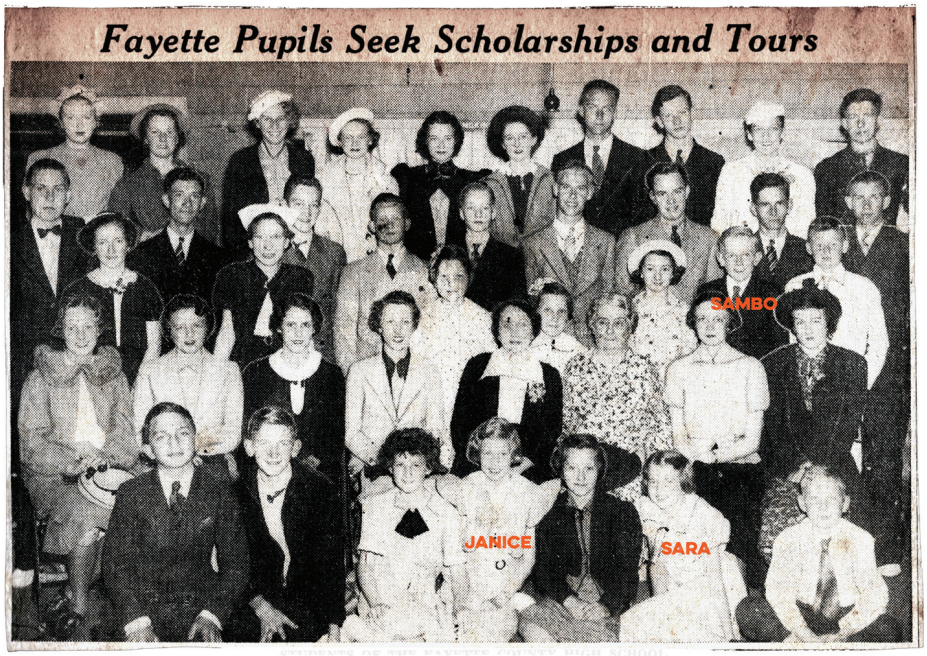
Many years later, soon after *Whisper*'s publication, Sambo received a call from an old lady with a creaky voice who asked if the character named Lila Hadley had really been named whatever the student's real name was. Sambo, who always publicly maintained that his books were fiction, said that he hesitated a second then admitted that it was indeed the same person. The old lady on the phone said, "She was my daughter," and went on to explain that the Lila character Sambo wrote about had died some years before. Sambo, in relating this story at a literary symposium at UGA in early 1986, added, "A week or two later, I got a package in the mail and opened it to find this," as he held a tambourine up and shook it. He then showed the audience an inscription across the instrument's head skin, then read it aloud. "From the family of the much-loved Tambourine Lady with sincere appreciation to Ferrol Sams, who immortalized her." Sambo's writing often touched people in such a profound way.

Next on Sambo's agenda was medical school at Emory, which he started in the Summer of 1942, and which was interrupted when he went to serve in World War II in 1943. This entire period is covered by the final book in his Porter Osborne trilogy, *When All the World Was Young* (hereafter referred to as *World*), which he once told your commentator was probably a mistake. "That really should have been…and is…two books instead of one, because the med school and war experiences were so very different," he said that day in 2010.

But whether it should have been two books or one, the characters he draws (med school faculty, staff, and students, as well as soldiers, officers, and civilians he encountered in war) are as finely crafted as in his other books. One of the most memorable of the first group is Dr. Horace Wingo, the name Sambo bestowed on the anatomy professor at Emory during his time there. Wingo is pictured as being tough as nails and highly eccentric, but as a man of tremendous integrity who could be counted on when all the chips were down. All in all, it's a positive portrait of a much-respected professor, although the professor's family, whom your commentator knows, does not find it to be.

Then there's Lt. Katie Elkins (named "Katie Albert" in the book), the flaming red-haired beauty from Nevada, a memorable virago of a nurse who managed the seeming impossibility of being charming in spite of her volatile temperament. Lt. Elkins took Sambo somewhat under her wing and actually visited the Sams homestead when they were both stationed at Lawson General Hospital, which was adjacent to the Naval Air Station in Chamblee.

Sambo did not remain in touch with Lt. Elkins after the war, but soon after *World*'s publication, a reader recognized her character in it and showed the book



Sambo in school photo with Janice and Sara - 1936 newspaper photo

Sambo's parents and son, Ferrol III, at FCHS in 1956

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF FAYETTE COUNTY

FAYETTEVILLE, GEORGIA, OCTOBER 22, 1937

Appendicitis Too Big a Word for Champ Speller

Constitution Staff Photo—Roton.

