

Year 1918 -- Tough for the County, Worse for Jim Brown's Family

By Ken Brown, the "Ozark Uncle"

Exercising his First Amendment rights, the 65-year-old Ozark Uncle has started writing in the third person. His email address, his family history site, and his whole presence on the Internet are all identified by that same handle--the Ozark Uncle [site list provided at the end of this article]. The Ozark Uncle has been publishing articles on sundry topics in this Journal for over twenty years under his full name, Kenneth W. Brown.

Now at least a couple of dozen articles later, the Ozark Uncle focuses primarily on his family history which includes these surnames: Brown, Morris, Hall, Honeycutt, Hartley, and Gunnels. This article here is about his grandparents, J.L. "Jim" and Amanda "Mel" Brown, whose farm was near the southeast corner of Benton Township south of Ava. Grandma Brown was a Morris and her mother was a Honeycutt. In their later years, the Ozark Uncle's grandparents were known locally as "Uncle Jim and Aunt Mel."

One goal for this article is to explain the presence of the Brown and Morris families in and around Ava in a tumultuous year, 1918. History tells us that 1918 was a year of world-wide war and an epidemic of influenza. Both had considerable affect on Douglas County. Adding to that misery for the Brown family was a total burn-out of their farm home in late July 1918.

In the following story below, the Ozark Uncle has coupled his knowledge of the county's history and that of his Brown family with an August 1, 1918, newspaper excerpt about the fire.

Pure family historians might frown upon

the following story about the burn-out as not being totally factual. While the story might be classified as historical fiction, the Ozark Uncle would suggest that it is about 80% factual and 20% fiction.

The Brown Burn-Out Story

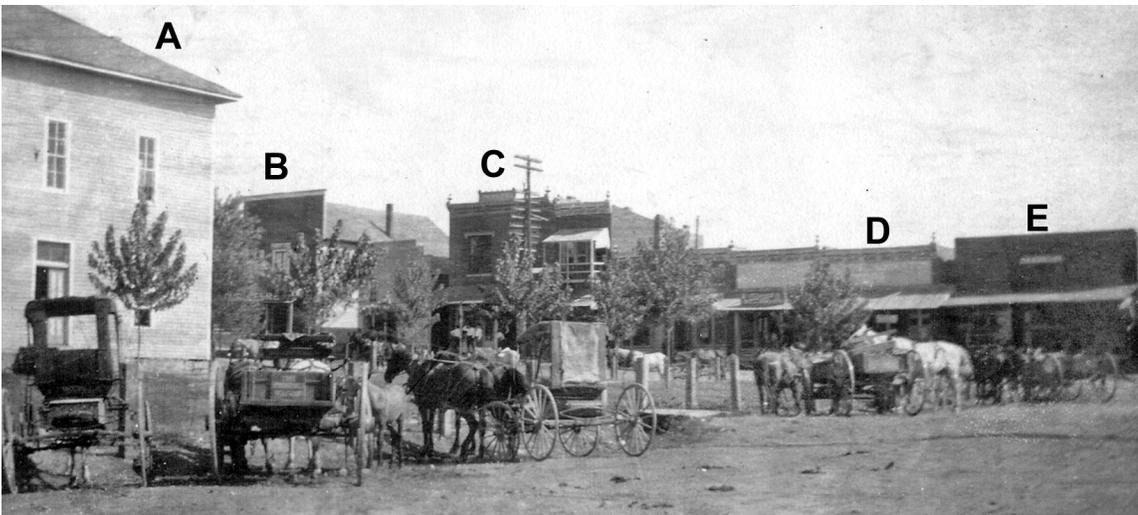
In 1918, 45-year-old James Lihu "Jim" and 41-year-old Amanda "Mel" Brown already had 11 children. At the time, five had reached adulthood, and the other six were at home, ranging from age fifteen down to age two. (Their twelfth child would not be born until 1919).

Well, early on Saturday morning, July 28, 1918, Grandpa Jim hitched up his team of mules to the wagon and headed up the dirt farm roads into Ava, four miles to the north. (It would be another 15 years later during the Great Depression that Federally funded road crews came down through his community. The crews would carve out the original Mo. Highway 5 to Gainesville, many miles of which still exist today).



