

Blood Town S1-E5

Historical Crickets

[00:00:00] **Penny:** I'm Penny Dearmin, and this is Blood Town.

Jim: In Milledgeville's early days that date back to near the eighteenth century, there were public springs where inhabitants came to take water. There were taverns, hotels, and public toilets. There was at least one "whorehouse," which is well recorded on an 1809 map that reads, "these [houses] are plenty, and make money out of the adventurous old Bachelors of this town." Before the bridge across the Oconee was built that Sherman will burn, there were ferries across it like Fluker's, Holt's, and Bolan's.

Naturally, some of Milledgeville's first communities appeared along the Oconee River. Stembriage Road is the main road through a [00:01:00] community once known as Salem, which is east of the Oconee River on the way to Deepstep, Georgia. Stevens Pottery is somewhere in southwest Baldwin. Less than five miles downriver from the vacant and overgrown historic site where there's no fort at all, Fort Wilkinson is just an open spot in the woods where people sell and use drugs, directly across from what was once the mighty and cruel Central State Hospital. Fort Wilkinson is a historic marker posted on Vinson Highway and a place to turn a car around if the fallen tree didn't block the entrance. What was bought and sold there doesn't much matter these days. The state of Georgia, the county of Baldwin, or the city of Milledgeville does not maintain the site. If it's supposed to be maintained by anyone, it's not.

Hamp Brown Bottom is where the Greenway is now. Few call the places these names anymore unless they study too much history then one may begin to see ghosts and call things names that others don't. In Milledgeville, a person tends [00:02:00] to imagine things that aren't there or aren't anymore. Hamp Brown Bottom used to come alive at night with juke joints along the river's edge just as Alice Walker writes the joint in *The Color Purple*. Although she's from twenty-mile away Eatonton, Alice Walker lived in Milledgeville for a brief period when she was young. It was Milledgeville where her brother's BB gun blinded her eye.

There was Sand Town near the plantation Mount Nebo on Lake Laurel Road, which was once Route 22 just six miles from Milledgeville. Nothing remains of Mount Nebo besides its dual white pillars at its gates and the likelihood that it was named after the mountain where Moses was shown the Promised Land over the River Jordan. There was Dovedale in northwest Baldwin. Dog Town, on Fishing Creek, is where the first governor's house was located when Governor Irwin and his wife arrived in a caravan shortly after Milledgeville was named capital.

Blood Town is to the south. The most forgotten of the towns is [00:03:00] Old Oconee Town where Indian Island is that's an ancient Creek Indian city and burial ground, but few can find it in the woods. As I understand, some people who find it dig around there from time to time with shovels, which is just one of the million sad tales Milledgeville can tell. Old Oconee Town is near a road that's still called Indian Trail Road. Most of these places are within a ten-mile radius from the center of Milledgeville if one drew a big circle, and the Oconee would cut through the middle of the circle as a line as crooked as a snake. All these place names are rarely spoken now, because they are Milledgeville, but I call it Blood Town.

Penny: The day after the Mother's Day murder, the Baldwin County Sheriff's office and the GBI held a joint press conference, and we were flooded with significant details and timelines, [00:04:00] and we've heard very little since. There's been silence. It's been seven months, and the toxicology results have not been released.

Marcus Lillard has not been indicted, and we have no idea if the case has been presented to the grand jury. Jim, why are we focusing on the history of Blood Town in this episode?

Jim: You know, not to give like a history lesson for people who don't like history, but what tends to happen with history is it repeats itself, which is a cliché that every college professor/history teacher will tell you. When we began the idea of creating this podcast, we had witnessed the tendencies of Milledgeville and the tendencies of middle Georgia and what it can do, and in anticipation of exactly where we are seven months later, we began working on the [00:05:00] podcast.

So, we're back to that word, silence. We're back to the word of, I don't know what the word is. It's just...hide it.

Penny: Bury it?

Jim: Bury it, yeah. Sweep it away. Let it wash away, enough time pass, let something else happen. And the reason why the history is important is the area, and I won't just blame Milledgeville, but you know, the area has had quite a long history, that strategy, and it's that, you know, I think I mentioned that Central State was created in 1847. I mean, it's actually even older than that. It's just, I just figured they're good and ready by 1847 or 1850, but it really goes back to the thirties, 1830 when some of the first patients came there.

