

## **BY REBECCA BEASLEY**

Clayton is where tourists come to see the Whiskey Bottle Tombstone famous for its inclusion in Ripley's "Believe It or Not." This monument, located in the town's cemetery between the Methodist and Baptist churches, is now joined by another unusual marker.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Village Smithy", prompted the placement of another monument that could draw as many visitors as the Whiskey Bottle.

George Sims of Birmingham, who is 90, returned to Clayton Monday with his daughter, Cindy Payton of Hoover, to see the memorial he commissioned J.J. Jaxon Company of Eufaula to design to honor his parents.

Jaxon said, "We are pleased to have the ability and technology so that we can work with families to create unique designs that are meaningful to families for generations to come."

"I was unable to attend either my father's or my mother's funeral so I wanted a monument to pay tribute to my father," Sims said. He said he was in West Africa at the time and his wife, Grace, was pregnant.

His father, George Webster Sims, was the town's blacksmith. Sims recalls his father's business located in the downtown area on North Midway Street that he opened with Foy Byrd. Dedicated to his father's profession, the monument has one large anvil with four smaller anvils on each corner of the copin surrounding the cemetery lot. The epitaph is inscribed with the family named Sims and reads: "The Village

Smithy – A Wonderful Day and a Loving Caring Inspirational Mother."

His father, George Webster Sims, name is inscribed on one grave with the dates 1872-1946, another bears his mother's name, Claudia Sims, 1880-1948, and a third grave on the lot is his mother's sister, Paula Smith, 1878-1962. He says he plans to place a marker in memory of his great great grandfather, Joel E. Sims, who established and built Baptist churches in the area.

Life has taken Sims, who was born in rural Barbour County in the Robertson Mill vicinity, to lands far away. He recalls that life was hard so he, followed by some other Clayton boys, headed to Texas to find a better life. "I did anything I could to make some money. I cut grass, washed dishes, anything I could do," he said. That experience is a constant reminder to him today in his senior years because the lady with whom he boarded took out an insurance policy on him and today he receives a check from the policy. After graduating from high school in 1936, his career took him to West Africa where he worked with Firestone.

He apologized for missing last year's Memorial Hall reunion, but he made a return trip to Africa with his daughter. Beverly Sims Hosokawa and her husband are missionaries to Africa.

"There is a lot of history here in Clayton," he recalled. He said he remembers when the streets were paved in town and businesses flourished. He chuckled as he quoted the sayings of three former Clayton citizens that history proved to be false. "Uncle Isam 'Bud' Smith said caterpillars would never replace the mule,

Harry Ray said the refrigerator would never replace ice, and George C. Wallace's famous segregation statement.

"I remember when Tom Parish was the first athlete to letter from Clayton at Auburn in baseball as a third baseman, then Sam Grubbs lettered. Wallace Wise lettered in football and Kermit Price and Paige Floyd received scholarships," he recalled.

But, more than 60 years after his father's death, he returned to his roots to have a lasting memorial placed on his family grave. As Longfellow's poem reads, "Week in, week out, from morn till night, You can hear his bellows blow; You can hear him swing his heavy sledge, With measured beat and slow..." Sims will forever hear the rhythmic beat of his father's anvil that surround his grave as a lasting memorial to hours he spent at "the flaming forge of life."

## **ANVIL MARKER**