Ferrol Sams, Jr., takes his spelling along with his medicine, but when it comes to appendicitis it goes with a capital "A." The boy is shown at Crawford W. Long hospital with his nurse, Mrs. C. E. Adams, after an operation following an acute attack Tuesday of last week. Ferrol was to have represented Fayette County in the state spelling championship at the Southeastern Fair, but had to content himself with practice spelling with Nurse Adams. (Courtesy of Atlanta Constitution.)

FIRE DESTROYS COTTON BELONGING TO REDWINE BROS. EARLY SATURDAY MORNING

A fire of unknown origin destroyed and damaged 38 bales of cotton belonging to Redwine Bros., early Saturday morning at Fayetteville. Twenty-eight bales were in a box-car on the side-track and ten were from bed by the sounding of the fire bell in the Court House and did what they could to subdue the smouldering flames, but the fire had such a start very little of the burning cotton was saved.

Wayne Smith Given Committee Place

Wayne Smith, past commander of the Fayette American Legion Post, has been appointed a member of the Legion community service committee for the State of Georgia.

He was selected for this important place by State Legion Commander Pat Kelly.

Sambo in hospital, 1937

Sambo, 1942 Mercer

Evelyn Neel (Sarah Belle Steele)

Leanita Blount (Amalita Hunt)

Darnell Brawner (Clarence Spangler)

to Mrs. Elkins, who was by then quite old. The reader then reached out Sambo and gave him the old lady's contact information. Sambo told your commentator about that call one day. "An old lady with a soft, hesitant voice answered and I told her who I was. She reacted as if she had no recollection of me. I reminded her of a few fun and improbable times we had enjoyed during our time in the war, and she thawed a degree or two and finally admitted to having read the book. She then snarled, 'But you never should have made me such a mercurial %&?/!@ character! You know %&?/!@ well I never cussed that much!' and banged down the phone."

World gets the reader to Sambo's embarkation for home after the war and ends the Porter Osborne trilogy. But ahead lay the best part of the story.

Ferrol Sams, Sr. had met with Emory brass and secured his son's re-enrollment in the medical class as soon as he could get back stateside in 1946. There, over a cadaver in dissection class, Sambo encountered a rarity – a female medical student. Helen Fletcher (1923-2013), who hailed from an accomplished family in Greensboro, Florida, intrigued the young man from the start and soon bewitched him body and soul. They married on July 18, 1948, and lived in an apartment in Little Five Points while finishing med school. When their first child, Ferrol III, was born in 1949, Dr. Helen had to lead Emory through the previously uncharted waters of establishing maternity policy for students.

Drs. Ferrol and Helen Sams moved to Fayetteville in 1951 and established their medical practice. Daughter Ellen was born the same year, then came Jim a year later, and finally, Fletcher in early 1954. Having four children in five years led Sambo to quip that he was the only man he knew who'd had an emergency vasectomy.

When Fletcher Sams was born, Dr. Helen asked Sambo if he wanted her to stay home and take care of their four young children. He replied, "You have wanted to be a physician for longer than you have ever wanted to be my wife, and I would never take that away from you." The couple would practice medicine together until they both retired in late 2006 – Dr. Helen that October, and Sambo in December.

The Samses' arrival in Fayetteville more or less coincided with the widespread introduction of television to America, and

the town's newest and youngest male physician rather loudly proclaimed his disdain for the medium, swearing that as long as he wore the pants in the family, no TV would be in the Sams house. But pretty soon a TV aerial appeared on the Sams rooftop, leading folks around town to snicker. That snickering turned to deep laughter a day or two later, when a pair of Sambo's trousers was spotted hanging from the aerial.

At some point in these early years, Sambo, who never had a cavity in his life, had a gold sleeve with a carved-out "S" fitted over a healthy front tooth to get a rise out of Dr. Helen. Judge Fletcher Sams indicates that his mother's reaction was a bit stronger than expected, to the point that Sambo delayed removing the sleeve till he could schedule a fake appointment and get it off. "He did love the ridiculous!" Judge Sams remembers.

The Samses became active in civic and church affairs, too. Sambo was a founding member of Fayette's first Kiwanis Club in 1951, and they quickly joined the Methodist Church in Fayetteville, where Sambo sang in the choir and taught high school Sunday School. Your commentator's mother was in that Sunday School class in the mid-1950s, and she and Sambo loved to laugh together about many things, among them, the time the class was supposed to take Christmas gifts to residents of the county's Poor Farm, which was on McDonough Road across from present-day McCurry Park.

