

Interview by Colonel "Chic" Wann of Chief E.J. Martin
Eyewitness to the construction of U.S. Nitrate Plant No. One
Also U.S. Nitrate Plant Village No. One, or Liberty Bell Village
1918

Recollections and Histories of Sheffield and the Tri-Cities

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Transcribed by Greg Harrison

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Chic Wann: This Is Chic Wann. I'm here in the home of the former Chief of the Public Safety Service out of the TVA. Chief Martin was one of the earlier settlers out here as a young man and witnessed construction of the Nitrate One and the Village One.

The purpose of this interview is to preserve the history, the historical data of the Village One and Chief Martin is one of the experts on it. In fact... I guess THE expert living today, and he has graciously consented to come down for this interview, and we are thankful to him for taking his time out to grant this interview.

Chic Wann: I understand you came out here at a very early age?

Chief Martin: I came out here the 2nd day of February 1918, in the midst of the worst flu epidemic [Spanish Influenza] I think we ever had. I arrived at the depot in Sheffield which was down on 1st St. in Sheffield. You could hardly walk for the coffins.....that was waiting to be shipped out and there was snow almost up to your knees.....and it was a miserable place. The streets were all chert. I came out to Plant One and got a job in the personnel office. Well I didn't like that very long so I decided I'd get a job on the guard force. Which I did. I saw the whole thing go from.....out here in the Village and also the plant.....almost from the ground up. J.G. White Engineer Corporation was the principal contractor. J.G. Munson was the general superintendent. (Nitrate) One was built for the production of nitrate.....ammonium nitrate. My understanding was that the formula was obtained by an American army officer from a German army officer which failed to give the whole formula but they went ahead and built the plant and it operated for a very short period of time due to the fact that the Armistice was

signed. The production of the ammonium nitrate was stored in bags and it was to be used for ammunition but it turned out to be used as fertilizer.....ammonium nitrate fertilizer. The plant shut down but in the meantime the Liberty Bell Village was under construction and I saw it go from sewers, and cisterns, and corn fields, up to where it is today.

Chic Wann: Chief you mentioned the Liberty Bell shape of this village. Can you expand on that just a little?

Chief Martin: Well, it was known as the Liberty Bell Village. It's in the shape of a bell, with commons, and parks, and everything, including the clapper of the bell which is in the end of the circle.

Chic Wann: O.K., we have heard.....now of course I'm one of the youngsters around here now...compared to you people. Now we always heard that these Village One houses were constructed here for U.S. Army officers during the construction. Is that correct?

Chief Martin: Built solely for the army officers.

Chic Wann: And up here, which is commonly known as the apartment house..... now I believe you told me was the bachelor officers' quarters?

Chief Martin: Bachelor officers' quarters, correct. Built for the single officers.

Chic Wann: Right on. And to catch the overflow, they added a second bath to what is now the G.O. Summers house? Is that correct? To take care of the overflow for the Bachelor Officers' Quarters?

Chief Martin: Well..... that house was just used as the guest house..... the G.O. Summers house. It was known then as House 40. [44 Chickamauga St.]

Chic Wann: House 40.

Chief Martin: Um..... and we had 3 houses up.....

Chic Wann: What we call the big circle?

Chief Martin Um..... the ah.....bell part..... of the Village there's 3 houses there. One for the commanding officer and then two Lt. Colonels. [Lt. Colonel's residence and two Major's residences]

Chic Wann: Was the commanding officer a general officer?

Chief Martin: Uh.....a commanding officer was..... a Captain Hemphill, at the time, and of course we had Col. Weir and Col. Hardee Chambliss was the last full Colonel army officer [unintelligible] and he lived in what was known as the Colonels House. [106 Guntersville Circle]

Chic Wann: And that's the one the Winkles live in now?

Chief Martin No. No, that was a Majors' house. [100 Guntersville Circle]

Chic Wann: That was a Majors' house?

