

Mahler Family: 20th-century Pioneers

by Terry G. Arnold Feb 28, 2015

In late summer of 1945, John August Mahler and his family were doing fine and their prospects for the future looked bright. Japan had just surrendered, and the war was over. Amid universal celebration, he and his wife Elizabeth had more reason than most for rejoicing. Their son, John Datzman (Johnny), had been drafted into the army in 1944 after graduating from Fairfield High School in Alabama and had thus become part of the massive planning for the invasion of the Japanese homeland. U.S. losses already suffered in taking the tiny Pacific Islands pointed to



unprecedented casualties on the Japanese mainland islands. Now, with Japan's surrender, these casualties would never occur, and Johnny had been assigned to occupation duty in Korea as part of the American efforts to bolster a caretaker

Johnny Mahler as draftee and in Korea

government there. His two-year enlistment would be finished, and he would be home in 1946. John and

Elizabeth's two daughters, Elizabeth and Janice, had also graduated from Fairfield High School during the war, and both were employed at the Fairfield works of U.S. Steel.

John worked at U.S. Steel as a shearman, a skilled production position, operating and managing the machinery that took coils of strip steel, slitting and end-shearing them into sheets, the basic building material for the manufacture of the ships, tanks, trucks, and guns of war. With the end of the war, such production would be replaced by automobiles, washing machines, refrigerators and all the rest of consumer manufacture which had essentially ceased during the years of war. Filling the pent-up demand for these peacetime goods assured John's job for the immediate post-war period. But John wanted a farm. Daughter Elizabeth remembers her father saying about this time that if he was to ever have a farm it would have to be now. The Mahler family had spent pleasant summers on Elizabeth's parents' farm in central Indiana, and John found he loved farming and working on a farm. Forty-seven years old, he admitted he wasn't getting any younger. Daughters Elizabeth and Janice were independent now. Johnny would be able to help with a farm when he got home. It was now or never.

John August's parents, John Mahler and Marie Lauer, were German immigrants.¹ John August was born April 22, 1899, in Forest Park, Illinois, part of Metropolitan Chicago. As a boy, John worked with his father and his Uncle Gene in their construction business. Daughter Elizabeth tells of a time when Uncle Gene and her father John were working together on the roof of a house. Uncle Gene slipped and began sliding down the steep slope of the roof. John, just below him, buried his shingling hatchet right through the roof, anchoring it in the same way that an alpine climber uses an ice axe to arrest a slide in ice and snow. With the hatchet as

anchor, John was able to stop Uncle Gene's slide toward the brink of the two story roof. Thereafter the grateful Uncle was quick to admit, "That kid saved my life."



John August Mahler as WWI army enlistee

John's mother had hoped that he would become a Lutheran minister. Instead, he joined the army as a teenager toward the end of WWI, but with the war ending in 1918 he never saw hostile action against the country his parents had emigrated from 25 years earlier.

By the early 1920s, he had graduated from college and was teaching at Calumet Township public schools near Gary, Indiana. There he met and on January 26, 1923, married fellow teacher Elizabeth Datzman. Together they made their home in Gary. Their three children, Elizabeth A. (Betty), Janice M. (Jan)., and John D. (Johnny) were born in the 1920s.

¹ The elder John Mahler, age 24, had arrived at Ellis Island, NY, on August 2, 1892, aboard the Elbe from Bremen, Germany. Granddaughter Elizabeth said that her grandfather's sister was married and living in the Chicago area and that the sister's husband Gene had promised a job to her grandfather in his construction business so he sailed to America first, traveled to Chicago, got the construction job with Gene, and then sent for Marie. Marie Lauer Mahler arrived in New York from London on the ship Majestic on September 15, 1892.



Mahler Family in 1936

By about 1936, John was Principal of the school, and it would have appeared likely that the Mahler family were permanent residents of Gary. Betty remembers her father saying that he knew he would never get rich teaching, but then he would have also realized that teaching jobs were at least more dependable than most jobs during the great depression of the 1930s.