The class was unenthusiastic, but the young lady organizing the almsgiving effort stood up, stamped her dainty foot, and chewed her classmates out to a farethee-well. "We are all gonna meet here at 3:00 this afternoon and we're gonna ride out to that Poor Farm with these gifts. And we're gonna have smiles on our faces when we do, 'cause we're gonna show those poor people we sincerely care for them, whether we mean it or not!" When Sambo would tell your commentator that story, he would always add, "I thought Jane Schell (your commentator's mother) was going to fall out the window laughing!"

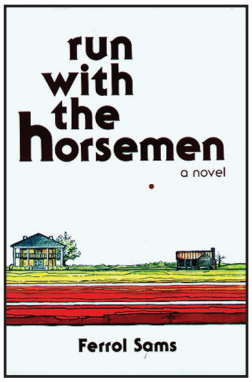
Some years later, a preacher assigned to the Fayetteville church stirred-up the congregation by insisting that his office door be locked when he was not present. This upset some of the female choir members, who were accustomed to using the pastor's phone (the only one in the church) to call home before heading that way along the dark country roads after Wednesday night choir practice. The pastor wouldn't budge; great tension built.

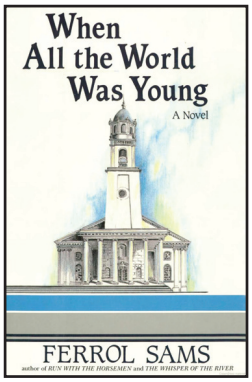
Finally, he came in one day and the door was gone – removed from its hinges. Rumor has it the door ended up propped against the back wall of Sambo and Dr. Helen's new house on Beauregard Boulevard, till such time as the pastor backed off his rather selfish position, when it was reinstalled. Rumor also has it that Sambo tried to persuade the beautiful young choir director to feature, "*Lift Up Your Heads, O Gates! Even Lift Them Up, Ye Everlasting Doors*" as the next Sunday's anthem, but she, being a person of refined taste and sound judgment, told him that would not be appropriate under the circumstances and chose, "*Be Still and Know That I Am God,*" instead.

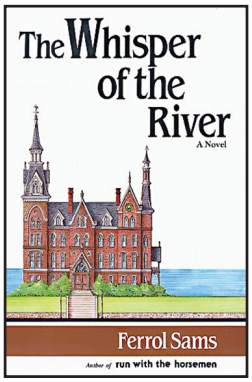
Speaking of the Beauregard Boulevard house, it was a wonder. Built as the Fifties ended and the Sixties dawned, it stood on several wooded acres which Sambo and Dr. Helen would fill to the brim with native and other plant specimens over the remainder of their long lives. Fern-lined paths meandered through their beautiful woods. Saving, relocating, nurturing, and enjoying God's own flora was a passion for both the Samses, and they often enjoyed it from their enormous back porch when they weren't actually out caring for it themselves.

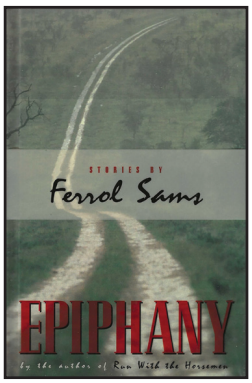
Their sprawling house's exterior might be described as "mid-century modern ranch," but its inside was furnished rather traditionally with antiques and other beautiful things from around the world, including abundant artwork. It was considered such a local showplace that the senior superlatives of FCHS's Class of 1960 chose to have their photos made there.

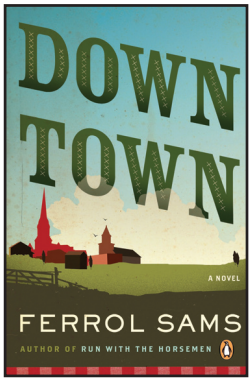
Sambo won a seat on the Fayetteville City Council in 1963 and served over twenty years. Jack Dettmering (1928-2008), who later became mayor, came onto the Fayetteville council at the same time. One story from those early years, when Fayetteville City Hall was in the old Sheriff Ben Adams house (next to where the depot was later relocated and now stands), was when Sambo and Dr. Helen had been among the first folks in Fayetteville to give up cigarettes after the Surgeon General's Warning in 1964. Sambo decided to try to get a ban on smoking passed at Fayetteville council meetings soon thereafter. Some say he went it alone, and others say he enlisted