Chief Martin: That's where ah..... Arthur..... the one..... you know..... who used to operate the Shoals Hotel? What's his name?

Chick Wann: Kirby. [Kirkby]

Chief Martin: Kirby, [Kirkby] Arthur Kirby [Arthur Kirkby] bought that house.

Chic Wann: I see.

Chief Martin: That's one of the biggest houses in the Village.

Chic Wann: Right. I believe you told me you came here from Tennessee?

Chief Martin: I came from Hawkinsville, Kentucky. My hometown is Hawkinsville and when I first came down here I was just out of school and nobody could tell me anything. I knew everything, but I soon found out I was about as ignorant as they come.

Laughter

Chic Wann: Well I understand, during one of our conversations prior to this, that there was quite a bit of mischievousness and meanness going on and your parent tried to get you to come back home?

Chief Martin: Yeah, I had a sister who lived at the Sheffield Hotel. Her husband was a general distributor for Miller and Heart Meats. This was there headquarters. This was the reason I came to Sheffield, and of course she used every wire she had to make me go home, but I refused to go home.

Laughter

Chic Wann: Well I guess you're glad you stayed now?

Chief Martin: Oh yeah. I'm glad I stayed because I got to see the thing go up and shut down and only 11 families living in the 100 houses.

Chic Wann: Is that the total houses that were here in the beginning?

Chief Martin: Yeah. There was supposed to be 100 houses.

Chic Wann: Well we've also heard, we younger people, that a house or two might have burned?

Chief Martin: Well, one house burned, up on Norris Circle. Of course that was when the Ordnance Department was renting a few of them and this holly roller preacher.....it was in the dead of winter.....so ah..... he forgot to shut the draft off and went somewhere to preach. When we got there with the firetruck, well of course the house floor was falling in. Another house on Norris Circle. 3rd house from corner of Pickwick, termites ate it up and the army tore it down and filled in the foundation.

Chick Wann: Was that before the days of all these fancy..... ah..... people that go around and destroy termites?

Chief Martin: Ordnance Department never treated any of these houses for termites but when TVA sold them everybody that bought them had them treated. They never had any treatment of any type.

Chic Wann: I understand that all this property was farmland?

Chief Martin: It was farmland and it was also part of Sheffield. The streetcar line used to run through here. It was known as Old Cherokee Pike, which is still Cherokee pike. Now it's known as Blackwell Rd. The streetcar line belonged to Alabama Power Company.

Chic Wann: And it went down to Tuscumbia.

Chief Martin: It went down to Tuscumbia, turned around and went all the way to Florence.

Chic Wann: Right.

Chief Martin: It turned around in East Florence and came back.

Chic Wann: I remember we used to.....from old Village Two.....way back.....

Chief Martin: Oh yeah, used to run straight through to Greenbrier.....

Chic Wann:had the junction about where the Putt Putt Golf is now.....

Chief Martin:ride out and transfer.

Laughter

Chief Martin: Those were the days! The Old Cherokee Pike used to run right through Plant One. So they bypassed it around to where it is now and that is still the Old Cherokee Pike. It was an old mail route. It came down to Pickwick went straight across Spring Creek. At that time the [Village One] reservation consisted of 2,300 acres but there was 1550 acres across Spring Creek. It was bought for future farming, this that, the other.

These houses were laid out in rows of 4 to 6 at a time and you could just see them jump. I've never seen as many carpenters in my life.

Chic Wann: War time construction.

Chief Martin: Yeah, yeah. War time construction. Of course, quite a number of subcontractors. Not as many as at Plant Two. 15 to 20 over there. Out here 8 to 9. General Chemical Company, Chemical Construction Company, J.G. White was principle. One of these houses.....they'd complete about 3 a day, and it seemed like it just jumped from block to block. In the meantime all the construction of the streets and waterlines, sewer lines and everything would be put down at the same time. There were so many sinkholes out here and cisterns. They used the debris left over to fill them up. So you can't dig down too far or you'll dig up an old cistern. [laughter]

We used to train out here on horses. All the guards had to train. We had a tough.....Lieutenant.....Lieutenant Edwards U.S. Army Ordnance Dept. We used to run into the barb wire fence [laughter] and it was quite a chore.

The Village was never occupied completely. Because the war.....

Chic Wann: Was ending.

Chief Martin: Now up on Pickwick Street we had what was called Snuff Row.

Chic Wann: Snuff Row?

Chief Martin: Snuff Row. At Snuff Row was temporary houses for Non Commissioned Officers and there was still quite a few of the old red houses that belonged to.....various people. They remained there for quite some time. But the big construction campus was right on the corner of Cherokee Pike at the street car stop..... that ran all the way back to what is known now as the.....well it ran back quite a bit.....and

there was a mess hall, fire hall, and there were quite a few soldiers here. They had barracks, they had barracks for the workers and.....

Chic Wann: And also military barracks?

Chief Martin: Yes. We had a large military concert here. We used to have about one of everything you needed. But ah.....when it closed down, everything began to fold up.

Chic Wann: Do you remember Chief..... do you remember a Mr. Stewart? He Used to live where Summers does now. He used to ride horses. Was he one of the first people in here?

Chief Martin: No. That's John Wright. There never was a finer man.

Chic Wann: That Oceil's daddy?

Chief Martin: Yes, and Moe remember Moe? They had two daughters.....forget what there names.....

Chic Wann: One of them is Sara.

Chief Martin: Yeah. Sara.

Chic Wann: Sara is still here. I think Moe.....

Chief Martin: No. Moe's dead.

Chic Wann: He died?

Chief Martin: He died up at Wheeler Dam. He was a guard up there.

Chic Wann: He used to drive a school bus too didn't he?

Chief Martin: Yeah. Joe Wright, he was quite a man. He lived in that house there.

Under Major Poyet, who was a warrant officer [Major] who was sent in under the Ordnance Department. Colonel John W. Clemmons was the commanding officer of the whole plant. [Plant Two] He kept receiving orders to close things down but he never did. His wife was the social leader of the Tri-Cities.

Chic Wann: I see

Laughter

Chief Martin: And they lived over at what was known as Proctor Farms then. That big house overlooking everything. All of Muscle Shoals was still nothing but a bunch of.....

Chic Wann: Where was that now Chief?

Chief Martin: No. That was out at Plant Number Two. Proctor Farms. Plant 2 reservation.

Chic Wann: You know, when I was just a young fella, we'd come here when I was 5 years old. They had the old fire station out on Wilson Dam Reservation. Big stucco building with that big siren on top of it.

Chief Martin: I remember you very well.

Chic Wann: And the largest flag that I'd ever seen in my life flapping on that pole.

Chief Martin: Yeah, that was something. We used to have to put it up at sunrise and take it down at sunset.

Chic Wann: Right. Now that's the first time that I can remember that I saw you. And you remember that it had a little tin and greased all garage of a thing with an old hand gasoline pump?

Chief Martin: Yeah, we operated that for.....ah..... the poor people. We of course..... We didn't sell gas to anybody but just employees. We wasn't supposed to , but we sold to a lot of personal friends and ah..... I was Major Poyet's personal representative then. He kept me.....he put me on the day shift out there.

Chic Wann: Uh huh

Chief Martin: I worked day shift all the time and had charge of the gas station.

Chic Wann: That's the first time I saw you.....pumpin that gas.

I had an old pump and Ol' Ed Engels of Alabama Oil Company.....I bought all my oil from Fred W. Robinson then. He was Chief Administration Officer and ah.....at Christmas we'd take that money and buy groceries.....and deliver em around in the Tri-Cities, to various poor people. We'd get names from associated charities. And ah.....Miss Jo Jack was head of that then. We'd take whatever profit we made, which was quite a lot, and buy groceries.

Chic Wann: That's great.

So that went on for quite a number of years, but it got to where we couldn't handle it, due to the fact that so many people.....we'd deliver big baskets on the day before Christmas. They'd be back the day after Christmas demanding more. So finally, we had a little committee out at the plant and we just decided we'd turn the profits over to the various associated charities and let them do it.

Chic Wann: Because there wasn't any United Fund.

Chief Martin: No. There wasn't any United Fund. There wasn't nothing.

Chic Wann: I understand that.

Chief Martin: It seemed like the more we givethe more they demanded.

Chic Wann: Well that hold true to some.....

Chief Martin That's human nature.

Chic Wann: Human nature.

Chic Wann: O.K. Chief, getting back to Major Poyet. I remember him.....he had two daughters didn't he?

Chief Martin: He had 3 daughters.

Chic Wann: Three daughters O.K. I remember two of them, and ah, I believe you told me back during World War One, Poyet was a Major in the army?

Chief Martin: Yeah, he was a Colonel on General John J. Pershing's staff. [1930 census shows Anthony Poyet as a Major U.S.A]

Chic Wann: Oh, he was a Colonel?

Chief Martin: He was a.....Major Poyet was a.....full blooded Frenchman, and when he'd get excited you couldn't understand him. And he used to holler out at me and he'd call me Mar-teen.

Laughter

Chief Martin: Mar-teen [laughter] and I taught him to drive his first car, one of those 1918 Dodges and he's the only man I saw that could make it squat in the middle.

Laughter

Chief Martin: When he'd start or stop. [laughter] and you could hear him [laughter]. We had a mechanic then, Johnny Williams.....and we had 150 of these Dodge cars and he kept Johnny running busy replacing these cars. [laughter] We finally got him [Poyet] where he'd just mash down on the accelerator and take his foot off the clutch. And boy, it would jump! [laughter] I'm telling you.....how he held it.....I can't tell you that. But he was one fine fellow.

Chic Wann: I remember your firetrucks out there had solid tires?

Chief Martin: Oh yeah. Those were American to France trucks, and we had three.

Chic Wann: Later on, I remember Chief Watson had a.....well I guess you'd call it a truck.

Chief Martin: A GMC. You had to crank it. And when.....[laughter].....he'd always leave it on a hill. Down there on the corner of Florence. He lived on the corner of Florence and Tombigbee.

Chic Wann: Right.

Chief Martin: And he parked it there you know.....and when it wouldn't start he'd hop in there and release theyou know.....put it in gear and roll down the hill. So I inherited that thing when I was made chief. When TVA came in here in 1933. I lived on the corner of Possum trot and Elmwood out there for twenty-two and a half years.

Chic Wann: Old Village Two.

Chief Martin: Yeah, old Village Two. Until they sold the house. That was the only way to get me out of it.

Chic Wann: Me too.

Chief Martin: But of course I didn't keep that truck for too long. I inherited Ol' Captain Riley's the engineering captain, who was the commanding officer of the dam.

Chic Wann: H.D.W.

Chief Martin: Yeah, and when they consolidated the guard force then. They used to have two guard forces here. The one over here (Nitrate One) was ordnance and the one over there [Nitrate Two] engineering. And T.V.A. come in here they consolidated that and I was then given Captain Riley's car, and it had these puncture proof tires on it. I used to drive it to Waco, down there where we had the old limestone factory. You could get up to 40 mph and it would.....[laughter].....shake. You couldn't tell if you were going or coming. [laughter]

Chic Wann: Well, ah let's see now. You said Mr. Robertson, Fred Robertson was the administrator, out in ol' First Quarters?

Chief Martin: Oh yeah, yeah [unintelligible] used to in [fire home or fire house]. That's where Major Poyet's headquarters was, and there were four people in there.

Chic Wann: We get back to that old.....this is about Village One, but we get to reminiscing about old times. Out on that Wilson Reservation or Village Two, was the old First Quarters down there. Before I retired from T.V.A. I found an old drawing or blueprint that you had to handle very carefully. It was so old that it almost crumbled. And they had that old First Quarters listed as a hotel?

Chief Martin: Well it was used for the workers. It was ah.....they had individual rooms but only for employees. Employees only. But mostly army people, and back during the C.C.C. days we were gifted with quite a bunch of C.C.s who brought the first Kudzu here.

Chic Wann: [Laughing] Is that where it come from?

Chief Martin: That's where it come from. Yeah, they were repairing the various erosion [problems] and boy, we have never been able to get rid of it since. We had never heard of Kudzu before the C.C.C. days.

Chic Wann: You know this big drainage ditch over behind the State Troopers office of Hatch Blvd. I remember playing in that ditch when we were kids.

Chief Martin: Of course you did.

Chic Wann: And there was no Kudzu then.

Chief Martin: No.

Chic Wann: This was before the C.C.C. days.

Chief Martin: Yeah, before C.C.C. we didn't know what Kudzu was.

Chic Wann: I wonder where they got that stuff?

Chief Martin: I don't know where the Civilian Conservation Corps.....somebody come up with it. Now it did stop erosion, but it choked everything else out. If you once got a little bit of it on the ground you couldn't get rid of it, even if you dug it up.

Chic Wann: Well, that's very interesting. First I've ever heard of that now. You were talking about John Williams. He was a machinist down at the plant, until he retired.

Chief Williams: There were three brothers, John, Dennis, and Warren. Warren and Dennis were Fire Department with us. Of course we had a guard force and.....part of us was guards, part of us was firemen and everything else. We was known as firefighter policemen. But Dennis he was the younger one and boy he was a [unintelligible]. [laughter] Wasn't nothin' sacred to him. Warren was the oldest, he was more sensible. But he developed something, not sure what it was, but he never did get over it.

Chic Wann: Chief, when they started construction of Village One here, was the old furnaces still in operation?

Chief Martin: There was three of them. They had the coal and they ah.....Brucie May, He was the general superintendent there. Ralphie Mays father. Those furnaces operated for quite some time. The ore they produced was shipped to Birmingham, the pig iron and stuff. That's where all the slag came from. The roads around here, you never seen such slag pits on the banks on the Tennessee River. And when they pulled one of those pots to empty it, it would illuminate Sheffield. Red fire, from Tuscomb to Florence. You could see it. They operated for a long time on what was called Furnace Hill.

Chic Wann: Well they finally got rid of the furnaces and then, the old.....I guess the shacks or the houses where the workers.....they got in bad shape.....they tore them down and put up a housing project there. Sure did improve the looks of it.

Chief Martin: Yeah, of course Furnace Hill did used to be the disgrace of the Tri-Cities.

Chic Wann: Chief, have you seen the copy of the neat book that the Friends of the Sheffield Library put out for the centennial this year. You know this is there 100th birthday this year.

Chief Martin: No, I haven't.

Chic Wann: They got a lot of those old pictures in there that you would really enjoy seeing. I have a copy. I'll bring it by here so you can see it.

Chief Martin: Well good. I've been reading about it in the paper. Of Course I can't read too much as it's hard to see without my magnifying glass. With my magnifying glass I can't reach. [Joking] not my eye.....

Chic Wann: I understand that! [laughing]

Chief Martin:but the glass [laughing]

Chief Martin.: Of course, my arm has gotten too short. [laughing]

Chic Wann: Too short! [laughing]

Chief Martin: To go on about back when they were shutting everything down. Alabama Power Co. The representative of the Tri-Cities at that time was a fellow by the name of Jackson. A very fine fellow, and he lived out here in The Village. He was the General Manager, and the dam was operating then, and of course not very much. They was paying 3 cents a kilowatt for power, and also the large steam plant by the river, turn around and sell it to the people of the Quad-Cities for 10 cents. So corporate T.V.A came in and bought up all the lines and everything and operated the steam plant for a while but it was unpopular so they just tore it down so.....

The Village out here. There was 11 families that lived here until T.V.A. took it over. They had it spaced so there was so many houses you were responsible for.

Chic Wann: For fire and vandalism.

Chief Martin: Getting back to Major Poyet though, he lived in 114, [106 now] the big house up there and he had three daughters, Garnett, Evangeline, and Isabelle. Evangeline, she was a full Colonel in the nurses corps. Isabelle married Bill Mead, Morris Meads brother, and he died of something, don't remember what it was and she married a Coastguard and left. Garnett, she married a newspaper man from Nashville.

When Major Poyet and his wife.....when he retired, they went to San Francisco.....and he died out there.....

Chic Wann:Well I didn't know what ever happened to the man. You know how people like that get away.

Chief Martin: He was a fine man.

Chic Wann: He always seemed like one. We had some fun times.

Chief Martin: Of course he had a terrible job, you know.....when a Warrant Officer relieves a full Colonel.....and he sold everything.....he, I mean....he sold everything. You remember all the old houses and barracks they had out at plant number two? [tape cuts off]

Chic Wann: We finished side A on the tape. Chief Martin was becoming fatigued. At this time he was real old, and I regret very much that we did not get to finish the tape at all. Chief Martin had his niece down at his house taking care of him until her death. Then Chief went into a nursing home where he finally passed away. Chief Martin was some character himself. He had got some of his army officers mixed up. He jumped Poyet from Warrant Officer to Lt. Colonel to Colonel and then back again to Warrant Officer, but I thought that he being as old as he was at the time his memory was remarkable. I have talked to some of the citizens of Sheffield and they pretty well were of the same opinion that Chief Martin was about the construction of this Village.

Later on, when T.V.A came in here they opened up a school for the children out here. In Village One Burns Bus lines in Sheffield ran buses from Wilson Dam which was Village 3, out on which is now known as Wilson Reservation. The bus came through there, picked up a bunch of kids and hauled them up over here to Village one for school. Then in the afternoon they would deliver them back to Village Two and Village Three. I remember they had a teacher over here in the Village School which is now known as Brewster School, named after Mr. Claud Brewster who was superintendent of schools for a long time. The kids.....it was sort of an experimental thing.....you had rest periods and all that sort of stuff during the day. Of course, we got out there in the fields to play ball. Ray Black was one of the principals out here, and later on, one of the principals at Sheffield High School. Then I think Mr. Black went back to school in Birmingham and got his PHD in education. Later on, he died in Birmingham but he was fortunate enough at one time to come back to one of the Sheffield High reunions. He seemed to enjoy that very much.

I remember very distinctly the time Sheffield High School burned. It was on Atlanta Avenue. The typing teacher was a lady by the name of Ms. Martin. She stood out on a very narrow ledge and some of the students went into the typing classroom and were passing those typewriters out to her and she was passing them down to someone else. It looked like she might fall out off that ledge at any moment. She was a feisty little thing anyway and she was going to get her typewriters out of there. I remember everybody had brothers and sisters in there and they were running around trying to find each other. It was quite a deal.

Chief Martin was talking about the streetcar running out here. The track went up just about where Sheffield High School is now, then came on down to what we called the junction. Then across the old bridge into Florence on down into East Florence. Now you wouldn't know it at all because they come in through East Florence with a new highway and quite a lot of new construction work.

This is about all I can bring to you at this time.....so we'll make a few of these tapes and give them to people who'd like to have it.

So this is Chic Wann, bidding you goodnight.

Note: As Col. Wann mentioned, Chief Martin was "getting fatigued" and "was really old" at the time of the recording. Anyone using this transcription for family or historical research should be aware. I made great effort to transcribe recording verbatim and only put notes or corrections, in brackets, where I had solid evidence to do so. The same caution should be applied to my spelling of some names (people and places).

GH