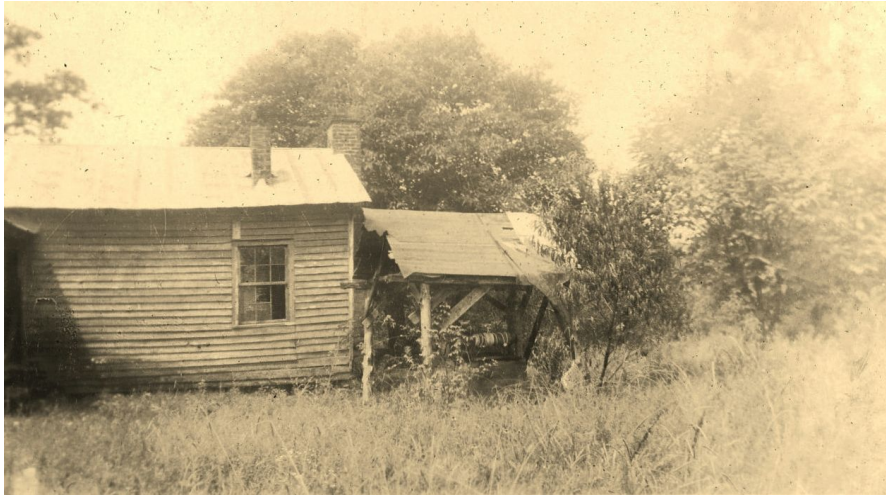
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In 1939, John Mahler quit his job in education and moved his family to Fairfield, Alabama, taking a job at the U.S. Steel rolling-mill facility there. His previous teaching and administrative experience helped little in his new mechanically-complex and physically-demanding work. Nonetheless, by rising to the skilled steel-production job of shearer during the war, he demonstrated an unusual innate general ability and the flexibility of mind and the strength of body to embrace and master new skills completely different from what he had done earlier.

Now, in 1945, as he hoped and planned to become a farmer in middle-age, his earlier successful but disparate occupations at least hinted that even this radical change might be successful. Also, John knew he had another source for help and even instruction. Elizabeth had grown up on a farm at Fowler, Benton County, Indiana. Benton County was and still is almost completely agricultural, which testifies to the deep fertile prairie soils that make the area part of the great midwestern-American corn belt. Elizabeth knew a lot about farming from her growing up experience in Indiana, and she loved the farming life.

² Then came world-changing events in Europe that would soon affect the Mahler family too. Across the Atlantic, Nazi Germany was establishing the third Reich. It refortified the Rhineland in 1936 in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, and in succeeding years overran Austria and Czechoslovakia. In 1939, Great Britain declared war after Germany invaded Poland. The United States became more and more an important supplier of war materiel for the island nation. With their newly-developed and rapidly-perfected blitzkrieg tactics, the Nazis demonstrated that modern warfare must include mechanized armies, for which steel was indispensable. Thus, some of the best and highest paying jobs were in the steel industry as war production expanded in America.

John began to look for a farm, searching from his Fairfield home. After finding an old run-down place just north of Montevallo, he showed it to Elizabeth. Betty recalls that Elizabeth asked John if he thought he could make a farm of the place, and, when he said that he could do it, she agreed that they should buy it. Sometime in late summer or early fall of 1946, they bought the old place and began the work of making it into a farm and a home. They commuted for a time from Fairfield. Elizabeth would have seen the stark contrast between the level, productive farms of her childhood and this eroded, worn-out place. Here, the soils in the flatter portions were thin, the topsoil largely missing, and the underlying dolomitic limestone bedrock exposed at places along the creek and in gullied areas of the fields. The hillsides were badly eroded and largely denuded of all vegetation, the result of the early 19th-century slave-based economy, which attempted to increase cotton production by clearing and cultivating ever more land, finally clearing even the steeper slopes that had been always protected by the virgin forest. Unprotected, the topsoil had washed first into Shoal Creek, then into the Cahaba River, and ultimately into Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Such land-consuming cultivation had ceased only when the resulting gullies made further row-crop cultivation impractical and unprofitable. In



Kitchen, Well, and Privy 1946

1946, fences on the old place were largely down or nonexistent. Farm

buildings were tumble-down. The only animals were a couple of horses pastured there by neighbors Peddie and Calvin Bearden. A sagging building at the rear of the house had served as kitchen. An open well along with a primitive windlass and bucket provided drinking water. There were no sanitary facilities, only a primitive privy. Alabama 119, the road in front of the house, was unpaved. Preparation for paving the road was underway, making the road impassable in wet weather. For many months, there would be no vehicle access south to Montevallo via Alabama 119, as a new concrete bridge across the creek was being built. No electric service was available.

