

## Mahan Photos Reveal:

# The Secrets of “Owl’s Cove”



Whenever the topic of the old Kroell house came up in conversation with Montevallo Historical Society Founding Director Dr. Mike Mahan, he never failed to mention that he had made a considerable number of “color slides” of its interior just before it was torn down in 1967.

Over a weekend in January that year, the elegant gingerbread-laden showplace that had loomed over Main Street in downtown Montevallo for nearly 70 years was open for public inspection during an estate sale.

Mike, with the help of his father, “Red” Mahan and his friend and colleague at the Alabama College News Bureau, Steve Huffstutler, took advantage of the opportunity to not only get inside what had been the legendary impenetrable inner sanctum of the reclusive Kroell sisters, but also to make a detailed photographic documentation of what they found there.

To their great surprise they discovered that the house, in spite of a layer of dust covering everything, had been left essentially as it was when the last Kroell to live there, sister Mary Kroell Creagh, died in 1965.

A few years back, Mike had worked as the official campus photographer at Alabama College, and developed the professional skills for an ambitious project such as this. The dark and dreary rooms of the Kroell house were a particular challenge so it was fortunate that Mike had his buddy Steve helping as his lighting technician.

Their efforts that day produced a small portfolio of 35mm color Kodachrome slides that make up a stunning visual record of this important piece of Montevallo history. Until now, any sense of how the house looked on the inside had been left to the vagaries of memory and personal anecdote.

We are happy to report that Dr. Mahan preserved and stored the Kroell slides among thousands of others he had made or collected throughout his life.

When he died in 2018 and the Mahans’ Brierfield home, Montebrier, was put up for sale by the family, the slide collection and other memorabilia were entrusted for storage to Mike’s cousin, Len



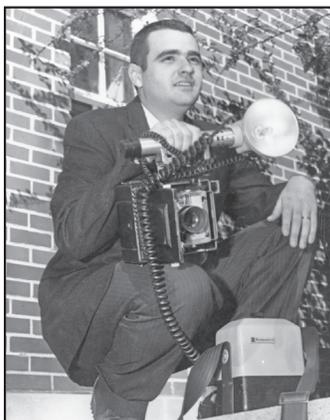
**Discovered in 2021, a treasure trove of color photographs has come to light that shows the magnificent rooms and furnishings of George Kroell’s circa 1900 Victorian mansion as they looked just before being dismantled and carted away to Birmingham for re-use in 1967.**

Lacey, who had space for it all at the building he works from on highway 139 nearby.

A couple of years after his death, Mike’s close friend and MHS director, Marty Everse, made a “quick trip” through the boxes left in Len’s care and pulled the ones that contained slides that might possibly be important to Montevallo’s history. Marty was well aware that there was a good chance of finding the legendary Kroell slides and remained hopeful that they would surface as he methodically made his way through them all.

In the fall of 2021, while inspecting the slide collection, Marty was greatly relieved to finally locate and identify Mike’s photographic record of “Owl’s Cove,” as the Kroell house has come to be known locally.

Thankfully, today’s digital technology provides us with not only an improved method for preserving the slides but also a way to bring fascinating detail out of the shadows, revealing heretofore hidden clues and secrets from the past.



**Before he enrolled in dental school, Montevallo native Mike Mahan spent several years working as a photographer for Ralph Sears at the Alabama College News Bureau.**

# President's Letter

Dear Friends,

As we enter the new year filled with the joy and uplift of the holiday season, I want to thank our MHS family and friends for enhancing the Christmas joy felt by the board of directors from your many expressions of kindness during the holidays and throughout the year. Our thoughts and warm wishes extend to all of you.

We greatly appreciate your enthusiastic response to our end-of-the-year membership renewal effort for 2022 and your desire to continue our shared bond with Montevallo. I am especially gratified by the fact that 32 active 2021 members renewed for 2022 at the Patron level (\$100) as well as the six members renewing at the Jesse Wilson Society level (\$250).

You may not realize the important part that you played in 2021. Because of the generosity of our members, MHS was able to meet its vital expenses and at the same time live up to our mission to discover and share information about our community's history.

We had several personal requests for historical information recently. Founding director and vice-president Clay Nordan reported that inquiries were made about the McCoonaughy/Warnke house on Vine Street and Monk's Variety (the old Hick's/Elliott's Ben Franklin 5 & Dime) on Main Street. He had plenty of information in his personal archives and from his Throwback Thursday series research to satisfy those and other requests.

I'd like to encourage you – our members, and anyone else with a need for specific historical information, to contact us at the society's email address ([montevallo1817@gmail.com](mailto:montevallo1817@gmail.com)). We will do our best to put togeth-

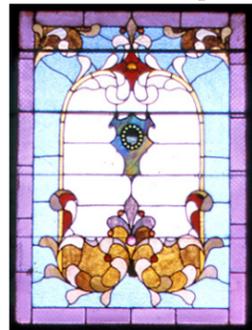
er whatever information, clippings, or photos we can find to help you learn more about your area of interest or concern.

Though we missed having the opportunity to meet with you in person this last year, your board of directors continued to gather and discuss issues of importance to our society. I would like to especially thank city councilwoman Martha Ann Eisenberg for generously allowing us to conduct an informal, outdoor meeting during the Fall at her home.

Special thanks also go out to founding directors Sherry Vallides and John McCulley for their tireless research efforts on our behalf. I am also grateful to member Marshel Roy Cunningham for representing MHS with his local history contributions to "Chamber Chatter," the Montevallo Chamber of Commerce's monthly publication.

And we are truly indebted to founding directors Marty Everse and Clay Nordan for their efforts in showcasing in this issue of the *Montevallo Historical Times*, for the first time, Dr. Mike Mahan's stunning 1967 color photographs of the interior rooms and original furnishings of the historic George Kroell house (circa 1900), known locally as "Owl's Cove."

The beginning of this year represents an opportunity for growth and renewal. We hope that circumstances will allow us to see you all again in person some time soon. Until then, I hope each of you will visit our MHS website [www.historicmontevallo.org](http://www.historicmontevallo.org) to follow the latest we have to offer of historic Montevallo.



Stained glass panel from Owl's Cove front door.

*Susan*

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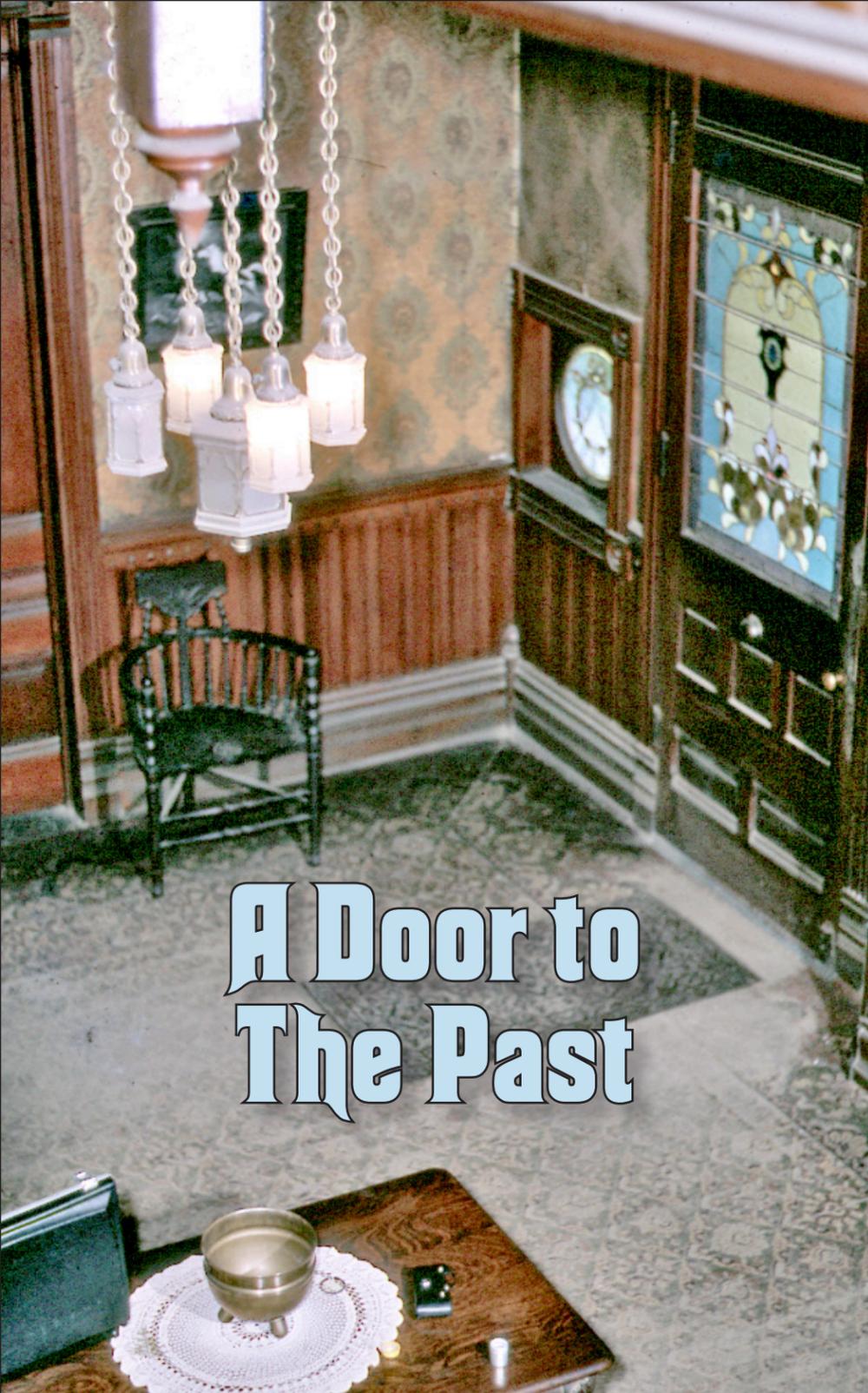
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## A Door to The Past



Mike Mahan's photograph of the ornate staircase and entrance hall that greeted visitors as they came in the front door also reveals an unusual carved owl figurine seemingly perched over the entrance to the "ALCOVE" located in the turret just off the staircase landing. It doesn't take too much analysis to conclude that the familiar "Owl's Cove" nickname for the house must have been prompted one way or another by the sentry-like presence of the wooden owl and this clever play on words.



Montevillo has many places of beauty, wonder and intrigue, but perhaps the only one that possesses all three is the old Kroell home.

Located in the center of town, it adds a touch of cloistered mystery to Main Street. It is the subject of many questions from college students, visitors, and young Montevillo citizens. George Kroell, an

Austrian immigrant, and his Irish wife moved into their new home on June 7, 1900. Built by a German contractor, the house follows the "Old Austrian" tradition.

Round, stained glass windows decorate either side of the front door. Several gables crown the two-story roof. The small-windowed cupola on the southeast corner entralls all viewers.

Virgin forests near Stanton and Selma furnished the

timbers for the house. All the woodwork is stained mahogany and the ceilings of twelve-foot-high rooms are inlaid in grooved paneling, set in patterns of squares.

Original decorations by Loveman's permeate the rooms with a shroud of proud antiquity. Carpeting, draperies, and wallpaper above the wainscoting are the initial installations. Filled bookcases line the front wall.

A graceful staircase ascends to second-story bed-

rooms. An *alcove* off the parlor gave semi-seclusion for couples occupying the "love seat."

Many of the rooms are now locked and unused, but blackened fireplaces and huge high-postered beds attest to the fact that a happy family once filled the house.

*Annette Burke, Carol Logan*

Reprinted from the March 22, 1963 issue of SPOTLIGHT, the Montevillo High School student newspaper.

MORE KROELL HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHY →



## Montevallo Landmark to be Victim of Progress

From the Shelby County Reporter • January 5, 1967

One of downtown Montevallo's landmarks will be torn down soon to make way for progress.

It is the George Kroell home, located on the main street in the heart of downtown Montevallo, built around 1896 by one of the town's most enterprising citizens.

Kroell operated a general store, built the St. George Hotel, and made a fortune in the mining business, according to oldtimers around Montevallo.

When he got the new two-storied home completed, he is said to have bought new furniture and accessories to match the excellent example of Victorian period architecture of the building.

The fancy woodwork, called gingerbread by today's artists, was ornate both inside and out. Hand carved items and stained glass windows remain with the old house.

After the death of Mr. and Mrs. Kroell, the home was occupied by their two daughters for many years. They were considered a part of the old home by residents and visitors to Montevallo.

The Victorian furniture was never changed, and the only thing that changed the building was time. The sisters were up early in the morning sweeping the walk to the street, 25 feet away, as regularly as the sun rose, neighbors said. They always wore dresses to match the house and furniture and stayed close to home.

After the death of her sister, Miss Kate Kroell lived in the old house alone until she died in 1964.

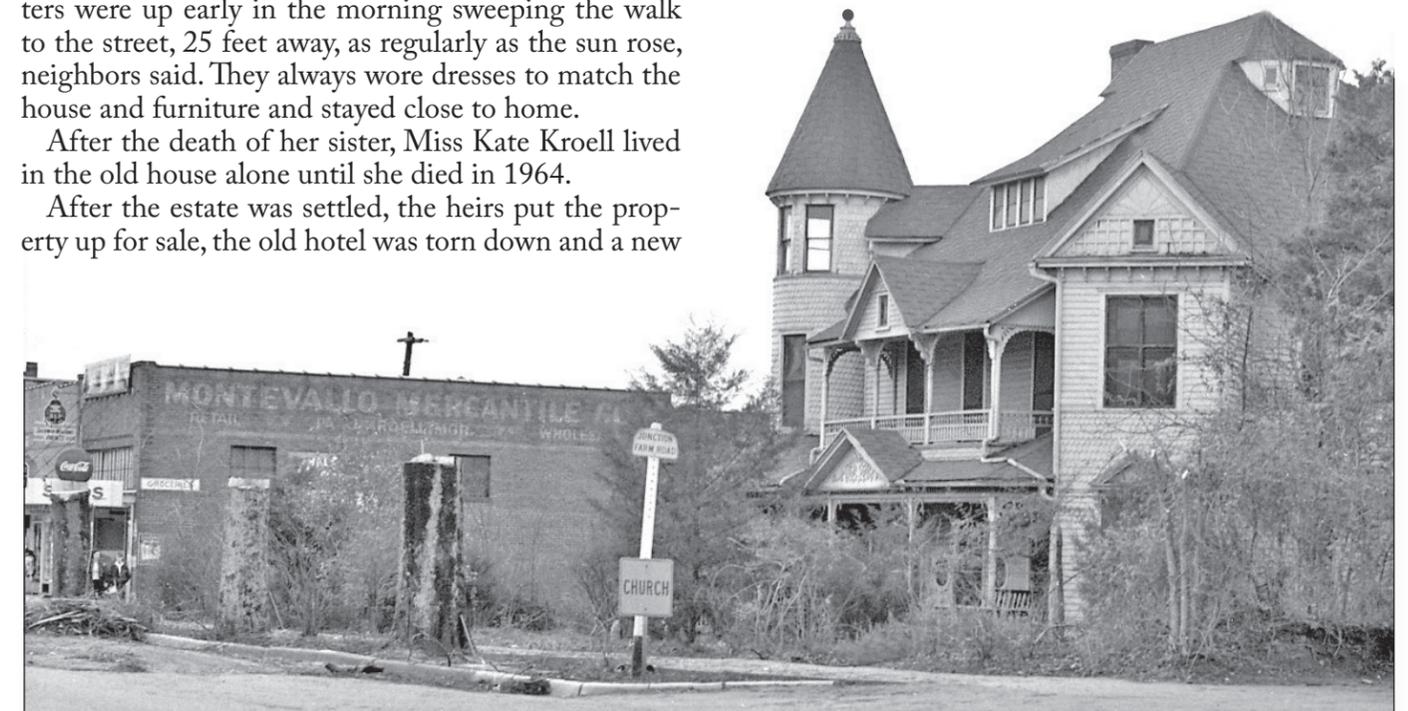
After the estate was settled, the heirs put the property up for sale, the old hotel was torn down and a new



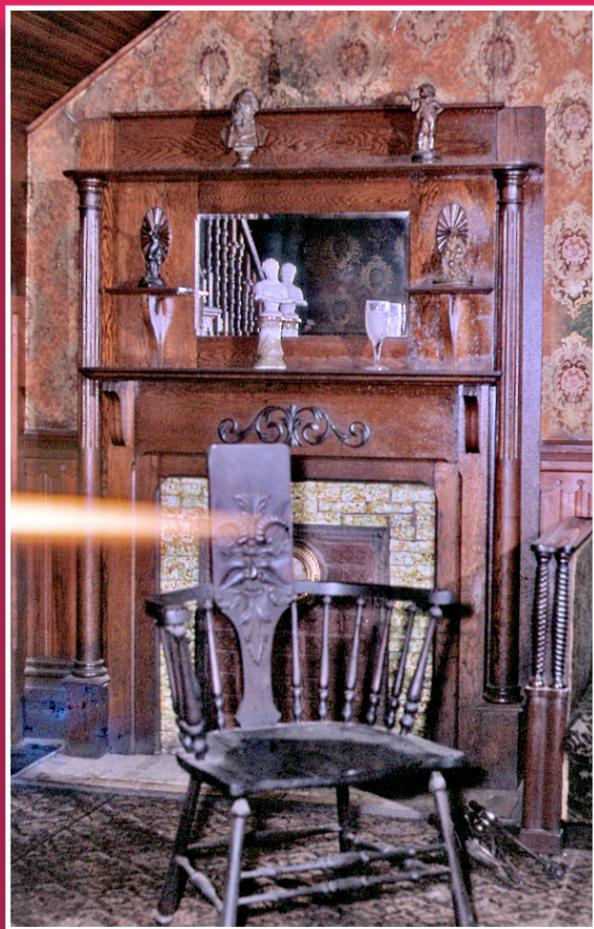
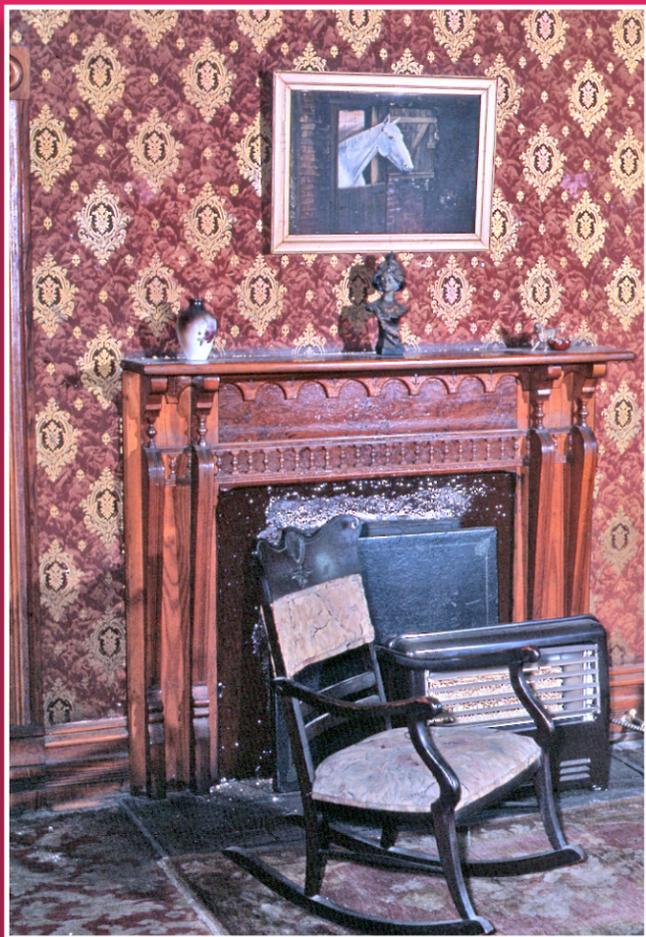
**LANDMARK DOOMED** – the old George Kroell home, described as one of the finest remaining examples of Victorian Period architecture will be torn down during the first days of 1967. It stands a few feet off the main street of Montevallo and is the last reminder of the splendor prevalent in that city around the turn of the century. "Gingerbread," stained glass and other valued articles from the house will be used in the new home of Atty. and Mrs. Stuart Leach of Birmingham.

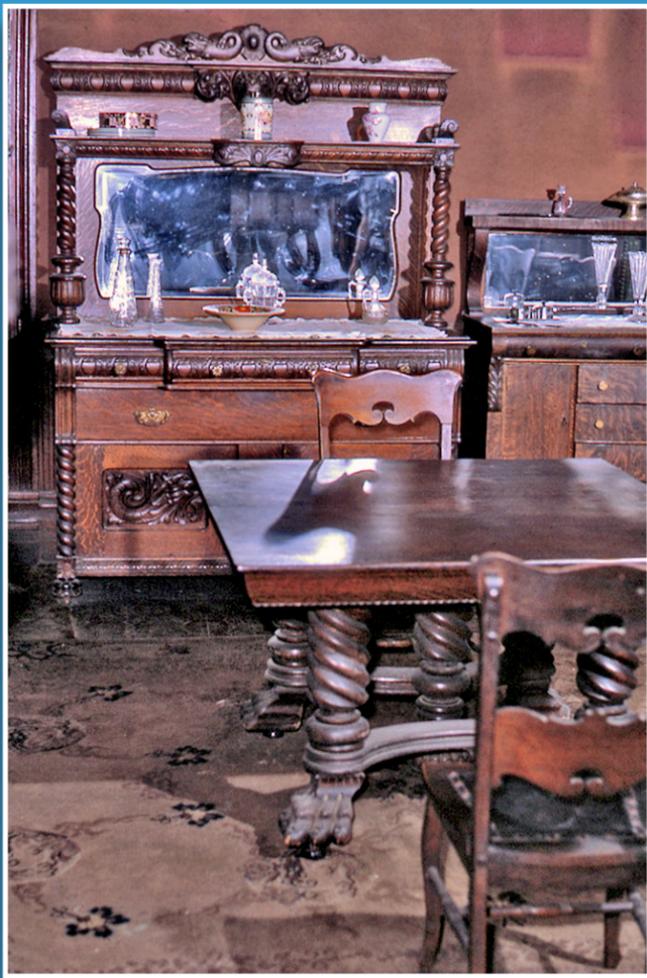
bank building is going up where it stood.