Penny: So why is it important for us to talk about Central State?

I know we focused on the fact that Dr. Clark Heindel worked there in our [00:06:00] last episode, and we're going to talk a little bit more about Central State and that pattern of keeping things silent and a secret.

Jim: Yeah. I think for some listeners or some of the audience who are out there, they're like, well, they're talking about a murder that happened in 2019, and they're talking about 1837 and 1832 and 11 years before the civil war.

And it does seem maybe at this point a little, a little misguided, but it's not; it's all very much connected. There is not an authoritative history of Central State Hospital. For many generations, people really can't tell you who worked there. People can't tell you who the patients were, who were there, why they were there, who sent them there, the qualifications of the doctors who diagnosed patients and sent them and committed them for life.

[00:07:00] **Penny:** Here's Mr. Brown, a local Milledgeville historian.

Jim: Are you a history teacher or librarian at GMC?

Mr. Brown: No, I was director of guidance and counseling. And so, I dealt with, and then I taught at the prison, taught at the Women's prison, taught at the men's prisons. Taught at the YDC at night. All these were courses I was teaching at night.

Jim: About the idea that, well not the idea, but the reality of there not really being any history sources for Central State Hospital almost by design. You know?

Mr. Brown: You know, if you work somewhere and a lot of secrets work at, a lot of secrets. ‘

Jim: ‘Cause you've been teaching history, or studying the area. And you're at the [00:08:00] public library and Mary Vinson Library in Milledgeville, Georgia, and you're the guy they say, well, if you really want to know, wait until Mr. Charlie Brown's here and he'll find, help find the answer. And you're the man who finds the answers. And if I walked in here and say, Hey, I need some facts on Central State Hospital, besides Cranford's book that's more or less an unauthorized book is out of print. If you tried to find this book it's \$300 on some server on the internet, and then it doesn't exist.

And that you can't there's there should be a row of these.

Mr. Brown: Yeah.

Jim: But there isn't.

Mr. Brown: That's right.

Jim: Why do you think that is?

Mr. Brown: One gentleman told me, when I finished the book on the railroads, I said, well, I'm thinking about writing a [00:09:00] history of Central State. And he said, Charlie, let me tell you...He said, depends on who you talk to, how long they were there, and what they claim they know.

Now, those might not be the exact words, but that's basically what he told me.

Jim: How does, how does how does an area keep a place that clandestine for that many years? Because we're in 2019. And that, I would say that the ticker on the secrets began, let's just say 1850 when they get good and up and running. So, 11 years before the Civil War. How is that possible?

Mr. Brown: So much of it [00:10:00] has to do with...if I had a person out there, some of my kin folks, I wouldn't want everybody to know about that. So, by golly, I ain't gonna say nothing about that. And the people who worked out there, most of them...see of the early years, a lot of the people who were the employees were slaves or ex-slaves.

Jim: Yeah. So, have you talked or, you know, or...

Mr. Brown: And so they were taught in the early years of their lives that you don't talk about your employer or anything like that.

Most of them. A lot of things is, you and I have already said sitting here, it's hard for anyone to believe that there would [00:11:00] be a place like Central State, and so if you hear about it, what do you do? You just immediately say that can't happen. That's not so.

Jim: Hey, do you think Blood Town is an appropriate title for Milledgeville?

Milledgeville Citizen: No.

Jim: What about all these murders that happen around?

Milledgeville Citizen: Yeah. We have our share. We're not worse off. Ours are just spectacular.

Penny: So, Jim, people in Milledgeville don't like their town being called Blood Town. What do you think about that?

Jim: I can understand that. I mean, who would want their town to be called Blood Town?

Penny: So, I think it's important to point out that it's not a made-up name.

Jim: Blood Town is called Harrisburg now. That's where, when I first got to Milledgeville, people had let Gaboon Vipers go, and the whole city of Milledgeville was in fear [00:12:00] for their lives. And shortly thereafter, there was a rash of drive-by shootings.

Although it's called Harrisburg, it was once called Blood Town. Let's just say that if you were standing in, probably back to that saddest place in Georgia thing where we got started, if you're standing in a graveyard with, I don't know, well over 20,000 people, but there's no headstones. There's only these little iron markers that are very small and teardrop shape that once were at the head of every unknown buried person who had been a patient at Central State, and you walked 200 yards, 300 yards through the woods past this graveyard, you would be in a town, an area of Milledgeville once on a map called Blood Town.

Penny: Right. If you look at our logo, [00:13:00] We have a picture of that map where it says Blood Town right in the middle.

Jim: Yeah, so it's not, you know, the best name of the many names that the areas around Milledgeville have been called, but I came to call it that because of its history.

Which is hard to get your head around just how many people have died horrible deaths in Milledgeville, Georgia.

Penny: Now that we have talked about the historical naming of Blood Town, I want to know why you call it Blood Town.

Jim: Other than it being on a map, and I, you know, it's a horrible name or a sordid name for a perfect town.

I call it that because, I study finding O'Connor, which is some of the most disturbing fiction in American letters. Flannery O'Connor wrote of one of her theoretical heroes or one of her

theoretical antagonists in a short story is a man called the Misfit who murders the whole family, including a baby.

Another story is a [00:14:00] woman who is stuck through the heart by bull. Another story is a little boy who tries to find Jesus Christ at the bottom of the river. He keeps swimming and diving deep into the river, until he drowns. Flannery O'Connor. Wow. She wrote some of, some people equate them to horror, horror stories and yet, somehow, they're also deeply religious stories.

She was Catholic. She wrote not about necessarily salvation, but the bestowment of grace, which is something that may kill you, but also may save your soul. She wrote stories that not everyone finds palatable at all, but she's still Flannery O'Connor. Well, you kind of start there, you know, this is where she wrote and why does she write these things?

She'd never really, she was very sick with lupus and could not leave her farm called Andalusia, which is just [00:15:00] slightly North of the downtown area. And I would say that it doesn't necessarily color Milledgeville, but there's a bumper sticker they sell at Andalusia called Misfits, Murder, and Mayhem, the home of Flannery O'Connor.

You know, it's something that is lightly called the place of misfits, murder, and mayhem. And so, you start reading, you start reading some more and you start reading history books, and you start talking to historians and you start looking at all maps and you, you know, the, probably the next biggest thing you learned about Milledgeville is about Central State Hospital.

And, you know, people have a fascination of the macabre, and they're drawn to this place because of this, this cemetery I'm telling you about where there are lots of really anonymous burials that are upwards in the, you know, at least 20,000 of them. 20,000 unknown graves. And [00:16:00] in the city cemetery called Memory Hill, there's a mass grave of patients. Some of the first patients of Milledgeville's Central State Hospital that're buried in a literal mass grave. It's the question, to answer that question is so, so big. It's not because, like I don't even know where to start.

Penny: Just as you're going into downtown on Georgia college's campus on the huge porches on the front of the buildings, there, there are rocking chairs and cupolas and columns, and it is a beautiful place. So, how can a place so beautiful be reminiscent of blood? How can it be the site of that amount...of misfits, mayhem, and murder?

Jim: So how, you know, let's say you stay there longer than a [00:17:00] weekend, you know, you go maybe because you're a fan of Flannery O'Connor or you're a fan of history, and you're going to inevitably go to Andalusia, talk about Flannery O'Connor and be like, wow. She wrote, she wrote this dark fiction in this town and often about the town, unfortunately for the people that don't want to be called Blood Town. Then you'll go to Central State and you'll hear of a ghost story.

Penny: Ooh, tell us a ghost story.

Jim: You'll see along the road where the quaint little buildings are in the, in the benches. You'll see an old theater with very intricate neon lighting. It's called the Campus Theater. And above the marquee, there's several windows. Somebody will point out, you know, if you take a history tour, a local lore tour, you know, it's not like Savannah, there's not like ghost tours and what have you, but there should be. A minute ago, I think I said that there was a little red trolley that goes [00:18:00] around and gives tours, but there should be like a black and gray one too, with a big skull painted on the side.

Penny: What would we learn on this tour? Where would it take us? And what stories would we hear?

Jim: Well, one of the stories I'm saying, they'll stop in front of that campus theater, and they'll point to a window right above that marquee. And tell you to look for a man standing there, smoking a cigar. A big, tall man. Very, in the shadows, but he's people say they see... his name is Marion Wesley Stembridge and he's up there because on the 2nd of May of 1953, the town of Milledgeville was preparing for the sesquicentennial, which is the 150th anniversary of the town.

Marion Wesley Stembridge on the morning. It was a Saturday [00:19:00] morning on May 2nd, 1953. He goes up there to that office where you, they say you can see his shadow and his figure, and he killed what could only be said to be one of the town's favorite sons. He was an attorney. He was the president of the Georgia Military College Alumni Association.

He was a mover and a shaker or a supporter of the town, very powerful individual in the town. And Marion Wesley Stembridge went up there to that office above the Campus Theater, and he shot Marion Ennis; his name was also Marion, Marion Ennis, with a pistol.

Penny: Why?

Jim: Well, they say that Marion Wesley Stembridge in his back pocket had a hit list that morning, and he was going to kill lots of people.

And Marion Ennis was just the first. So, the way it goes is he shot Marion Ennis up above that Campus [00:20:00] Theater. And he goes down the stairs. And to this day, you can see the stairs that lead up through in the middle of the Campus Theater. There's no longer a theater, but the stairs go up to some of those offices that have been there for a long time.

And he comes down, comes down the stairs, which faces him on Hancock Street, and he takes a right and he walks around to what is, what is now the Baldwin County Courthouse. But it wasn't at that time, there was a building there called the Sanford building and next to it was the Sanford house and he goes upstairs again and there, Marion Wesley Stembridge kills another attorney who was a younger man, and then he kills himself.

So, on the morning of May 2nd, 1953, Marion Wesley Stembridge commits two murders of two prominent attorneys and then kills himself. So, it's a double murder and suicide, [00:21:00] and that's one of the ghost stories. Around the corner from Hancock Street is a bakery now called Ryal's bakery that sells you know, home baked goods and really, you know, really good cookies and what have you.

And it was a legend that sometimes people will go in there and they smell a cigar burning.

Penny: Really?

Jim: Yeah.

Penny: They have really good cookies.

Jim: Yeah. And for some reason that cigar is more pungent in the early mornings, and then that will put you on the way to be more steps down. You'll be on Memory Hill cemetery, which is, where Flannery O'Connor is buried.

And it's where the man who began Central State is buried. But it's also where Bill Miner is buried. He's kind of known as one of the last, you know, great train robbers, like the kind of guy they make movies about in the old West. He was caught and sent to Milledgeville, Georgia, where he died. [00:22:00] In the same prison where Leo Frank died.

Penny: Who's Leo Frank?

Jim: Leo Frank is...it's another one of Milledgeville's stories we'll get into later. So far, I think one thing that's missing in culture of exploring small town murders is how and why it's possible that they can go sometimes for decades without being solved or correctly investigated. Blood Town intends to reveal perhaps the culture of how that is possible.

Yeah, I would like to tell this story, just, just not even something we've talked about. We, we have been talking about Milledgeville for quite a few years and really what to do about it. And Blood Town was originally title of a book about Marion Wesley Stembridge, and the research that I did on what led to that morning on May 2nd, 1953.

And that's what happened in 1949, which was the murder of [00:23:00] Emma Johnkin, and Emma Johnkin was somebody that probably most of the people who would defend or not like me calling Milledgeville Blood Town, they'd never heard her name, but I'll tell you who she was. She was a 17-year-old African American girl in 1949, who Marion Wesley Stembridge killed in a house almost to the area of Milledgeville historically called Blood Town.

Penny: That's unbelievable. Why do people not know her name?

Jim: I don't know. What else about Blood Town is that Marion Wesley Stembridge didn't go to kill Emma Johnkin by himself.

Penny: So, he had an accomplice?

Jim: Well, he had a business partner. So, what they did, the man who was with Stembridge, his name let's just say he was highly connected in the city of Milledgeville.

He was an elected official. And believe it or not, he was the County Coroner. His involvement in the murder of Emma [00:24:00] Johnkin, and a name that is especially not known was Emma Johnkin's Aunt named Mary Jane Harrison, who was an approximately a 42-year-old African American lady who was shot four times that day, that Emma Johnkin died.

Penny: By the same person?

Jim: Well, that's the rest of the story, they don't tell you when you look in that window above the campus theater. The County Coroner was Marion Wesley Stembridge's business partner, who also carried a gun that day and unloaded four bullets into the body of Mary Jane Harrison and was never even put on trial for it.

Penny: What happened to Marion Wesley Stembridge because he was obviously able to continue to murder people?

Jim: Yeah, well, it's I think at some point in time, I wrote it as probably one of the greatest miscarriages of small-town justice and corruption I have ever seen.

Penny: Tell us more about why that is.

Jim: Okay. Well, in [00:25:00] 49, when it came time for courts, they put Marianne Wesley Stembridge on trial for voluntary manslaughter.

Well, after, you know, not too terribly long, he was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, but he never went to jail. He was told to go get his things and report back for jail, but he never went. Not because he didn't have to, he just, it just never happened. It was never enforced. And so, then when it came time for the first time, the Capitol was in Atlanta and I have asked a friend of mine, who's an attorney to explain to me how this happened, and he still can't explain it because it doesn't make sense. The writ of Habeas Corpus is one of the most ancient, I guess, guidelines for the American legal system. In other words, that due process has to occur for someone to be convicted of a crime.

Well, when the orders came in that would've been, Hey, [00:26:00] Baldwin County, go pick up Marion Wesley Stembridge, and put him in jail for the murder of Emma Johnkin and, or the manslaughter, I mean, it was never a murder trial, by the way, it was manslaughter. Although she was shot four times, too. Somehow, Marion Wesley Stembridge and his attorney were having lunch with the Judge of a neighboring or nearby County where the order from Atlanta putting Marion Wesley Stembridge in jail was somehow sent.

Penny: Okay.

Jim: So the, it was hand delivered to the judge who was sitting with Marion Wesley Stembridge, and one of his attorneys. And so right there, you have a violation of the writ of Habeas Corpus because the letter came to the wrong County.

Penny: Okay.

Jim: So, from there, they knocked down the voluntary manslaughter to involuntary, which allowed Marion Wesley Stembridge to basically get a slap on the wrist for the murder of Emma Johnkin.

Penny: Let's get back to the Mother's Day murder.

[00:27:00] **Jim:** Back to Blood Town because we were on the idea of Marion Wesley Stembridge in 1949, 1953 small town, Jim Crow South, multiple forms of coverups, racisms. Manslaughters, murders. What does that have to do with Marianne Shockley? Well, originally Blood Town was going to be about Marion Wesley Stembridge, and mainly Emma Johnekin and why those 53 murders happened, and we were gearing up for that.

Remember?

Penny: Yeah.

Jim: Then, Mother's Day happened. I think...I don't think, I know, that you and I had been taking our time with the Blood Town podcast and said, you know, this is enough.

Penny: Trying to bring light to a place where these things continuously happen since the beginning of the founding of the town to 2019.

Jim: Yeah. I want to, I want to define my, my statement of enough. What I don't mean by enough is enough to have a sensational story and [00:28:00] not enough to create a podcast with...not, not enough for someone to go, Hmm, what a rabid story. Let's talk all about the dirty of this town that you call Blood Town.

What I mean by enough is I had had enough.

Penny: Do you hate Milledgeville?

Jim: Not at all. What I do about Milledgeville is care about her enough that I want it to be honest.

Penny: Why do you think Milledgeville isn't being honest or transparent about its history?

Jim: I wish I knew. I think because it's a lot. You're talking about a town with mass graves.

That's not something a lot of towns could say they have.

Penny: In more than one location, right?

Jim: You know, from the mid-1800s, it was a place where people were sent to be forgotten. And were successfully forgotten for well over a hundred years.

Penny: What about the history of GMC, as the other college in Milledgeville.

Jim: Georgia Military College is of [00:29:00] course we, you know, we keep, this is like a history lesson or something, and there's no describing why justifying why it's called Blood Town, unless you really put about 200 years, right, of history in your head, and timeline it. I think most people would agree that slavery was a bad thing. Well, if the Confederate army fought, maybe not primarily, maybe not, you know, again, that's an argument, but what happened on the square of where Georgia Military College is, was where the legislature was that agreed to secede from the Union.

And what you see now is a College, Military college that is in that buildings that was original capital of Georgia or the original established capital of Georgia. And so that was 1861 when that happened, but 58 years before there was the land cession from the Creek Indians. And in order to build those buildings, it sits on a rise over the Oconee [00:30:00] River. That rise was chosen by the Native Americans of the area who were technically the Muskogee Indians, the Muskogee people. It was a burial ground.

Penny: So, what happened to the burial ground when they built on it?

Jim: It was leveled off and most of where the burial ground is, there's a football field that also used to be a baseball field when Ty Cobb played there.

Penny: Really? I needed to lighten that moment with that fact, because it's...I can see if you were born in Milledgeville and you knew even 1/10th of the history that you know that's tragic, that you wouldn't want to think about it, let alone talk about it.

Jim: The thing is, there's so many neat things to say about Milledgeville too, and it's one of those, is that ever heard of Laurel and Hardy, you know, the kind of iconic American Hollywood comedians, right?

Penny: Right.

Jim: Of course, Laurel wasn't American, but Hardy was. Hardy was just from, he was from Georgia. And [00:31:00] his mother married a professor at Georgia Military College and he moved there when he was a young man, Oliver Hardy; I think his real name was like Norvel or there's a few historians in Milledgeville who would be really mad at me that I'm not getting his name right.

Tragically, not to be the eternal tragedist, but his older brother dove into the Oconee and died; hit a rock and broke his neck. And what Oliver Hardy's mom did is she managed the Milledgeville motel, which of course is like anything else around here it's so old it's gone through many names.

Where is a kind of a hotel, I think around the corner, but it's near it enough. And that, it had a stage, or it was like a movie theater, like a very early form of a movie theater and Oliver Hardy ran the projector and was kind of how I got into film.

Penny: His beginnings happened there in Milledgeville.

Jim: You can [00:32:00] throw a baseball as hard as you could, and just about hit Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where Flannery O'Connor went to mass; throw the baseball the other way, you'd almost hit the post office that most of her letters went through that, you know, it was her primary form of communication with the world. I mean, it's just so much history. It's just.

That's where, you know, I don't want to push, how could I hate a town like that? You know, that has such fascinating history.

Penny: Next time on Blood Town:

[News Report] Today's commitment hearing was designed to determine if there was enough evidence for the case to move forward to a grand jury. Judge William Pryor ruled there is enough evidence for the case against Marcus Lillard to go to trial on three separate charges. Those are the murder of UGA Professor Marianne Shockley, concealing her death, and aggravated assault. The state unraveled extensive details on interviews they have made so far in their investigation. GBI special agent Michael Maybin took the stand to present evidence for the murder case against Marcus Lillard, the man accused of [00:33:00] murdering Marianne Shockley, a UGA Professor. Maybin explained Investigators conducted three interviews with Lillard and he was inconsistent with his explanation of what happened. The state argued that bruising and rib fractures found during autopsy support an aggravated assault charge and show she was strangled. Maybin also said several women claiming a romantic history with Lillard said he would choke them during sex. The defense says they will plead not guilty if, and when they are indicted.

[Defense Attorney Hogue]: I would ask that you dismiss all three warrants. I don't believe the evidence you heard here supports the offense of murder—if you concede and give to the State all these following facts, it's more consistent with an accident. If there was sex going on, and there's no evidence that there was; in fact, there's some statement that there was no sex between Mr. Lillard and Ms. Shockley there at Clark Heindel's house that night, but if there was sex between them, and [00:34:00] if she died during it as a result of this choking, then based on the other women that they have uncovered who described similar sex acts with Mr. Lillard, all of them consensual, two of whom were choked unconscious, apparently by accident, at least one of them it would seem by his reaction to her, then that would really support an accident defense and not a murder warrant, so I'm asking you to dismiss the murder warrant as well.

Penny: Thanks for listening. Please rate and subscribe. You can follow us on Facebook and Insta @bloodtownpodcast and Twitter @bloodtownpod [00:35:00].