The house had been built by slave labor in 1834 as the residence of Scion Jacob Perry III and his wife Sarah McLeroy. It became home for them and their eleven children and the

management center for his 800 acre cotton plantation. The house was named Perry Hall. Over a century later, when John and Elizabeth Mahler bought it and a 167-acre remnant of the Perry farm, Perry Hall showed a patrician graciousness in name only. The house, like the land itself, was worn out and in a state of decrepitude.



House as purchased by Mahlers 1946

Before the days of governmental incentives for preserving historic old buildings, John Mahler made the decision to salvage the house even as he worked to build a viable farm. When he finished the major work, four or five years later, the house foot print and the house's hewn structural-timber bones were just about the only things that remained the same. Betty Mahler, in talking about her father, said that she didn't know just where he got the self confidence and knowledge to do all the things that he did. He just did them. To make a viable farmstead, John would also have to build the fences and farm buildings, obtain the necessary agricultural equipment and animals, and acquire the expertise for operating the equipment and managing the farm.

To make the house livable, it would have to be completely rebuilt. The weathered siding would have to be replaced. All the house exterior trim for the walls, windows, and roof would have to be rebuilt, and the roof structure at the gable ends reconstructed so as to provide a roof overhang for the gabled ends. The windows and exterior doors, the house roofing, and the front porch had to be replaced or rebuilt. The ancient kitchen structure in rear would have to be rebuilt and repurposed. A garage was needed. The pillar foundations of the house would have to be replaced with modern continuous perimeter foundations. The two house chimneys and their fireplaces and hearths required rebuilding work. John determined that he would install

central heating, which in turn required the construction of a basement for a furnace and coal storage as well as the installation of pipes and radiators for sending the heat throughout the house. A kitchen and bathrooms had to be added inside the house, along with the hot and cold water plumbing to supply them and a septic system to receive and treat the wastes. A pressure water supply would have to be developed and pump installed in the old open well or in a new well. Since the house had originally provided living space for 11 children and in later years had been divided into at least two rental units, much of the interior space had to be redesigned and reconstructed. Two narrow staircases had to be replaced with a single, architecturally appropriate staircase. The entire house had to be wired for electricity, and an electrical power distribution line would have to be run from Montevallo.

As daunting as the tasks ahead clearly were, Elizabeth had confidence in John and was a full partner in this 20th century pioneering. Accustomed to all the features of her previous Fairfield and Gary houses, she agreed to come to the tumbledown house that had none of the amenities of modern 1946 America.

Betty told several stories showing how Elizabeth's farm knowledge helped in shaping her responses to the inevitable problems of farm and house building. The roofer, for example, completed the removal of the old roof on a Friday and planned to return the following Monday, since he didn't work on weekends. Elizabeth and John had not yet completely moved from Fairfield and so returned there for the weekend. Upon returning to Montevallo, they found that rain had completely soaked the roofless house. Elizabeth said that they were lucky though since they were able to find some matches that had not been wet through and so could light a fire for drying. Another time Elizabeth was alone at the place with only one helper, Germany. A brush fire somehow got started on the place, and Germany told Elizabeth that there was nothing they could do about the fire without help. Elizabeth told him that the two of them could do something and would do something. And they did, putting out the fire.

The following photos are from Jan's photo albums. They picture and describe the energetic and creative years of house and farm building.



In the photo on the left, John is nailing the very end of the new gable end eave extension, fastening the fascia board on the front of the house. A short man, he is working at the limit of his reach on the highest part of the house and is swinging across his body since he is left handed. All of this indicates that he is a good carpenter and fearless of heights. Johnny seems to be steadying his end of the fascia with one foot resting in the temporarily empty second story window opening. Johnny started college at Auburn in 1947 and so was able to help full time for a number of months after being discharged from the army. Jan's photos show that scaffolding stayed in place for four or five years. Scaffolding material is clearly used lumber, perhaps gleaned in wrecking derelict buildings on the place. Some of the bracing may be old siding that has been taken down from the house. The house exterior is covered with some kind of plastic or building paper to keep out the weather. In a comment, Jan said that "the inside walls are outside."



at about the same time. The old front porch has been removed, showing the entrance door side-lights and transoms. These are probably original with the 1834 house. John had a new front door made of the indigenous cedar by a man who built church pews, according to Betty. She said that

her father made the other exterior doors himself. The chimneys seem to have been reworked, and scaffolding has clearly been raised to access both chimneys.



In the photo on the left, the scaffolding on the front of the house has been removed, and Johnny is adding water to the concrete mixer as he prepares to mix concrete for the floor of the new front porch. In the right photo, Betty is using a heavy tamper to consolidate the concrete. Though she has her trousers rolled up, her shoes and blouse and her hair show that this clearly is not her regular work. Betty and Jan stayed in Fairfield during the week and came home on the weekend during these early months, riding the taxi (a commuter bus line from Montevallo to Birmingham). Jan wrote

that when they came home for their first Thanksgiving, Highway 119 was impassable because of the mud from road construction associated with the paving of the highway. Since no one at home knew they were coming, they got off the bus on Salem Road, walked cross country and crossed the creek to surprise everybody.



In the photo, John is checking out the tamping work that Betty has been doing. From Betty's posture, leaning over with hands resting just above her knees, she may have done all she can that day with the heavy tamper. The tamped concrete is on the left of the image, and concrete yet to be consolidated is on the right. Through the empty front door opening are materials that appear to be stacked bundles of shingles for the new roofing. Since Jan is the photographer, she doesn't show in the photographs, even though she is clearly part of the work, too. Note John's hat and the knee hole in his trousers. He is not only overseer and designer for the work underway, but an active participant in the heavy labor as well.



Here is the same area perhaps a week later and the same father and daughter, but now the floor and step are placed, the concrete has set, and Betty's smile seems to say that she is glad that there'll be no tamping today.

Scaffolding support for porch construction is set on the new floor, and framing for the new front porch is seen overhead. Betty said that though John certainly did not do all the labor in building the place, he did a lot of it and that he designed and planned the new porch as well as the new staircase and other new interior construction additions and modifications.



Elizabeth is seen here standing at the rear of the house at about the same time as the photo above. The old kitchen is behind her. No construction has started in this area yet. Behind her, there is a ladder to the roof as well as new radiators for the house, which have not yet been installed.



The first winter was also a time of fence building.

Although the fences on the place were very poor or missing, there was a plentiful supply of eastern red cedar, which, because of the extreme rot resistance of the red aromatic heart wood, makes very good fence posts. On the left, Johnny is using an axe to cut a piece of the cedar. His swing blurs the image. The line of posts shows the location of the new fence. In the background is a kind of cut-off saw that John and Johnny built together. John may have also designed this saw. Just below the saw table is an air-cooled engine, and the blur of the saw blade shows that it is running. Johnny is using the axe rather than the running cut-off saw. In the right photo, John and Johnny are using a cross-cut saw, apparently to cut the cedar to post lengths. Since in both photos the new saw is not being used, it may have been that this was one of John's creations that didn't work out just as he planned. In the photo to the right, the front porch is under construction. Scaffolding is in place on the gable ends to be used in the installation of siding.



The plentiful supply of cedar also evidently allowed some of it to be sold for fence posts. Here Peddie Bearden is using his new truck to carry off a load of cedar cut to fence post length.

Though even the largest logs could be fairly easily split into fence posts, John soon realized that they would have a much higher value selling them for use in making moth- and insect-repellent chests. The post war brought with it a surge of new marriages and home formations and, with it, an increased market for the cedar chest or hope chest. John sold a portion of his cedar to the Lane Cedar chest company in Virginia. Jan's photos show the harvesting and shipping of the trees. The sale of the trees for the high valued use of chest construction provided a significant early cash income from the farm.



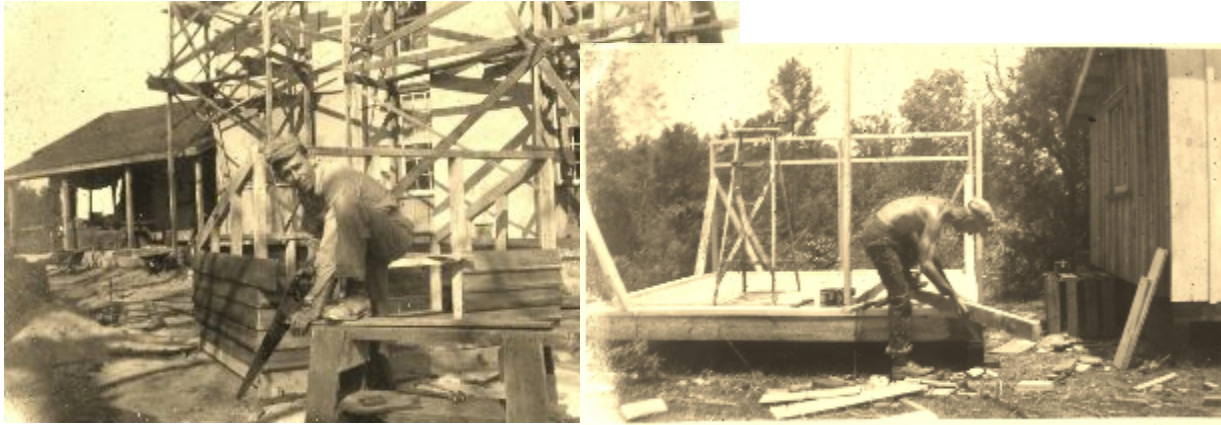
In the photos above Lewis Sullen and Spot Jemison display their double-bit felling axes and two man cross-cut saw, which were the tools for timber harvesting in this time before the general use of the gasoline-powered chain saw. In the photo to the right, a large cedar has been cut through with the two-man cross-cut saw, the tree is falling, and Spot is trying to extract his saw to prevent the tree from damaging it. Lewis's end of the saw is vacant. He has evidently retreated to a safer place as the behemoth begins its fall.



Jan's photo gives a good illustration of a technique for loading timber on a truck before specialized motorized harvesting machinery was available. The chain around the log being loaded has one end fixed at the truck bed while the other end goes over the load to a singletree harnessed to a draft horse or mule. As the mule moves away from the



truck, the log rolls up the ramp to the top of the load. Johnny is using a cant hook to unload the cedar logs at the Aldridge rail siding for transloading to a train bound for the buyer, Lane Cedar Chests in Virginia.



In the photo above, Johnny is building a pig house. He is building it on skids so he can work on it at a convenient location near the house, but will later move it to where the pigs are. Building on skids also would help in muck control since the building could be moved when it got messy. Note that the corners of the pig house are mitered, a rather fancy technique for constructing a pig house. Behind Johnny's pig house, the old kitchen wing has been rebuilt and a new roof installed. The garage has not yet been built.

The right image above shows John building yet another animal building on skids. This was probably after Johnny left for Auburn.



A chicken house gets some occupants even before it is finished. Jan is feeding the chickens. On the right, the pig house Jan and Betty are in the process of painting, clearly labeled.



James and his horse Ada plow a vegetable garden near the house. Betty said they had been avid gardeners in the early years, but they scaled down the vegetable gardening

after a few years to a few things like peppers and tomatoes in the flower beds.

John was particularly proud of his pigs. Jan wrote that with this litter “Dad is in pig heaven while feeding these specimens in more ways than one. This is Rosie’s first litter. She had eleven, and both Dad and Rosie are very proud.” With a newly acquired tractor, John also planted corn and oats, even renting an additional space from Peddie for a while. Betty said that the corn was not a big success.



Elizabeth is seen here on the new tractor. John and Elizabeth seem equally proud of it.



As hard as Elizabeth and John, Johnny, Betty and Jan worked, there was time for other things. Shoal Creek, which winds through the place, became a great swimming hole, for the Mahlers and for others who visited them. Jan and Betty invited fellow office workers from Fairfield, and relatives from Indiana came to work on the place and to hike and swim in the creek. Jan adds a note

to this photograph in her picture album: "Mom floats up and down the creek in her inner tube singing 'Zip-a-dee-do-dah, zip-a dee- day, My oh my what a wonderful day.'"



The little pig that John and Elizabeth are feeding with a bottle was named Kolinsky by Elizabeth. He was a runt and was not getting enough from his mother so Elizabeth and John decided to bottle-feed him. The old kitchen is in the background with the new garage to the left. There is new siding and a new concrete porch surface. Betty tells of how the family got out of the pig business. Betty and a friend were headed to

the old cemetery area on the north edge of the property. As they crossed through a pig pen on their way, her father appeared and told them to walk at once and very slowly to the fence and get out of the pig area. There was an aggressive boar in the field that Betty didn't know about. She said that her father got rid of the boar the next day.



In the photo on the left, Elizabeth is ready to pick blackberries. When there were physically capable visitors, there would be long hikes across country. Usually included would be a hike into the gullied, eroded hillside that Jan called "the badlands." From an overlook Jan wrote that they could see the horseshoe shape of Shoal Creek as it made a 180 degree reversal of course through the property.

Jan, Betty, Johnny and Elizabeth are shown taking part in a trip to the mission Stravern church. John is absent. Betty said though he was raised a Lutheran, John went with Elizabeth to a Catholic church until she was born, and after that he baby-sat.

In this photo, Elizabeth wears the big hat. Johnny is behind her right shoulder, Jan stands next to him, and Betty is just in front of Jan.





In this photo, visitors heading out for a day of hiking and blackberry picking cross the creek over the ancient footlog. House is in the background.³

³ Betty said that when her family first moved to Montevallo and the present concrete bridge was under construction, this footlog was located at the bridge site and that there was a time while the bridge was still unfinished that the footlog or fording were the only options in travelling the Highway 119 road. She said that the footlog was very old when they came, and she thinks it may date back to the time of the early Perrys, indicating that the footlog may date to 19th-century days when vehicles forded and only walkers could cross without getting wet. The footlog is still in service in 2015. It was hewn from a very carefully-chosen ancient American Chestnut tree, a species now extinct. After the Mahlers began the construction of the farm, the footlog was moved to its present location near the house, allowing walking access to the portion of the farm on the right side of Shoal Creek. The top of the ancient log is hewed more or less flat to provide a walking surface. The parallel cable and supporting pipes provide the suggestion of a handrail.



Mahler Home Spring 1951

The house appears completed in this photo. The Mahlers have worked for about 5 years, while at the same time building and operating the farm. John's design for the porch is architecturally at home and makes a gracious complement to the original box shape of the house. The exterior dimensions of the house are the same. Almost everything else is new. Old Perry Hall has been transformed into The Mahler Home.



Johnny graduated from Auburn in March, 1951. After graduation he worked for a time off the farm, including working in sales for Westinghouse.

Betty and Jan also continued to work at the Fairfield works, commuting each day from home.



Elizabeth and John are shown in their completed home, perhaps relaxing after a day's work on the farm. As the photo shows, the interior walls of the house are plastered and painted. New hardwood flooring has been installed. The fireplace, its new brick hearth, and mantle are ready for service.



Elizabeth at home doing needle work.



John sits at his desk in the new house with his usual pipe. Shown are new radiators, windows, and plain pull-down shades for window treatment. John had finally built and now lived on the farm he had hoped for in 1945.

As the years went by, Betty, Jan, and Johnny came to live and work at home as John and Elizabeth got older. Johnny took over more and more of the farm activities, and under his direction the farm became a beef cattle and hay operation. By the time I came to live just north of the Mahler homestead in 1968, Johnny was doing nearly all the field work himself. Even as a new rural dweller and wannabe farmer, I quickly came to recognize and admire the skills that he showed in operating the farm. Before the days of detailed satellite based forecasts and television radar images, he seemed to never get his hay wet. Time after time I saw him bale his hay and have it under a roof while others were caught with windrows of rained-on hay. When I recently told Betty of my memories of Johnny baling and storing perfectly cured hay, she smiled and said that he was good at it but he

sure worried a lot. He also had a hay bale loader that picked up the small square-ended bales as the tractor and loader traveled down the rows of baled hay and delivered them to the wagon for carrying off the field. Thus, he was able to do this normally backbreaking work single-handed. He also had a hydraulic bucket on the front of the old tricycle Farmall tractor, perhaps the same tractor shown earlier in this account that John bought in the late 1940s. A bucket on a low stability tricycle tractor is a rare configuration, but Johnny made it work. He used the bucket to stack the hay and muck out the barns.

I first met Johnny when I stopped to talk as he mended fences along the highway. A lot of the fence line along the right of way of Highway 119 goes through areas of very shallow soils with bedrock at or near the surface, making it extremely difficult to construct a strong fence. Johnny used creative techniques, using cedar trees growing on the line of the fence after being planted by birds perching on the fence after making a meal of cedar berries. He also used braces to support the fence posts in rocky areas, sort of like the flying buttresses of a European cathedral. It was a rare thing indeed for a cow to get through Johnny's fence.