The old house has been sold to Birmingham attorney Stuart Leach who plans to remove the fancy woodwork, stained glass and other items to use on a new home. The house will be torn down and replaced by a commercial building, according to Realtor Victor Scott who has handled the sale.



Following the death of George Kroell in 1925 and the sale of his building and business in 1932, his son and business partner, Pat Kroell, built the Montevallo Mercantile Co. building on the lot next door to the house and ran his own business there until it was sold in 1936.







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**B**y the 1890's George Kroell's general mercantile business was thriving along with a lucrative livery stable that included a "pre-automobile era" horse-drawn public transportation service.

His "department store" was a large brick building on Main Street located where the Subway is today. The livery stable was next door on the corner of Main and East Boundary streets.

In 1897, Mr. Kroell built the St. George Hotel across the street from his business and where Trustmark is today.

Mr. Kroell, a devout Catholic, named the hotel after St. George, who was tortured for his faith and died on April 23, 303 A.D. He was canonized in 494 A.D., so April 23 then became the "feast day" of St. George every year thereafter. When Mr. Kroell came into the world on April 23, 1843 in his native Austria, his parents recognized his birthday was on the feast day of St. George and named their son after the martyred church hero.



# THE PASSING OF A PIONEER

From the Birmingham News  
March 12, 1925

To the Editor, *The Birmingham News*:

On Tuesday, March 3, Montevallo lost one of her most beloved citizens in the passing away of Mr. George Kroell. For fifty years he had lived in this community, carving a place for himself in the hearts and lives of the people, and now that he is gone his place will not be easily filled.

Mr. Kroell was born in the Austrian Tyrol and came to America in 1866 at the age of 23. After living for a short time in Maryland and Minnesota, he came to Aldrich, Ala. It was in Aldrich that he met and married Miss Mary Jennet, who came to Alabama from Ireland when a small child. Shortly after their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Kroell moved to Montevallo, where they lived and worked together until Mrs. Kroell's death in 1916.

Here Mr. Kroell (locally pro-



nounced Kah-rell) established a mercantile business, destined to become the leading business for many miles throughout the neighboring country. By his honesty and fairness, his sound business principles and his friendly personality, he made friends of his customers and earned for himself an irreproachable name in the business world.

His was a loyal nature, true to his God and true to his friends. His daily life was filled with acts of thoughtful kindness, charities of which the outside world knew little.

Although 82 years old at the time of his death, Mr. Kroell was seen daily in his store and on the streets of Montevallo, with a cheery word for everybody, and eager to take an active part in any civic movement. He was the oldest member of the Montevallo Exchange Club.

He is survived by a sister in Austria, two daughters, Miss Kate Kroell, of Montevallo, and Mrs. M. A. Creagh, of Mobile; one son, Mr. P. J. Kroell, of Montevallo, and 11 grandchildren.

The funeral services were conducted by Father Wilkinson, and the body was interred in the Montevallo cemetery.

*Mona M. Davies*  
Montevallo, March 8, 1925



Mary Jennet Kroell – 1915

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George Kroell – 1915

**Pictures** of her grandparents from an album of snapshots compiled by Dionetta Kroell, 1915. **Illustration** of Kroell house from "Good Morning Yesterday," a book of local history collected and compiled by the Local History Class at Thompson High School, Alabaster, AL – 1977. **Mona Davis** had a ladies clothing business in Montevallo in the 1920's following her husband's separation from Davies & Jeter Mercantile.



The Kroell family plot, located in one of the older sections of the Montevallo City Cemetery, presents striking examples of the ornate burial marker style often employed by well-to-do Southern families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



George and Mary Kroell's daughters, Kate and Mary, lived together at "Owl's Cove" until their own deaths in the 1960's. "The Kroell Sisters," as they were known around town had a reputation for being reclusive and inseparable when they were both still alive. In death, not only were they buried side-by-side, but the inscription, "SISTER" on both markers leaves no doubt to posterity about their sibling bond.

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