James L. Brown Family -- ca 1921.

Back row: Everett, Jesse, Rosa (Davis), Sherman, Bess (Snook), Louis "Doc" and Bertha (Davis); Front Row: Orville "Jake" Brown, Charles "Woody", James L. Brown, Amanda "Mel" (Morris) Brown with Leroy (born late 1919) on her lap, and Lulu (Shrum). All of the Brown children were present in this photo except Vernie who died in 1918. Note: this is one of only two known photos of James L. "Jim" Brown. The other photo of him is included in the John W. Morris article elsewhere in this Journal.



While the above photo of the Ava square's south side was taken in 1908, it would have looked almost the same in 1918 except that the young trees around the courthouse would have been near maturity in 1918, and some electric lines would be added to the telephone lines shown in the picture. Legend for 1918: (A) Courthouse, (B) Drug Store, (C) W. F. Morris's furniture store, (D) T.W. Morris's store, and (E) the Peoples Bank.

That Saturday morning, Grandpa took along two of his sons--15-year-old Everett, and 13-year-old Vernia "Vernie." The other children were left with their ailing mother and a neighbor lady who was helping out that day. Except for getting some tonic medicine for Grandma Mel, Grandpa Jim was going mostly to visit with his many friends and relatives in town.

Grandpa was personable and had the gift of gab; with his handlebar mustache and his pipe, Grandpa Jim was quite amiable and open to discussions about any topic. (Previewing this article, cousin Cinita Davis Brown recalled: "...his face oozed kindness and goodness especially expressed through his smile which covered his entire face.")

Unlike some of his brothers and brothers-in-law who were merchants and store keepers, Grandpa Jim remained a farmer all his life. Some remember him as a wise and compassionate man who would do whatever he could for his fellow man.

On that Saturday morning, Grandpa Jim would not be picking up his mail in Ava. You see, three years earlier Frank Smith had opened up a post office at Hest just southwest of Grandpa's 170-acre farm. Also, what little farming supplies Grandpa needed would be purchased from his brothers, Ike and Louis Brown, both storekeepers down at Squires at that time.

John Squire who founded Squires had married the Grandpa Jim's older sister, Frankie. Both Ike and Louis worked for John starting in their younger years, learned the business and remained store keepers for the

rest of their lives.

Grandpa Jim's early start was partially because another hot day was expected. Because of the heat, Jim would take his mule team through the square where his boys would jump off the wagon to start their rounds, and then he exited at the north-east corner toward the Ava Mill. He crossed over Prairie Creek and hitched his team under some trees along the northern banks of the spring-fed stream.

Having secured his team down north of the creek, Grandpa Jim made his way back up the hill toward the square. He said hello to the people at the mill, and crossed the street so he could go by the new M.C. Reynolds building. In 1918 it housed Crumley's Garage, opened up by Alex Crumley and his son, Claude, earlier in the year. (From somewhere in the 1930s up into the 1950s, this building served as the town's skating rink).

Grandpa Jim peered into Crumley's dimly lit service area but had to rush to get out of the way of a noisy Chevrolet sputtering toward the entrance for some repair). Unlike Grandpa Jim, his oldest son, Sherman was all enthused about this new form of transportation. At the time, Sherman was busy trying to start a Democrat newspaper in Gainesville. He wanted his dad to buy one of these new contraptions, but Grandpa Jim put his extra money in Liberty Bonds being sold in 1918 for the war effort. (Notes on Uncle Sherman—he would later become the Ford dealer at Humansville in the late 1920s. Also Sherman's son, Charlie Brown, would become U.S. Congressman for southwest Missouri in the mid 1950s—the last Democrat to hold the seat).

Grandpa Jim thought, "Can't forget Mel's *Cardui*." Recently, Grandma Mel had switched to *Cardui Patent Medicine* from *Lydia E. Pinkham Vegetable Compound*. She said *Cardui* made her feel much better--perhaps because it was 38 percent alcohol compared to only 18 percent in *Lydia E. Pinkham*.

