

Photo of the Month

Joe Means



Joe Means
Rogers, Arkansas
c.1950
Neg. # N011450

Joe Means once described himself as the “meanest man” in Benton County. However, this notion does not necessarily do justice to his colorful history or his service to the citizens of our area. As he said in an interview with the Rogers Historical Museum in 1990, “I did a little of everything, in the law and out of the law.”

His grandfather originally came from Spring Valley and homesteaded at War Eagle about 18 miles east

Rogers where the White River and the War Eagle Creek come together in the late 1880s or early 1890s. The Means family farmed and operated saw mills, which reflected their heritage as descendants of the well-known Blackburn lumber family. Corn, oats, and timothy hay were the main crops they grew in the good river bottom land as well as producing lumber from the surrounding stands of timber. During the early years of Monte Ne, Means even recalled that his grandfather and “Blind” Dutton often rowed the resort’s gondola.

Joe Means was born August 7, 1916 to Claude and Katherine (Thompson) Means in War Eagle. His mother died in 1925 and his father remarried. The immediate family also included one brother and one sister.

Growing up only 18 miles from Rogers seems a short distance today, but he described how he crossed the White River and made the walking trip to town on dirt roads in the late 1920s and 1930s: “I used to take a short cut and go down, I lived on War Eagle. I’d go down and cross the river and go through the hills across what was called Pine Creek Holler, go on over and down and across the river to a fella’s name of Arthur Martin at White River. Go on up past where the entrance is to Horseshoe Bend, go right straight on west and go up the bluffs and wade White River again and go up Horseshoe Bend and wade it again, and through Monte Ne walk into Rogers.” During this time, many people in the area continued to drive horses and buggies, while only a few people owned automobiles – his great grandfather J.D. Blackburn owned a Model T Ford.

In his youth, Means worked on his family farm, spent time hunting and fishing, and even caddied at the Eden’s Bluff golf course near Monte Ne. This particular job, he recalled, paid “twenty-five cents for carrying that sack around nine greens with them.” Means attended school first at Oak Grove and then later at Monte Ne. He joked that he “went through school – in the front door and out the back!”

By the time he reached 16 years of age, his outlaw reputation began to take shape. He never identified himself as a bootlegger, but as a wholesaler. A wholesaler produced and sold whiskey to bootleggers, who then sold it to the public. In 1933-34, Means typically hauled 50 gallons of whiskey to a Fayetteville man every week, who then distributed it in Rogers, Springdale, and Fayetteville. This activity usually netted at least \$1.50 per gallon of whisky delivered, which was a sizable sum of money at that time. Mean Joe Means recalled in a Rogers Morning News article that “in Rogers, there were so many bootleggers, you had to wear a name badge to keep from selling to each other.” By 1937, he stopped making illegal whiskey.

Soon after, Means expanded his saw mill operations and began settling down. In 1948, Means joined a local church and it was members of his congregation who encouraged him to run for sheriff in 1954 against John Black. Means had one deputy and one day jailer and received a salary of \$416 per month as well as \$50 for vehicle expenses. This time period saw some crime typical of smaller communities, but the area began to greatly change during his tenure as sheriff with the rapid industrial expansion and plans for damming the White River.

In 1958, Means' term of office ended and in 1962 he was hired as the Rogers Police Chief. His department included Quant Morris, Bill Dunson, Wayman Buttry, Bob Deason, Warren Adams, Gordon Saxson, Dennis Musteen, and Max McCoy as well as two patrol cars. Noting the changes in the community, Means urged the Rogers City Council to expand the Police Department with additional personnel and equipment, but only small gains were made. In 1965, Means submitted his resignation to Mayor Eddie Bautts.

Following his time as Police Chief, Means returned to his saw mill operations. For those people who knew Means, he was respected for never shrinking from a challenge, but also as someone who extended a helping hand to the people of his community. His self-reliant way of life extended throughout his work as a farmer, timberman, and saw mill owner as well as his career in law enforcement. He and his wife Ruby had three children, Katherine, Peggy Jo, and Homer, and he was a member of the Monte Ne Baptist Church, Masons, and Fraternal Order of Police. Joe Means passed away in 2005.