

The Mid-Century Ranch House: Hip *and* Historic!

Our newest exhibit, "The Mid-Century Ranch House: Hip *and* Historic!" opened over Labor Day weekend to great acclaim. The Ranch House has reached the age (50 years or older) which makes it eligible for the National Register. Citizens of DeKalb County see many, *many* examples of the Ranch House around them. They are so common it is almost easy to disregard the patterns of history these houses illustrate.

Visitors to this exhibit will learn why this house type was so popular and the reasons DeKalb County was the epicenter of this mid-century construction boom. There are a number of variations found in the Ranch House, but here you will learn their major characteristics. We have already heard reports from people who now "see them everywhere!" And if you think you already know everything about the Ranch House because you grew up in one, we might have few surprises for you!



Richard and Judy Cloues joined other guests for an evening of nostalgia.

Our opening reception, billed as "Mid-Century Madness" invited guests to dress in **MAD MEN** or **MAD WOMEN** style. More than 125 donors and DHC members attended to enjoy the exhibit, great food and fantastic music. **Badda Bing** provided delicious 1950s inspired hors d'oeuvres and desserts. Our guests enjoyed live local music performed by **Mark Augustyn, J. P. Strong, and Dan Woods.**

Additional décor and technical support came from **2000 A.D. Concepts in Floral Art and Spectrum Entertainment and Events.** We thank John Hewitt and *The Champion Newspaper* for covering the event. Special thanks to John Coleman, Kerri Carlson and April Moon Carlson for their volunteer support. And the special evening was captured by photographer **Cindy M. Brown.** ✦

More event photos on page 4

Genealogy Tips

The following ideas are adapted from the September lecture, *Genealogy: It's Time to Get Started!*, given at DHC by **Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr.** Have you always wanted to research your family tree, but don't know where to start? Technology has changed, but the information you are gathering about your family has not. Whether you are looking at microfilm or Ancestry.com, these pointers will make the process easier:

The Six R's of Genealogy Research

Request information by interviewing relatives

Record the information at each step

Research further by visiting institutions like archives or courthouses

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Read for background – review published history books to better understand historical events

Review your findings at each level and repeat

Results Finally, decide what to do with the results of your efforts. Do you want to put it into a genealogy program, create a website, have a family reunion, or write a book? Whatever actions you choose, preserve and share your information, now and with future generations.

Write Down Your Memories Create a record for your relatives which will be an invaluable source. Otherwise your descendants may only know a name on a tombstone.

Autobiographical Sketch Write up your *own* history so your kin will know about you and what you think is important. You can also write sketches about any or all of your ancestors.

Be Prepared There are many great books on genealogy. A cheap option is the Boy Scout Merit Badge booklet on Genealogy. You can buy it at a Scout Shop or at www.scoutstuff.org. Find books by national authors on specific topics via the Genealogical Publishing Company at www.genealogical.com. Your local library might have copies of some of their titles.

Magazines *Family Tree Magazine* is a good resource. Some info is free online at www.familytreemagazine.com. They also issue a list of the "101 Best Websites."

Societies to Join There are many genealogical societies in Georgia. The DeKalb History Center is a great resource and your membership helps us preserve DeKalb specific materials. Local genealogical societies are found in surrounding counties like Cobb, Rockdale, and Gwinnett. And there are statewide organizations including the Georgia Genealogical Society with memberships and resources. A helpful website is www.usgenweb.org, which is organized by state and then county. It provides many local links and contacts at the county level.

Meetings and Training Many local genealogical societies and freelance genealogists offer lectures or classes. The comprehensive calendar for Georgia's genealogical events can be found at www.gagensociety.org. Many events are mentioned in Ken Thomas' weekly genealogy column in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

National Websites Check the National Genealogical Society (NGS) www.ngsgenealogy.org for their publications and online classes. They publish short, detailed state guides to genealogy research. The most important website for sources of abstracted information is www.ancestry.com, which is a subscription site. A free site created by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, www.familysearch.org, is a must.

Go Do Research Georgia has many places to visit after you finish your family interviews. For local research, you may visit courthouses, libraries, and archives. The Georgia State Archives and the National Archives/Atlanta-Southeast Region are both located in Morrow, GA. Public libraries in our area with great genealogical collections include Atlanta (central library and Auburn Ave.), Marietta, and Smyrna. Outside of Atlanta the best are in Athens, Columbus, Macon, Rome, and Savannah, with good collections in Homerville, Moultrie, Thomasville, and Vidalia. Don't overlook collections at the Atlanta History Center, the Georgia Historical Society (in Savannah), and Emory University. Always check ahead for operating hours, advance appointments, and holiday closings. There are also Latter Day Saint operated "Family History Centers" nationwide, with 45 in Georgia. Check on www.familysearch.org to find one near you and to get an idea of the assistance they can offer.

When in Doubt, GOOGLE! A lot of genealogy material can be found via a Google search. Just enter your question, your area of interest, a society, or whatever, and follow what turns up. But always be sure to check internet sources. ✦

The Art and Life of Atlanta Artist Wilbur G. Kurtz by David O'Connell

Reviewed by Claudia Stucke

You may not recognize his name, but chances are good that you've seen at least some of the work of artist and historian Wilbur G. Kurtz. His murals and paintings appear in private collections and public buildings all over the country, particularly in the South. But even if you are not familiar with his art, you've seen some of Kurtz's work if you've visited the Cyclorama or FDR's Little White House in Warm Springs, or if you've seen *Gone with the Wind* or Disney's *Song of the South*. If you've read the text of any of the hundreds of historical markers that address the Battle of Atlanta, you've probably read the words of Wilbur Kurtz. These are only a few of the many accomplishments described in biographer David O'Connell's carefully documented account of the life and work of this influential Atlanta transplant.

In his early twenties, Illinois native and history enthusiast Wilbur Kurtz came to Atlanta in 1902 to interview CSA Captain William A. Fuller, the train conductor in the Andrews Raid (a.k.a. the "Great Locomotive Chase"). Nine years later the former Midwesterner and Chicago Art Institute alumnus was married to Fuller's daughter, Annie Laurie, and was settling into his adopted city, Atlanta. Although Kurtz was a Northerner, he was so enamored of Atlanta and its history that he became one of the founding members of the Atlanta Historical Society and the Civil War Round Table of Atlanta. These associations, his passion for Southern history, and his artistic skill and insistence on historical accuracy gained the attention and respect of prominent Atlantans, including historian Franklin Garrett and Margaret Mitchell and her family.

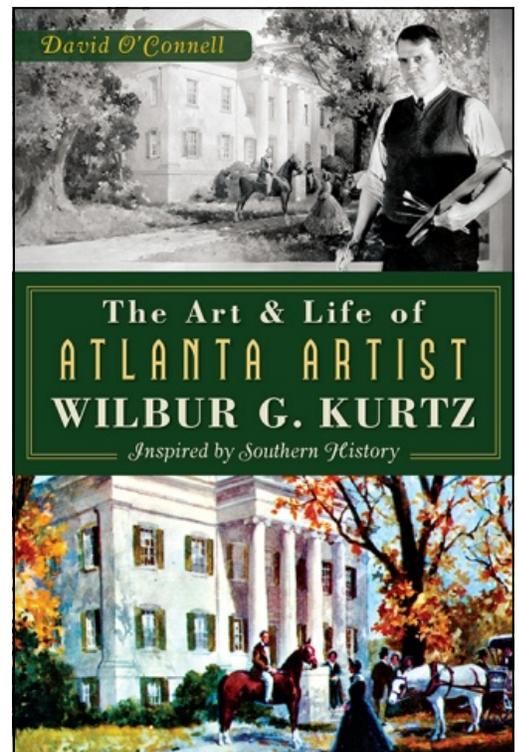
When producer David O. Selznick approached Margaret Mitchell to act as technical advisor for *Gone with the Wind*, she declined and deferred to Kurtz. In this capacity Kurtz was charged with ensuring the historical accuracy of the depiction of 1860s-era Atlanta, Tara, and Twelve Oaks in Selznick's film version of the novel. O'Connell takes the reader behind the scenes in his account of Kurtz's Hollywood experience, the complicated task of interpreting Margaret Mitchell's vision while trying to remain faithful to history and to satisfy the demands of the Selznick studio, whose mission was to entertain Depression-era American audiences and give them the Old South that they expected. Movie buffs will also enjoy seeing some of the watercolors that Kurtz created for this project, which the studio reproduced and issued to theaters as stills to build audience anticipation for the release of *Gone with the Wind*. Although you won't see his name on their lists of credits, Kurtz went on to work in a similar capacity on two Disney films (*Song of the South* and *The Great Locomotive Chase*).

In terms of scholarship and education Kurtz was an artist first and a historian second, but his devotion to history and his genuine affection for the South are evident in his work. The usual subjects of his murals and smaller paintings are historical scenes, such as his *Atlanta and the Old South* series. Of particular interest to DeKalb readers is his 1955 watercolor of the antebellum DeKalb County Courthouse. The courthouse painting appears on one of the sixteen pages of color plates included in O'Connell's book. These reproductions help show the depth and range of the artist's skill as well as his meticulous attention to historical detail. In contrast to his impressive architectural renderings, his paintings of everyday life are poignant, especially those that include individuals often overlooked and neglected during Kurtz's time and during the Civil War era. Particularly in his portraits, but also in his larger works, Kurtz conveys the genuine dignity and humanity of the individual.

Wilbur Kurtz was a genuine renaissance man. Local Franklin Garrett said of him, "In his pursuit of the subject, Mr. Kurtz possessed three attributes seldom combined in a chronicler of history: an inquiring mind, an ability to write and skill as an artist." Kurtz's talents took him to the Cyclorama, to supervise the restoration of the deteriorating painting and its installation into the exhibition hall at Grant Park, and to Warm Springs, to supervise conversion of Roosevelt's Little White House into a museum, where a grateful Eleanor Roosevelt posed for a photograph with Kurtz and gave him an autographed print of it. He accepted corporate commissions from Coca-Cola and Rich's; and although he gained respect and some degree of fame during this lifetime, Kurtz never became a wealthy man. O'Connell shares some of Kurtz's personal philosophy in an excerpt from a letter to his wife: "I'm a firm believer in the doctrine that no good is ever lost . . . and by the same token, I've no patience with the cynical attitude that unless immediate cash return is in sight nothing can be worthwhile."

Wilbur Kurtz left his mark on Atlanta, in history, art, and popular culture; and yet his is not a name that most of us recognize. Biographer David O'Connell says that Kurtz did achieve the respect he desired as an artist and a historian, and he believes that the time has come to widen Kurtz's circle of admirers.

David O'Connell will be lecturing and signing his book at the DeKalb History Center on Tuesday, November 12 from 5:30—6:30 p.m. Join us for wine, cheese and crackers at this free event. He will have books available to purchase from the History Press. They are \$21.99 each. ✦



Mid-Century Madness (Reception)



Thank you to our donors, lenders, sponsors and volunteers. Our exhibit would not have been possible without your support!

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Terry Bird, Dr. Richard Cloues, Justin Kenagy, Kevin McQueen, David Ramsay,
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Volunteer Carpenters: John Mullins & Howard Stacey

Cathi A. Arostegui, C. J. Clark, Dianne Isakson, John Hewitt, Annie and Kyle Johnston, Susan and Gary King,
Erin & Kris Justice, Claudia Nesbit & Claudia Stucke and **Interns:** Ryan Prechter & John Prince

Big Heartbeat Photography, Beth and Randy Funderburke, Mary K. Jarboe, Kudzu Antiques & Cathy Mullins

Volunteer Perspective (Exhibit)

*We had many volunteers help with our newest exhibit. Since we are a small organization, it can be a great way for a layperson to learn how much work actually goes in to developing an exhibit. To further reward our hard working volunteers, we occasionally ask them to write about their experiences! **This is Howard Stacy's account.***

I came into the project at the midpoint, stayed to the end, and got to enjoy the glory. Thus, working on the DHC's Ranch House exhibit was a success for me. I signed up when my friend John Mullins "invited" me to join the construction team. As he described it, Karen Chance, Exhibits Coordinator, needed a few good carpenters to help.

There were three major carpentry tasks: building the family room, the bathroom, and the wrought iron entrance. Each presented unique demands—perhaps the most challenging was recreating the family room.

Karen had done much preliminary work, locating vintage furniture, and laying out the exhibit spaces, so all we had to do for the family room was build a platform and cover the walls. It was important that the replica room be elevated above floor level. Constructing the platform meant lifting and toting heavy wood. The History Center does not have a loading dock or freight elevator, so it fell to us to do most of the heavy lifting of 2 x 8's and 3/4 inch plywood. There was a lot of sweating and grunting involved in just moving the wood. Then it was time for cutting, fitting, and screwing the pieces together; the physical effort was significant. The mental effort was also considerable as we built the platform to support an imaginative exhibit while also making it cost-effective and long-lasting.

The "brick" wall was Karen's clever idea. It was created using a Masonite-type material attached to furring strips. It went up quickly, yet gave a good faux brick look. But the 1950s "tongue and groove" pine paneling which covers the back wall was a challenge. Karen located the paneling at a house that was being remodeled and brought the planks from Marietta in her car.