The drugstore where Grandpa Jim would get the *Cardui* tonic was on the south side of the square just east of the second hand furniture store operated by Jim's brother-in-law, W.F. "Bill" Morris. Three stores further west on the square's south side, another brother-in-law, T.W. Morris, had a dry goods

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store next to the Peoples Bank. (See photo)

To get to the south side of the square, Grandpa Jim crossed over to the courthouse yard and walked under the almost mature shade trees that circled the courthouse. He knew all the men sitting on their haunches under each tree—and he stopped more than once to squat down to visit a little.

Jim hadn't made it totally across the court yard when he heard his name--"Jim! Jim!" It was being yelled out from the direction of Bill Morris's store. Bill Morris rushed across the street--"Jim, just got a phone call--your house is on fire! You gotta git home. I'll find your boys and keep them with me. Get goin'."

Jim turned and was about to run for his team down by the creek when one of those new autos tooted its horn behind him, and Alex himself from Crumley's Garage hollered, "Git in, Jim! I'll get you there." Jim had only been in one of these new fangled things a couple of times and didn't especially like them, but off they went on the dusty and bumpy dirt roads toward the Brown place.

Jim thought, "I'm glad Vernie is still in Ava with Bill." He knew that even though almost 13 years old, Vernie was a weak and sickly child, and the excitement wouldn't be good for him.

When Grandpa Jim got home, his house, grain bin and smokehouse were a total loss but his family was safe. Louis "Doc" (age 9), Orville "Jake" (age 8), Lulu (age 6), and Charles "Woody" (age 2) would witness the whole tragedy. Reportedly the 300 bushels of oats in the granary and the 100 pounds of smoked and cured beef and pork in the smokehouse were all destroyed. Everything in the house was destroyed except for a sewing machine and some quilts.

A few years before her death in 2006, the Ozark Uncle's Aunt Lulu (who married Bruce Shrum, a Baptist minister) still could recall the fire in vivid detail. She told about standing up on the hill holding her two-year old brother's hand, and "...watched her world go up in flames."

Aunt Lulu also recalled that there was an old house down in the valley on their farm that they called the Barrows Place. The family moved in there until a new house could be built on the site of the burned house. Jim and Mel's 12th child, Leroy, was the first baby born in the new house (1919). The Ozark Uncle, Kenneth Brown, may have been the last baby born in that house (1945). The house was replaced with a new structure in the 1950s.

Here's a flash forward in time from that Saturday in 1918 for all the characters in the above story:

- **J.L. "Jim" Brown** continued to farm until being thrown from the back of a milk truck and killed in 1935 at the age of 61. Ironically, Jim was hitching a ride to go home. The truck missed a curve just south of town on the new road and turned over.
- **Vernie Brown** would reach his 13th birthday in August 1918 but die in November 1918 of the flu epidemic. In later years, Uncle Everett recounted that little Vernie had a bed made in the front room, and was very sick. He raised up, turned over his pillow, laid back down and life left his body. The whole family had the flu but Vernie's frail body was the one that could not overcome it.
- **Everett, Louis "Doc", Charles "Woody", and Leroy** all graduated from Ava High School before moving to the Tulsa-Bartlesville area in Oklahoma and becoming merchants and car dealers.
- **W.F. "Bill" Morris** would continue to operate a second-hand furniture business on the south side of the square until the early 1930s, and he continued to live in Ava thereafter before dying at his southside Ava home in 1947. Many readers will remember W.F.'s daughter, Jessie, who married Lawrence Croslin, and they operated the Croslin Dairy in Ava for many years.
- **T.W. Morris** and his family would move to Sallisaw, OK in 1919 only to return for a year or two before relocating again and eventually settling in Oklahoma for good. He died in 1948 in Oklahoma.
- **Orville "Jake" Brown** married Kiree Hartley in 1932; like his Dad, Jake was a farmer, and he took over the family farm after his dad died. However, failing health forced him to give up farming for a second-hand furniture store in Ava before dying of TB in 1949 at the age of 39.
- **Lulu Brown** would attend Southwest Baptist College where she met a ministerial student, Bruce Shrum. They were married and spent their lives ministering at Baptist churches and teaching in schools in Missouri and several western states.
- **The Crumley Garage** would operate only until May 1919 when it was bought by Henry S. Wilson and M.C. Reynolds and turned into the Ford dealership.

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