

## Deadly Confrontation at a Farmerville Saloon

by Timothy Dean Hudson

Fate brought James McBride and Alonzo S. Lewis to a Farmerville saloon on the evening of Monday, 7 November 1853. Both of the young men were single, but we know little about their backgrounds, although it appears neither had families or close connections in Union Parish. Born in about 1832, McBride worked as a laborer on a plantation in Carroll Parish in 1850, whereas Lewis had received his "*Bachelor of Laws*" degree from the University of Louisiana in New Orleans (the precursor to Tulane University) and was admitted to the Louisiana bar in April 1850.

Since that was Election Day evening in Louisiana, a crowd had gathered in the saloon along with McBride and Lewis, who reportedly sat enjoying their drinks in the holiday atmosphere. After imbibing for a while, McBride began singing loudly. The barkeeper asked him to cease, or he would throw him out. McBride replied, "*You will not put me out.*" Lewis turned to McBride and said, "*I'll put you out if you don't hush.*" Lewis grabbed McBride by the collar, drew his bowie knife, laid the blade sideways on his breast, and told him to hush. McBride ignored him and resumed his loud and rowdy singing. Incensed, Lewis shoved McBride away from the bar and then lunged at him with his knife, plunging the blade into McBride's chest, killing him instantly.

Lewis' actions caught the crowd by surprise, as no harsh words or difficulty had previously existed between the pair. Lewis fled after knifing McBride, but a posse followed and apprehended him, placing him in the Farmerville jail. Since the District Court happened to then be in session in Farmerville, Union Parish Sheriff Thomas M. Hand arraigned Lewis for trial. However, court officials could not impanel a jury for a criminal trial that quickly, forcing Lewis to remain in jail until the court's next session, scheduled for April 1854.

On the morning of Monday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, Sheriff Hand left home with breakfast for the jail's prisoners, Lewis and a Mr. Windgut, who was serving a three-month sentence. When he arrived at the jail, Hand found the jail door open and Windgut "*out taking some fresh air,*" waiting patiently for his breakfast outside the jail. Windgut informed the sheriff that Lewis had broken out of jail the previous night and absconded. The "*Farmerville Enquirer*" wryly said of Windgut, "*We have at least one law-abiding man in our community.*"

Lewis remained on the lam for the next year, while a bounty on his head kept a regional spotlight on his case. He made his way to southern Mississippi, and by November 1854, had concealed himself in the small village of Liberty, in Amite County, just north of the Louisiana State

Line and a short distance west of the recently completed New Orleans-Jackson railroad line. An astute local citizen recognized him from the wanted posters and notified the New Orleans Police Chief, who began the steps to secure permission from Mississippi's governor to arrest him.

Meanwhile, Liberty's Methodist Church held a camp meeting in early December, and Lewis decided to attend. He attempted to portray himself as the most pious man at the meeting, proclaiming to all present his conversion to Christ and loudly expressing the happy and joyful emotions he professed to feel at the experience. His new-found way of life lasted until he returned to town after the meeting, when Lewis promptly returned to his *"evil ways—playing cards, billiards and drinking liquor."*

Engrossed in a game of billiards, Lewis failed to notice the two strangers who entered the room behind him. Having received proper authorization from the Mississippi officials to apprehend Lewis in Liberty, Officers Horn and Mayhew of the New Orleans Special Police had quietly slipped into the billiard hall. Addressing Lewis by name, the officers seized him, slapped handcuffs around his wrists, and rushed him away. The Vidalia, Louisiana newspaper editor remarked, *"This is the last camp meeting Lewis will be permitted to attend for some time to come."* Convinced Alonzo Lewis would receive a severe sentence, the editor of Liberty, Mississippi's newspaper proselytized a gloomy fate ahead for him:

*How wretched—how awful the doom which awaits that young Man! From hence to the dungeon—from thence to the gibbet or to years confinement in the State Penitentiary! How true, that virtue receives its reward and vice its punishment!*

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, the officers boarded the New Orleans/Jackson railroad line with Lewis and headed back to the Crescent City. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, court officials there ordered that Lewis be returned to Union Parish. After his transportation via steamboat up the Mississippi, Red, and Ouachita Rivers and Bayou D'Arbonne to Farmerville, the District Court convicted him of murder. Given that he had already managed an escape from the Farmerville jail, the court ordered Lewis to serve his sentence in the Bastrop jail, regarded as more substantial than the Farmerville edifice.

By early March 1856, Alonzo S. Lewis had served just over one year of his sentence. He somehow managed yet another jailbreak, bolting from the Bastrop jail and escaping to parts unknown. This time, he disappeared for good, leaving uncertain the Liberty editor's prediction of the awful doom awaiting Lewis.

