

## Feature

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### **Tommy Wright- a collector of historical memorabilia**

By Angie Heitman

A man walks into the Weakley County library carrying a gun and not one person appears alarmed. This is because this particular gun is an antique.

The man is gun collector Tommy Wright of Martin.

"Any gun made before 1899 is not considered a weapon. You can take it across state lines," Wright said, but stressed, "You don't want to walk in a bank with one." Wright, 61, is retired from Ferry Morris Seed Co. He has collected antique cars, antique coins, and his most recent focus is Civil War memorabilia, which he started collecting a few years ago.

"I think it's interesting. I like Weakley County memorabilia," he said.

His most prized piece is a Manhattan Revolver that once belonged to Capt. William Thomas Baldrige, a Weakley Countian who fought with the Company A, 31st Infantry during the Civil War.

The gun was passed down through the Baldrige and Wood families for more than 100 years. Wood was the maiden name of Baldrige's late wife, Susan A. Wood, also of Weakley County. Both Baldrige and his wife are buried in Wood Cemetery, just south of Martin.

The last family that had possession of the Baldrige gun was Mrs. Jean Wood Liming of Martin. Mrs. Liming sold the gun to Wright in August 2004. He has kept the gun exactly as it was.

"I like guns in original condition. I don't like them if they are restored," Wright said. "If they are damaged, I want them to stay damaged."

The fact that Wright knows the history of this gun also makes it more valuable.

"If you don't have the knowledge of whose it was and who had it, you just have a piece of metal," Wright said. "You could have a baseball and say it was Babe Ruth's. Unless he signed it, it would be hearsay, and hearsay don't cut it in gun collecting."

He is proud of his historical find.

"It's just knowing that you have items people had 150 years ago and used to fight for our country," he said.

Wright has researched Captain William Thomas Baldrige and discovered historical documents about his life. The documents tell about what his life was like from childhood memories to post-war life.

Wright's love for researching and collecting runs in the family. His daughter, April Jones, of Weakley County, helps him find historical information on many of the items he finds. His wife, Marie, enjoys collecting antique dolls.

He and his family also enjoy attending Civil War re-enactments, and his favorite is performed at Shiloh.

"They really have a good one there," Wright said.

His focus is mostly on Civil War memorabilia because he is intrigued by the history of the war.

"Well, I just like everything about it. Tennessee fought more battles than any other state except Virginia during the Civil War."

Wright plans to continue collecting in the future. "I'm going to keep what I've got, but probably won't get much more because it's expensive and it's hard to find people that have it and want to turn loose of it. Yeah, if I can find them, it's really difficult to find," he said.

He travels to various Civil War shows and other gun shows across the state and looks for individuals wanting to sell civil war memorabilia.

"Two or three hundred miles in every direction, I go a lot," Wright said.

He has a definite passion for collecting, which has shown in the measures he has taken and continues to take to find items and information about them. Wright is now in search of any photos of Baldrige with this gun.

Part of what motivates Wright is the hope that there is a picture stored away in an attic somewhere just waiting to be found.

"She had no photos," he said. "If anyone has any photo with this man and his gun, I would love to have one."