Neighbor Doug Morris tells this story of Johnny's fence-maintenance dedication and focus. Doug grouched that for years when there were animals out anywhere between Nix Hill and Moores Crossroad the Montevallo police would automatically call him, even though there were others in this stretch who also kept horses and cows. They didn't call Johnny, perhaps because his cows almost never got out. On one particular night, it was after midnight when Montevallo police woke him, reporting a cow on the road. When Doug dressed and walked down the highway row, he found that the cow was Johnny's. Being a good neighbor, he drove the cow ahead of him down to the Mahler place, a distance of about 3/4 mile, and into the house drive. The cow was now off the road. When Johnny answered the late-night knock and was told of the situation, together they drove the cow through the gate near the house into a fenced area, safely securing the animal for the night. Johnny told Doug that he thought he knew just where the cow got out, and Doug said that since Johnny had a good idea where the fence was down he was sure that it wouldn't take him long in the morning to find the hole and fix the fence. "Oh no, it'll have to be fixed tonight," Johnny said. So Doug got into Johnny's truck, and they drove across the pasture toward the creek. Doug was uneasy driving across the untracked pasture in the darkness, for he knew that Johnny's field was full of rock outcrops and probably holes too, but Johnny showed that darkness and light were alike to one as familiar with the land as he was and they arrived safely at the suspected breach in the fence. Sure enough, there was the dead tree that Johnny had spotted earlier in one of his regular fence-maintenance circuits. The tree had since fallen across the fence, flattening it just as he had feared it would. Together they cut the tree off the broken fence and put up a strand of barbed wire to close the hole. "That'll hold till morning," said Doug hopefully. "Oh, no, I must put up all the wire," said Johnny. And they did just that, returning finally to the house before daybreak. After thanking Doug, Johnny went back into the house and Doug walked back home. With Johnny's laser focus on fence repair, he didn't see in the darkness of the night that Doug had no car.

As Betty, Jan, and Johnny assumed more of the duties of the farm and household, Jan became the cook, not particularly because she liked to cook, but because the other two particularly didn't like to cook. With a deadpan face Betty said that you know Jan expected me to do the dishes too.

John died in October of 1984. Elizabeth died a little over a year later in January of 1986. These yankee transplants from Indiana had taken the faded and tattered relic of an old southern house and moribund farm and rebuilt them into a unique homestead. Respecting the history of the house, they let it stand while completely redesigning and reconstructing it for their needs. The resulting homestead became their lifelong home. It stands a testament to their creativity, energy, and practical building skills.

Jan died in June, 2008.

Johnny died in August, 2013.

As the oldest child, Betty said she never expected to be the last survivor of the family. She said that she and Johnny had never discussed what was to be done with the homestead. Now with limited mobility herself, she realized that she couldn't stay at the homeplace alone. Thursday, August 8, 2013, returning from the burial service for Johnny, she went by Montevallo City Hall, called Mayor Hollie Cost out of a meeting, and told her that she wanted to explore the possibility of giving some land to the city.

On November 22, 2013, Betty signed a deed giving all properties included in the Mahler farm to the City of Montevallo. Covenants made a part of the deed specify that a major portion of the land, "shall be retained by Grantee for the purpose of establishing a city park to be enjoyed by Grantee's citizens, with said park to be named 'Shoal Creek Park.'" The covenants also specify that "Grantee shall preserve the old Mahler home place which is situated upon the premises, for the purpose of enjoyment and usage by the Grantee and its citizens. "

Betty had given a gift of extraordinary generosity.

Because of her gift, the creek that inspired Elizabeth to sing Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah may also inspire in Montevallo's citizens the same joy of life.

Because of her gift, many people may hike the same gullied hillside of the badlands and look down on the horseshoe bend of Shoal Creek as Jan loved to do.

Because of her gift, the Mahler homestead may be a place where children can come to a working farm, perhaps even feeding a runt pig like Elizabeth and John fed Kolinsky.

Because of her gift, the Mahler home may be used by the people of Montevallo as a residence from a past time, not primarily as a Civil War antebellum home of the old south, but as a WWII postbellum residence reflecting the energy and creativity of an extraordinary 20th century pioneer family from Indiana.



In the backyard of the Mahler home, there is a small statue of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and the environment. There is a bird in his hands and a look of blessing on his face. The figure was perhaps a house-warming gift given to Betty's mother Elizabeth long ago by her Indiana sisters. The face and habit are roughened by 70 years of exposure. Lichens, moss and mold provide additional and appropriate vestments.

Because of Betty's gift creating Shoal Creek Park, the spirit of St. Francis can continue to bless the animals and protect the environment of the Mahler home place.