When I first saw the pine planks, I had significant doubts about the chances of success. The boards were broken, dirty and stained. Because the courthouse walls are solid masonry, Karen's plan was again to use furring strips to create an authentic paneled wall.

Since none of us had ever worked with this pine paneling it was a challenge, but John's extensive woodworking experience really helped. Starting at the left side of the platform, we nailed the first board to the furring strip. Then we selected a second board that mated nicely and slid its tongue into the milled groove on the first board. Then we nailed that board into the furring strip. We continued across the living room, with some bending, pushing, hammering, and profanity required.

Once the paneling was up, Karen cleaned, patched and varnished the boards, with the help of other volunteers. After hanging a few tacky wooden ducks with metal wings, the family room was ready for June Cleaver or Lucille Ball to come to life on the console TV.

It was great fun working with Karen Chance on this project. She and the many other volunteers and staffers made "DeKalb's Ranch House Heritage" something that we all can be proud of, and I was very glad to be a small part of the effort. ✦



Howard Stacy (right in first picture) and John Mullins (left) contributed time, skills, and humor to our Ranch House exhibit!

History Adventure Engages

We greatly expanded our previously named Heritage Festival this October, and our first *History Adventure* was a resounding success! This large living-history event designed for school children was held at our historic houses on West Trinity Avenue from October 23 to 25, more than 2,000 DeKalb County and Decatur City students attended, coming from schools such as Stone Mountain Elementary, Lithonia Middle School, Dresden Elementary in Chamblee, Stephenson Middle School and the 4/5 Academy at Fifth Avenue in Decatur.

At the History Adventure, students rotated through stations meeting James Oglethorpe, Mary Musgrove, Harriet Tubman, and Sequoyah.

Students went into the Mary Gay House and the Swanton House as well as two pioneer log cabins where they experienced the story of Zenith Twilley, a free African woman who lived in Decatur in 1852. They heard demonstrations of mid-nineteenth century musical instruments and learned about Decatur during the Civil War.

On the third day there was an archaeologist, an early natives' camp and a Revolutionary War soldier as the emphasis shifted from Georgia to early U.S. History.

Many teachers made positive comments about the event and students lingered to have pictures taken with the presenters and to ask final questions. Several teachers' enthusiasm extended to wanting to make a reservation for next year. John Farthing, a department chair at Druid Hills Middle School and a facilitator of county-wide conferencing among social studies teachers, was very supportive of the History Adventure when he wrote the following:

This experience, hands down, was one of the most standards-based, entertaining and worthwhile presentations that I have been to in the past 14 years as a Georgia History teacher. My students now know more about these figures than they would have known by being in my class. The presentations were very entertaining and



From the top: James Oglethorpe, Harriett Tubman, Mary Musgrove, and Sequoyah.

Students and Teachers



they truly addressed the standards.

Mr. Farthing kindly went on to offer his help in promoting the event to other DeKalb County teachers in the future!

Of course, an event of this size requires a lot of helping hands. The volunteers who unloaded buses and got students to the correct stations were irreplaceable. They were *Gail Bardis, Linda Fountain, Jim Langford*, and *Cathy Mullins*, who is also on the board of directors at the DeKalb History Center. *John Hewitt*, also a board member, assisted with logistics.

The Junior League of DeKalb County took on the job of touring students through their historic property, the Mary Gay House, and we want to thank *Ann Earle, Elizabeth Scott* and *Susanna Scott*, Junior League president, for their hard work.

A.S. Turner and Sons Funeral Home sent *Mr. Searcy* and “Pops” to set up large tents they loaned for the event. City of Decatur employees *Lee Williams* and *Greg White* brought tables, chairs, tents, trash cans and other essential equipment, while the Decatur Police Department supplied officers to help students cross the street safely and direct bus traffic.

We also thank our financial sponsors for the event.

Major support came from the Davidson and McCurdy Families, with Mr. Chip Davidson acting as their representative and showing great interest in the History Adventure.

Additional financial support came from A.S. Turner and Sons Funeral Home, the Coosawattee Foundation, the Cousins Foundation and Epps Aviation.

Many thanks to everyone, including DHC staff and our wonderful presenters, who helped make this first year such a great experience. ✦

From the top: Cathy Kaemmerlen, Zenith Twilley, Scott Jones, and Fiddlin' Dan.

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