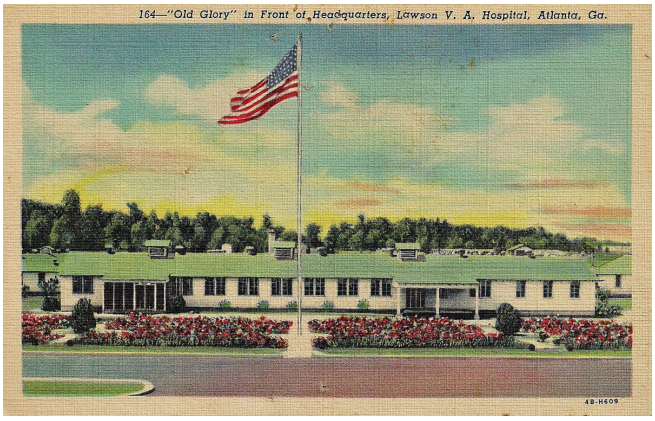










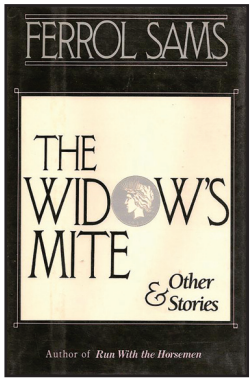


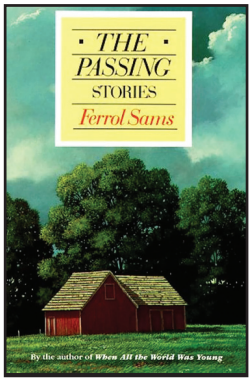
Postcard of Lawson General Hospital

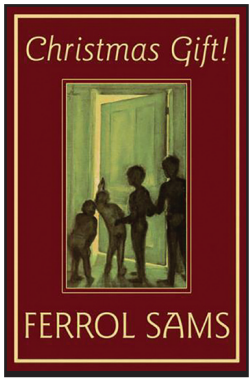
Check for $3 to Sams Clinic (commentator's collection)

Helen

Helen with her four children







friend and fellow churchman, Jack Dettmering, in the effort. But whether it was one or two folks wearing gas masks who shocked the Fayetteville council at their next meeting, the non-smoking message was delivered in a dramatic way. The smoking ban was eventually won.

Jack Dettmering was a character, himself. Some years after the gas mask incident, Fayetteville Methodist had a preacher who tended at times to be a tad theatrical. One Sunday he preached on the Parable of the Lost Sheep and was down in front of the altar calling out for the missing lamb and acting as if he were searching the horizon for it. He called and called. Then, from the choir loft, came a soft response that grew louder and louder. "Baaaa!" Jack Dettmering called out. "Baaaa! Baaaa!" It was all Dettmering's fellow chorister Sambo could do to hold things together and keep from bursting into laughter in the middle of the choir loft in 11 o'clock church.

Jack Dettmering could come close to matching Sambo's shenanigans, but perhaps the only person in Fayetteville who could, on occasion, truly outdo Sambo was his good friend, Kate Culpepper Greer (1897-1972). She figures heavily in many of his published stories, under several different names in different stories – he calls her "Mae Pringle" in his final book, Down Town. One of your commentator's favorite tales speaks to two of Kate's well-known characteristics: an absolute phobia of germs and sickness and a willingness to speak up when she felt oppressed.

It occurred when Fayetteville installed its first sanitary sewer system in the mid-to-late 1960s. Kate Greer was vocal in her opposition, declaring she would lie across the blade of any bulldozer that tried to disturb the ground in her front yard along Highway 54 West. "It nauseates me to think of my filth jumbled up with everyone else's in town, and what if the pressure builds up and that nasty system explodes outward into my bathroom or kitchen?" She would not be dissuaded by even the most compelling argument.

Kate was awakened early one morning by the roar of machinery close by and looked out her front window to see a backhoe digging a six-foot-deep ditch across her front yard, into which workers were laying pipe. She ran out her front door in nightclothes and jumped down into it. The workers couldn't persuade her to get out of their way, so they radioed the town manager, who figured his

friend Sambo might be the only person on earth who could talk Kate Greer out of that ditch, so he called the good doc.

Sambo came driving up shortly. He went over to the ditch and fussed at Kate sternly. She fussed right back, as defiant to him as she had been to the others. Finally, Sambo dealt his trump card. He lowered his voice confidentially, "Kate Greer, I can't believe somebody as germ conscious as you are is standing barefooted in that ditch where all these workers have spat their tobacco juice and probably peed."

