

JAMIL'S GEORGIA

Stories that move us and make us: Fitzgerald's civil end to an uncivil war

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In this column, members of Georgia Humanities and their colleagues take turns discussing Georgia's history and culture, and other topics that matter. Through different voices, we hear different stories.

This week guest contributor Laura McCarty, executive vice president of Georgia Humanities, shares the remarkable story of Fitzgerald, Georgia, and its unusual history of community reconciliations.

By Laura McCarty

Last week's column on the Civil War Centennial [<http://saportareport.com/150-years-later-georgia-and-the-end-of-the-civil-war/>] spurred Cam Jordan, the Community Development Director for the city of Fitzgerald [<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/counties-cities-neighborhoods/fitzgerald>], to write and share about the Fitzgerald-Ben Hill Civil War Sesquicentennial commemorative weekend, which occurred in May. From a concert featuring blues and gospel acts to programs at area historic sites, from the dedication of a bike trail to a community cookout, the weekend included activities intended to appeal to a diverse, intergenerational group.

There were traditional Civil War-related events, including cemetery tours, reenactors, and lectures on military history. The Blue & Gray Museum offered tours, and the community conducted a Parade of Unity and Roll Call of States, commemorative activities that are central to the town's history as a site of reunion between Northern and Southern Civil War veterans. However, the concluding program, a play and multimedia presentation, "A Civil End to an (un)Civil War," focused on reconciliations of a much broader scope.



Laura McCarty

Cam Jordan (a Fitzgerald native who remembers the Civil War Centennial observances) wrote the play with Sherri Butler, a staff writer for the Herald-Leader, the town newspaper. Both are active researchers on community history who previously co-authored the book *Fitzgerald: Images of America*. They shared with me a script of the play, as well some insights on the intentions behind its creation.

The play includes five vignettes, each of which depicts instances of community members making positive contributions through interacting with people who are different from them. The play begins with a scene of the Northern and Southern veterans deciding to parade together, early in the history of the town. The second scene, set during World War II, juxtaposes the recollections of a veteran who had seen a concentration camp firsthand with the memories of his parents, who sent shoes to Germany for the children of a POW who had worked on their farm during his internment. The shoes were most likely purchased from one of the Jewish merchants' stores that were central to Fitzgerald's downtown.

The third scene features the visit of a Soviet textile manufacturer to Fitzgerald in 1963 to exchange business ideas and tools with a Fitzgerald delegation headed by H. R. "Dick" Kaminsky, the owner of a garment factory. Just as Fitzgerald's business leaders sought to host the end of the national Civil War commemoration, they saw the international business meeting as an opportunity. But three days

after the visit, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald, and the public learned that the assassin allegedly had ties to the Soviet Union. Cold War tensions increased, and the tragic event 900 miles away from Fitzgerald prevented potential collaborations from going forward.

The fourth scene features retired educator Joyce Jenkins as narrator, sharing her own recollections. Jenkins was one of the first African American students to integrate Fitzgerald High School in 1966. The scene includes a lunchroom encounter between her and a white student who chooses to eat at the table with her while other white students had refused. After breaking the ice, the teenagers commiserate about their studies, even as they acknowledge their history of separation.

The last scene focuses on the story of Martin Gottlieb, a Hungarian Jewish immigrant with a retail business in Fitzgerald. Upon his death in 1968, he left funds to buy Christmas gifts for needy children in the community, white and black. The *Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities* [<http://www.isjl.org/georgia-fitzgerald-encyclopedia.html>] notes that because of Gottlieb's legacy, "In Fitzgerald it was said that Santa Claus was Jewish!" In the scene, white and black workers in a factory express concern about how they are going to obtain gifts for their children as well as gratitude for the potential of Gottlieb's help.

Sherri Butler noted that each scene depicts a moment of reconciliation or potential reconciliation as well as the acts of local, ordinary citizens. To conclude the play, the plan was to bring the idea of reconciliation forward. The script called for the last narrator to invite audience members to join hands with someone they didn't know, just as the characters throughout the performance had done.

On the night of the play's debut, that is not exactly what happened, according to Butler. One of the narrators, a descendant of another person featured in the play, was touched by the stories of his community he had just seen. He improvised his lines, saying, "Fitzgerald made Martin Gottlieb. God bless America," at which time the audience applauded, and the cast members joined hands without the invitation to the audience being offered.

Sharing stories about community, place, and patriotism: is that the key to uniting people across the divides that separate us? At the end of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, Fitzgerald's example suggests that such might be the case.

Laura McCarty is the executive vice president of Georgia Humanities.

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**The Following Stores Will
Remain Closed All Day**

**Tuesday and Wednesday
Sept. 23rd. and 24th.**

**The Holidays of
Jewish New Year
5771 1950**

**Abe Kruger's Dept. Store
Martin Gottlieb
The Surprise Store
The Fair Store
H. & S. Store**

Newspaper notice about Jewish store owners observing the high holidays, 1930, Fitzgerald, Georgia. Photo: Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities