

## **Union Parish Family Feud: The Ward-Auld-McGough-Joiner Shootouts**

**by Timothy Dean Hudson**

The Ward, Auld, McGough, and Joiner families all settled in the Bayou d’Loutre region east of Farmerville in the latter 1830s and 1840s. Numerous intermarriages connected the Ward, Auld, and McGough families, and they remained a close-knit bunch throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the latter nineteenth century, several incidents of conflict, including two violent ones, reveal something of a long-standing feud between the Wards, Aulds, and McGough families and that of Dempsey Joiner.

Born about 1810 in South Carolina, Dempsey Joiner raised his family in Conecuh County, Alabama in the 1830s and early 1840s. In the mid-1840s, Joiner and his family moved to Union Parish and settled east of Farmerville along the road leading from Farmerville to Port Union on the Ouachita River. Dempsey’s youngest son was Sylvester Lavanius Joiner, known as “*Sil*,” born about 1845.

The first documented conflict between the Joiners with these other families occurred in 1876. S. W. Winds won a judgement of \$250 in the Ward One Justice Court against Sil Joiner. In April 1876, John T. Ward, acting in his capacity as the Constable of Ward One, executed the writ by seizing two mules from Joiner and advertising to auction them at the courthouse door in Farmerville in a few weeks. Dempsey Joiner sued Ward in the Union Parish Court, claiming that he owned the mules, not his son, and Dempsey requested an injunction against Ward to prevent him from selling the mules. At the trial, the Parish Court ruled against Joiner, dissolving the injunction against Ward and ordering Ward to proceed with the sale. Joiner appealed to the Union Parish District Court in February 1877. Preparations for the trial began in April, but Dempsey Joiner’s health apparently failed, incapacitating him during 1877. It appears that he died about 1878, and the case never went to trial.

We do not know if the squabble over Ward’s seizure of the Joiner mules formed the only basis of the hard feelings between the families, or if perhaps other events in the 1880s added to their conflict. In any case, violence erupted between them during the summer of 1891.

In that era, black sharecroppers had to sign contracts each growing season in which they agreed to fulfill their obligations and indebtedness to a farmer before moving to work on another farm. Local constables appointed groups of men to enforce the terms of the sharecropper contracts

and punish violators. In May 1891, a group of men charged with contract enforcement made plans to ride to Sylvester L. Joiner's farm to chastise several black workers living on his farm who had apparently caused some offence by not fulfilling their contracts. The group included two McGough brothers, James M. and William Creath McGough, and their brother-in-law, James Henry Auld, all close relatives of Constable John T. Ward who had the earlier conflict with Dempsey Joiner.

On the night of Saturday, 30 May 1891, the McGough brothers and Auld, together with their friend, James R. Dawson, went to Sil Joiner's farm about five miles east of Farmerville to confront the black farmers. Once finished, the group rode away. Meanwhile, Joiner and his son, Sidney Lee Joiner, had learned of the group's plans, and they lay in wait along the road. About 10:00 p.m., just as the riders passed where the Joiners had concealed themselves, Sil Joiner fired his shotgun, delivering a full load of birdshot into Creath McGough's neck. Joiner then fired again, this time hitting Jim Auld in the back. Jim McGough and Dawson pulled their pistols and fired back at the Joiners, but they missed, and the Joiners vanished into the woods.

The unexpected blast killed McGough almost instantly, whereas Auld had 150 birdshot in his lower back but no serious injuries. Sil Joiner sent word to the sheriff that he would come to town and surrender on Sunday, but he apparently changed his mind. The sheriff issued arrest warrants and formed a posse that soon apprehended Sidney L. Joiner, but his father remained concealed in the woods east of Farmerville. Sylvester L. Joiner remained in hiding and evaded the posse for the next two months, although locals apparently knew his whereabouts.

To avenge his brother's death, Jim McGough gathered several men in late July to waylay the Joiners. Their group included Jim Dawson, present when Creath was killed a few months earlier, as well as William J. Roan and Lawrence McGough, Jim and Creath's first cousin from Arkansas. James Auld accompanied the group, but apparently due to his lingering injuries, he did not actively participate. As Sil Joiner rode in his wagon with his son (presumably Sidney), the McGough group fired their double-barreled shotguns four times from their place of concealment about twenty-five yards from the roadside. The blasts hit Sil Joiner in the jaw, side, thigh, and leg, breaking his jawbone and nearly cutting his tongue in half. Several pieces of shot lodged in his neck, a wound his doctor initially thought would prove fatal.

All involved surrendered to the sheriff, who charged the McGoughs, Dawson, Roan, and Auld with "*shooting with intent to murder while lying in wait,*" and Sil Joiner with manslaughter. The District Attorney dismissed the charges against Auld, who had little active involvement in the affair. At the joint trial for the McGoughs, Dawson, and Roan in February 1892, all pleaded not guilty and requested a jury trial. After arguments, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. At

Sylvester Joiner's trial a few days later, he pleaded not guilty to manslaughter, and after arguments, the jury returned a verdict of not guilty.

Lingering resentment against Joiner may have led to his selling his farm near Farmerville. He moved south along Bayou D'Arbonne into northern Ouachita Parish and settled near West Monroe. The increased distance did not ease the tensions between the Joiners and the extended Ward-McGough families, however. During the drought of 1896, brothers John Martin and Leander Ward, nephews of John T. Ward who had conflict with the Joiners back in the 1870s, cut considerable timber in low-lying portions of their farms. Significant rainfall in November and early December caused flood waters to carry their timber downstream.

The Ward brothers had carefully marked their timber before the D'Arbonne waters carried it downstream, and so they could clearly identify it. Sil Joiner and his son, Lott, pulled the Wards' timber from the D'Arbonne near West Monroe. John and Leander Ward, together with James R. Dawson and Tom Ashcraft, went searching for their timber and found it at the Joiners' farm. Sil Joiner demanded a price for the return of the timber that the Wards found excessive, and this resulted in hot words between the groups.

Both the Joiners and the Wards armed themselves with pistols and shot guns, and it appeared as if another shootout like the one back in 1891 was imminent. The Wards eventually left, but the Joiners swore out warrants against the Wards, Dawson, and Ashcraft, charging them with disturbing the peace and threatening to kill. The local justice of the peace dismissed the charges, but when the Wards and their party returned to collect their timber, Sil and Lott Joiner and James Morrison lay in ambush, intending to waylay the Wards just as they had the McGough-Auld-Dawson party several years earlier.

The Wards and Dawson evaded the ambush and filed charges against the Joiners that resulted in their arrest. The final outcome of the case is unknown, but with the Joiners now in Ouachita Parish, their decades-long conflict with the Ward, McGough, and Auld families appears to have dissipated.