At that, the septuagenarian raised her arms fetchingly about halfway above her head, turned her palms outward, smiled coaxingly, and cooed, "Pull me up out of here, baby!"

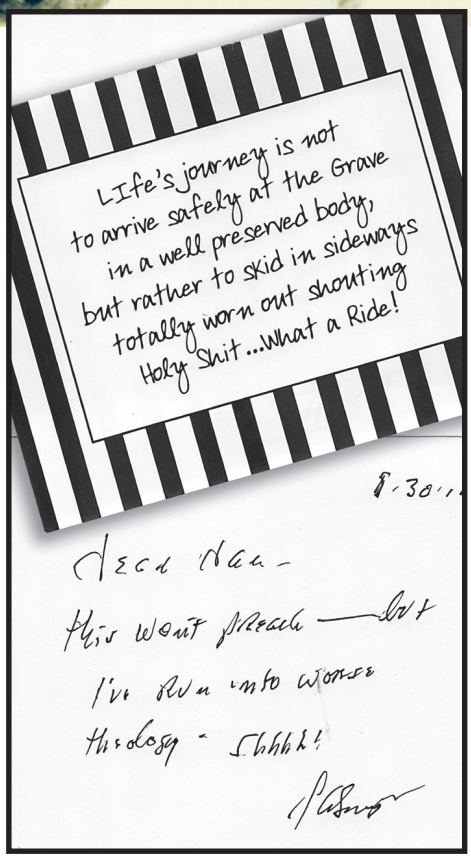
Thus, life proceeded over the next few decades. Sambo left the council in the mid-1980s, due, he always said (quoting former Gov. Marvin Griffin), to reasons of health: "The voters got sick of me." Maybe they did, but no one really realized how much Sambo had been noticing and making mental notes upon for all those years.

It came to a head when *Run with the Horsemen* came out. Sambo had handwritten the manuscript over a couple of years and his sister Jimmie Cole had typed it. Sambo, who said, "Jimmie Kate's about the only one who can read my handwriting, but the challenge is going to be to find an editor who can read her typing," took two shoeboxes of manuscript first to his good friend, Jim Minter, legendary VP and Executive Editor of the AJC, who he knew would tell him unvarnished truth. Minter read the manuscript and told Sambo, "I don't know exactly what you have here, but it deserves to see the light of day." Minter helped to connect Sambo to folks who could help.

It was big; bigger than anyone expected. *Horsemen* came out to a stellar reception in the fall of 1982, and by that December had been banned from libraries by the Cobb County School Board. AJC columnist Lewis Grizzard (1946-1994) asked the new author about it. Sambo replied, "I don't want to get too excited about this. Some authors get 'Banned in Boston.' I haven't achieved anything of that magnitude. All I've been is 'Culled in Cobb'." Sambo would later laugh and say his editor told him it was pretty apparent that he'd learned to write about halfway through that first book.

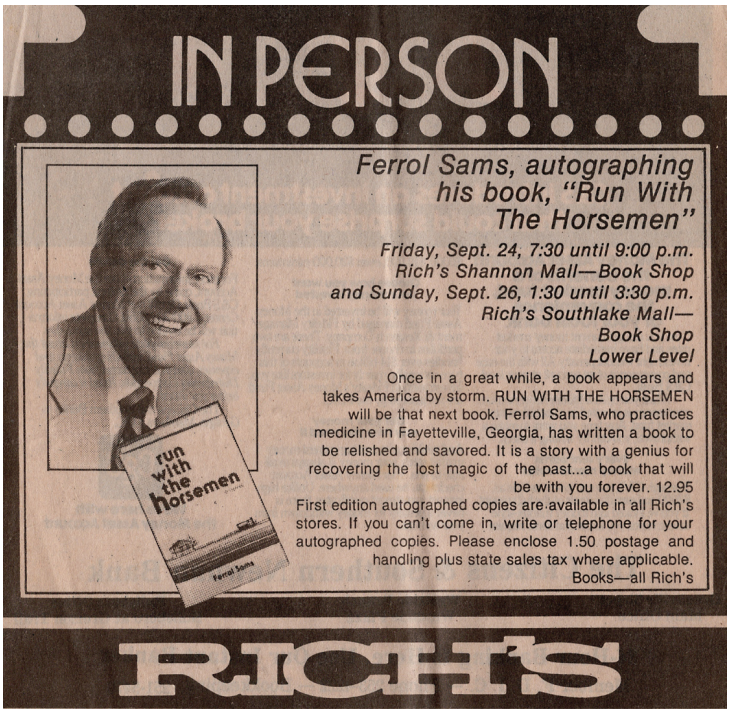
Fayette artist Steven Stinchcomb, who was virtually a fourth son to Sambo and Dr. Helen, tells of the time soon after *Horsemen*'s publication when the Samses were out driving near their mountain house and got lost – ending up at the same unpaved intersection several times. Dr. Helen told Sambo he needed to ask for directions, so he got out of the car, walked to a nearby field, worked his way between strands of barbed-wire, and walked up to the man working the field with his tractor to ask directions. The farmer turned off his machine. Sambo held out his hand in introduction and said, "My name is Ferrol Sams and…" The farmer broke into a grin and said, "Well HELLO, Porter!"

