



Mattie and James Banks Sr.

Banks family photo

work for,” Banks’ widow, Mattie, says. “James was a butler and he’d serve food and stuff like that. He set up the tables, washed dishes and helped take care of Mr. Reynolds any way he could.”

Banks never strayed far from Sapelo, except for a few occasions on trips with Reynolds, who took him to places like Palm Beach and the Reynolds family estate in Winston-Salem, N.C.

As Reynolds was slowly dying and under orders not to drink or smoke, he’d entice Banks and other employees to slip him cigarettes and alcohol, Patrick Reynolds says. The effects of the disease were irreversible, and they saw no harm in complying with the dying man’s wishes.

Banks, also, may have participated in an event buried deep in island lore. Dick Reynolds stashed sacks of gold coins at various points on the island, Patrick Reynolds says, and later dug up the gold and took it to Europe aboard a freighter. But the younger Reynolds thinks some of the gold may have been left behind. His father, after all, had promised to take care of his employees once he was gone.

That’s news to Mattie Banks. “I don’t know anything about that,” she says.

Mattie Banks continues to live the simple Sapelo Island life she has always known. No amount of gold could convince her to move.

“I’ve never thought about leaving,” she says. “I just like the peace and quiet. There’s not a whole lot of people and I just love the environment.”

Time goes by on the island, as it always has and always will.

“I have a lot to fill my day,” she says, “reading, taking care of my house and my yard, going to church. I only go off-island when I have to or to visit my family.”

Patrick Reynolds lives in Los Angeles. He tried his hand at acting, but now, ironically, heads up an anti-smoking organization. His father’s name still rings loudly on Sapelo and in McIntosh County.

“R.J. Reynolds did a lot for McIntosh

County,” Sullivan says. “He did some good stuff in a philanthropic way. He’s still highly regarded by the people of McIntosh County.”

His abiding legacy, perhaps, is that he opened up the island for research in the 1950s and provided funding. University of Georgia professor Eugene P. Odum wrote a paper, “The Ecology of a Salt Marsh,” based on observations he made on Sapelo. Odum’s paper is considered a catalyst for the modern ecology movement.

“Eugene Odum is regarded by the scientific community as the father of modern ecology,” Sullivan says. “I don’t think it would be a stretch at all to say that Sapelo, then, is the birthplace of modern ecology.”

Shannon Anthony left the island to find work, but she feels its pull like an outgoing tide.

“Probably, when I reach retirement age, I’ll go back,” she says, “to a place that’s away from the hustle and bustle of the mainland, to the peace, tranquility and love, where everybody knows each other and is one big family.”

And where her father rests easy under the mossy oaks, a part in the island’s rich history when a flamboyant millionaire cast a giant shadow for a brief but momentous time. ■