Sambo and Dr. Helen at one of Sams' first book signings, 1982



Note card recieved six months before Sambo's death. It reads: "Dear Dan, This won't preach - but I've run into worse theology. Shhh! F.A. Sams" (commentator's collection)

Newspaper ad for book signing at Rich's Department Store



Sambo's sister, Jimmie Kate Sams Cole

Many readers of this remembrance are likely familiar with Ferrol Sams's body of published works, and some might be tempted to think that writing was his passion. It was – but just one of many. Sambo was a man of many parts and many passions: he adored his bride till the day he died, he adored his children and their families; he loved his community and its denizens, he loved the practice of medicine, he loved the beauty of God's earth around him, he loved to laugh and make others do so, and many other things. A particular joy of the Samses' golden years were their grandchildren, who all lived close by and were intimately connected with their grandparents' daily lives. The entire family met every Sunday after church at the Beauregard house for a delicious home-cooked meal – regular joy-filled events they referred to as "hassles."

Deep grief descended, though, when granddaughter Jennifer died tragically in 1995, and again when young grandson Joseph Sams, who had been born with Down Syndrome but never suffered from it, died a year later. Sambo said he couldn't write for nearly ten years after those devastating tragedies. "When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions" perhaps never rang truer for anyone than it did for the Sams family in that dark time.

But he did eventually pick up his pen once more. *Down Town*, which was published in 2007, was the result. Critics have described it in many ways, but your commentator has his own opinion on what it really is. He believes it's a love song to Fayetteville and its people – no more, no less – and will not be dissuaded from that opinion.

Sambo's memory was phenomenal. In the summer of 2012, your commentator was visiting on Beauregard one Saturday when Sambo told a delicious story he had never committed to paper. When your commentator had mostly finished laughing, he gasped, "How do you remember all that stuff??" Sambo's response was, "How could anybody forget?" One must reckon that's so, for Sambo certainly never forgot. And his writing was enriched immeasurably because of that memory.

He was once quoted as saying, "There is a richness on the tongue of many patients, and they will bestow it freely on a perceptive physician." He loved to tell of the corpulent lady who confessed, "I aim to tell you the truth as the Lord knows it, Dr. Sams, and that is that I think the day has finely arrived when I am going to have to break down and ast for one of them dad-blamed diets of yourn. I have long since grown accustomed to not being able to git into my clothes, but here of late I have commenced to worrying about the door."

Or the elderly great-grandmother who, while in his office, added to his collection of stories by saying, "Do you remember when Will Mundy was the jailer over in Jonesboro a long, long time ago? Well, one day he was called on to lock up a woman, and he was a little nervous because he'd never locked up no lady prisoner before. The woman called out to him, 'Mr. Jailer, you're gonna have to bring me a box of Kotex." Will Mundy hollered over his shoulder without breaking stride, "I'll never do it, lady. You'll have to eat the same thing the other prisoners do."

Sambo was a joy, purely and simply. He kept us well, helped us remember, and made us laugh. When his baby sister, Sara Goza, died in 2009, Sambo told your correspondent, "I'm the last acorn left on the tree." But sadness never kept him down long; that irrepressible joy in his soul would soon bubble to the surface, as the pictured card and message he sent your commentator six months before his death illustrate.

Sambo died at home on Beauregard Boulevard in the early hours of the morning of January 29, 2013. His beloved Dr. Helen followed just over three weeks later. Both are buried in the Sams plot at Woolsey Cemetery.

***

Sambo believed that the essence of Christ's message could be condensed to one word, "Rejoice!" He believed humankind was created for joy, and while he dispensed many medicines over the years of his practice as a physician, perhaps joy was the most effective of those. For after all, as the Proverbs remind us, "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine."