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Of Myth and Moo: Huntsville's Lily Flagg

By
Whitney Snow

When Lily Flagg departed Huntsville, Alabama, for the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, locals wished her well, and most expected her to return home victorious. Known as the country's best butter producer, the bovine beauty had a legion of admirers, and while folklore says different, she did not win a prize at the fair and never saw Huntsville again. Dubbed "Queen of the Tennessee Valley," "Queen of the Jerseys," and "Wondercow," Lily Flagg became legend not merely in cattle records, but more importantly in Huntsville. Over time her name donned a community, roads, signs, businesses, and even beer. She became as much a part of Huntsville's history as its cotton mills, Redstone Arsenal, and the Space and Rocket Center. That she left a mark is obvious, but why Huntsville so embraced her is far less clear. Much of the Lily Flagg story is shrouded with myth, but facts show that such embellishments were unnecessary. Even without the folderol and pomp, Lily Flagg was truly one of a kind.

While sources differ as to the year of her birth, Lily Flagg, whose real name was Signal's Lily Flagg, was born in Frankfort, Kentucky, to parents Georgian, 6073 and Little Nan, 15895.¹²⁰ When still a calf, her owner W.J. Clunn sold her to W.E. Matthews, Milton Humes, and General Samuel Moore, affiliates of the Monte Sano Dairy in Huntsville, Alabama.¹²¹ Moore, who

¹²⁰ *The News* [Frederick, Maryland], September 4, 1892; and Mike Kaylor, "Belle of the Ball: Lily Flagg Festival keeps Jersey Queen Legend Alive," *Huntsville Times*, October 13, 1994.

¹²¹ *The Country Gentleman*, vol 57, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

managed the dairy and lived on site, knew this heifer was different from the start because when she reached milking age, she produced an unprecedented amount of rich milk, so much so that he and his cohorts decided to run an experiment.



Sketch of Lily Flagg. Courtesy of *The Huntsville Times*, October 23, 1992.

This test, which lasted from June 1, 1891, to June 1, 1892, was primarily conducted by herdsman L.C. Goodell who analyzed Lily Flagg's milk, cream, and butter. Her production of over 1,047 pounds of butter bested Bisson's Belle which had made 1,028 pounds and 15.6 ounces.¹²² Ironically, this announcement was made at the Monte Sano Dairy by Bisson's Belle's owner Valancey E. Fuller, an expert Jersey breeder, along with Hunter Nicholson of the *Jersey Bulletin*. Fuller had been hand selected by the American Jersey Cattle Club to oversee the last week of testing:

Day 1: 3 lbs., 1 oz.

¹²² *Alabama Jersey News* (Auburn, AL: Alabama Jersey Cattle Club, nd.), Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library; and "Lilly Flagg's Butter Test," *Mercury*, May 11, 1892.

Day 2: 3 lbs., 8 oz.
Day 3: 4 lbs., 0 oz.
Day 4: 3 lbs., 9.5 oz.
Day 5: 4 lbs., 10.75 oz.
Day 6: 3 lbs., 11 oz.
Day 7: 4 lbs., 9.75 oz.¹²³

When the results were proclaimed, a crowd of some 300 erupted in applause, and the *Jersey Bulletin* soon dubbed Lily Flagg “Queen of the Jerseys.”¹²⁴

Given the press results garnered, it is safe to say that most believed the remarkable totals. Take, for instance, the *Waterloo Daily Courier*: “It is a little curious that the South, where an idea obtained that Jerseys would not thrive, has produced the most remarkable Jersey butter cow in America, if not the world.”¹²⁵ Many, however, thought Lily Flagg too good to be true. Charles A. Morton, a skeptic in Fargo, North Dakota, wrote a letter to his local newspaper editor: “My Dear Sir—We never had much of a reputation for Jersey cows, but we supposed that when it came to a showdown, that we had the champion liar of the United States, but since reading the foregoing, we lie down, we yield the palm, we acknowledge ourselves not in it. We weep, yea, our tears are of the brine, briny, and are numerous enough to preserve the butter produced by Sam Moore’s cow.” The *Huntsville Mercury* reprinted it and retaliated as follows: “What Col. Chas. A. Morton needs is to leave that barren blizzard chilled waste and come to the Tennessee Valley, whose responsive soil under a genial Southern sun, with a mean temperature of sixty, not only produces the fleecy staple, the golden grain, waving grasses, and verdant clover, but is

¹²³ “Signal’s Lilly Flagg,” *Mercury*, July 13, 1892.

¹²⁴ “Some General Dairy Tests,” *Lincoln Semi Weekly Nebraska State Journal*, June 17, 1892.

¹²⁵ “A Great Cow,” *Waterloo Daily Courier*, September 20, 1892.

the home of the finest cattle on earth, and Lilly Flag is queen of them all”¹²⁶

To celebrate Lily Flagg’s achievement, Moore decided to throw a party in her honor. He bragged about winning the American Jersey Cattle Club silver cup and said that those in attendance would be able drink “Alabama mountain dew” out of it.¹²⁷ Over 1,500 engraved invitations were sent: “Mr. Samuel H. Moore

requests the pleasure of your company, Thursday evening, July the twenty-first, eighteen-hundred and ninety-two, from nine to three o’clock. Huntsville, Alabama, complimentary to Signal’s Lily Flagg, the Jersey cow of the



603 Adams Street, The Moore Home; Courtesy of the Huntsville Times, October 13, 1994

world. One year’s Moore Home.

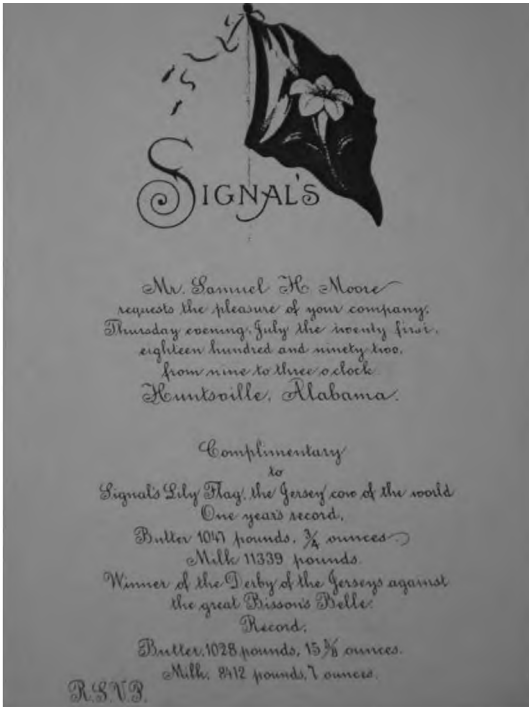
record, butter 1047

pounds, $\frac{3}{4}$ ounces, milk 11339 pounds. Winner of the Derby of the Jerseys against the great Bisson’s Belle.”¹²⁸ The venue for the event could not have been better.

¹²⁶ “Doubts Lily Flagg’s Achievement,” *Mercury*, July 20, 1892.

¹²⁷ “The Jersey Queen,” *Mercury* June 15, 1892.

¹²⁸ Doris Benefield Gilbreath, “Lily Flagg: The Belle of Huntsville,” *Alabama Life* (Winter 1980): 30-31.



Invitation Courtesy of the Huntsville, Madison County Public Library

Moore lived in an elegant mansion at 603 Adams Street. The house had been built by Robert Watkins in the 1850s. During the Civil War, it had been used as a base of operations by Union General John A. Logan. After the war, it was sold to Moore who immediately began making improvements like the installation of porcelain bathtubs. To prepare for Lily Flagg's party, Moore installed electric lights, painted

the house Jersey yellow, and arranged

for a slew of flower arrangements.

One of the largest gala events Huntsville had ever boasted, called "the doggonest, dad blamedest party that this part of the country has ever seen" by one in attendance, the gala took place on July 21, 1892.¹²⁹ Many bragged on the décor of brightly colored bouquets, the dance floor, and the food courtesy of Moore's cook Zenie Pruitt. One account read:

¹²⁹ Mary Coral Murphree, "Huntsville's Lily Flagg party Set," June 14, 1981; and Alvis Howard, Jr., "The Cow that was Queen of the Valley," in *The Huntsville Trial of Frank James, plus other colorful stories from Huntsville's Historic Past*, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

A lover of beautiful things, Gen. Moore's home was one of the showplaces of the South. The guests were struck with awe. As they filed past to see the prized little Jersey who stood silently among the splendor and pomp and in whose honor it had been given, the orchestra struck up, and the festivities began. Laughter and gaiety rang across the lonely countryside as courtly Southern gentlemen guided their fair ladies across the dance floor, colored servants rushed back and forth among the guests passing champagne and wine, which from all indications was the most consumed of all the refreshments. Gen. Moore, who was a bachelor, was to have imbibed quite a bit that night himself, and promenaded more than one Southern belle across the dance floor, to the delight of all. All that is, except Lily Flagg, who according to most reports, stood silently munching hay which had been amply provided, and who didn't even moo once during the whole party which lasted until dawn.¹³⁰

Indeed, the guest of honor was displayed in a stall in the yard and had a garland of roses around her neck. The *Mercury* reported that 500 had attended and that "Lily Flagg, the greatest of Jersey Queens," had "made Huntsville and herself famous."¹³¹

An overnight celebrity, Huntsville could not get enough of Lily Flagg. The American Dairy Association threw a party for Lily Flagg on Monte Sano Mountain. According to one source, Lily Flagg's milk was used to make the ice cream served with a special

¹³⁰ Untitled, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

¹³¹ "Lily Flagg Reception," *Mercury*, July 23, 1892.

dinner at the Huntsville Presbyterian Church.¹³² Someone with the initials W.D.S. even wrote a song about the bovine belle:

*Well may the people of Huntsville feel proud, of
this beautiful city, so richly endowed, proud of these
valleys, and green fertile hills, railroads, hotels,
and the 'new cotton mills'*

*Proud of the boundless, pure water supply and of
yon mountains whose tops kiss the sky, where sits
'Monte Sano' an emblem of wealth, resort of
renown, joy, comfort, and health.*

*Down from this steep, winds the quaint dummy
line over trestles through gorges in regular decline.
Scene wildly majestic, it rocks to and fro, till
reaching the broad level valley below.*

*The fame of this region, long known far and wide,
but never the country so published 'till now she
comes to the front with the champion milk cow.*

*Lily Flag! Not as a royal banner unfurled, whose
record is known, throughout the wide world.*

*Though strange it may seem, by the break of the
scale brings matchless renown through a simple
milk pail.¹³³*

The songwriter hints that Huntsville may have longed to be known for its natural beauty, but that in a bizarre twist of fate, a cow had become its claim to fame. Huntsville citizens expected this recognition to continue after Lily Flagg competed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

The fair proved largely anticlimactic for Lily Flagg supporters. Granted, her fame had preceded her, and many flocked to see the

¹³² D.S. Loyd to T.C. Reid, December 5, 1950, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

¹³³ "Lily Flag," *Mercury*, July 8, 1892.

world class cow. One story has it that this notoriety worked against her for partly due to her renown, she was not allowed to compete.¹³⁴ Another has it that her caretaker, naively hoping she would produce more, failed to milk her for several days. This resulted in her developing “milk fever.” The *Book of the Fair, World’s Columbian Exposition, 1893* stated, “Thus it was that Jersey milch cow, Signal’s Lily Flag, valued at \$15,000, and considered the queen of her race, was not permitted to enter the lists, for though with a record of more than 1,000 pounds of butter a year, at her preliminary trial she failed to meet the expectations of her admirers.”¹³⁵ Even so, Lily Flagg was still rated a prize Jersey and made national headlines. In reference to her, the *Ohio Democrat* exclaimed, “We’ll all rally around that Flagg—long may she wave.”¹³⁶ As predicted, Lily Flagg continued to wow but not in Huntsville.

Lily Flagg never returned to Alabama. She was bought by C.I. Hood, owner of Hood’s Sarsaparilla and Hood Farm in Lowell, Massachusetts, for about \$10,000.¹³⁷ Eager to add to his herd, he had set about buying several World’s Fair winners like Brown Bessie and Merry Maiden. Even though she won no prize, Lily Flagg likely appealed to him because of her renown as the world’s top butter producer. In fact, the *Boston Daily Globe* noted that among his collection, his two favorites were Merry Maiden and

¹³⁴ “A Famous Farm,” n.d., Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

¹³⁵ *Book of the Fair, World’s Columbian Exposition, 1893*, p. 396, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.

¹³⁶ Untitled, *Ohio Democrat*, June 8, 1893.

¹³⁷ A Famous Farm, n.d., Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library; “Signal’s Lily Flagg,” *Daily Kennebec Journal*, August 20, 1896; and J.E. Dodge, A Barn Full of Jersey History, *The Jersey Bulletin and Dairy World* 36, no. 2.

Lily Flagg.¹³⁸ After her purchase by Hood, Huntsville lost track of Lily Flagg.

Some Huntsville locals imagined that Lily Flagg died shortly after being purchased by Hood.¹³⁹ In reality, she lived a good many years, long enough to drop several calves like Signella M. and Jennie Fordyce, both of which achieved impressive butter records.¹⁴⁰ One man who happened to see her at Hood Farm described Lily Flagg as follows:

*This cow has proved herself to be one of the
greatest dairy
Cows living, and at the same time she captivates the
eye by
Her wonderful beauty of form. She has the general
wedge
Shape of body, the round barrel, the loose, soft skin
and
Golden color, the clean-cut head and waxy horns,
and,
Above all, perhaps a wonderful development of
udder—
Not so remarkable in size as it is in splendid shape,
Particularly in the forepart of the udder, in
distinction
To the pinched appearance so often seen in that
part.*

¹³⁸ Mr. C.I. Hood's Jersey Herd," *Boston Daily Globe*, September 17, 1894.

¹³⁹ D.S. Loyd to T.C. Reid, December 5, 1950.

¹⁴⁰ C.I. Hood, Catalogue of Hood Farm, Lowell, Massachusetts, 1896,
https://archive.org/stream/catalogueofhoodf00hood/catalogueofhoodf00hood_djvu.txt

*Her teats are large and finely placed, and in general
There is the look of the almost perfect cow about her.*¹⁴¹



Mrs. Hinds Porter and Harry Moore Rhett, Jr., with replica of Lily Flagg. Courtesy of The Huntsville Times, July 22, 1981.

Much as she had been admired in Huntsville, it seems Lily Flagg continued to turn heads. Although it is not known how long she lived, myriad sources mention her children and grandchildren. Inevitably, Lily Flagg died. However, in Huntsville, her memory remained vibrant.

Numerous erroneous claims have been made about Lily Flagg, but three stand out more than the others. One myth revolves around Moore's gala being a welcome home party for Lily Flagg who returned to Huntsville from Chicago as a first prize winner.

Matthews' daughter Lucile tried to rebut it with her recollection: "Lily Flagg . . . went to Chicago, but never returned."¹⁴² Another myth holds that at Moore's party, Lily Flagg's stall was in the house. For example, in one article, an author wrote, "Lily Flagg, who stood contentedly on a silver platform under a flowered mantel in one of the twin parlors. Not a guest was shocked as the choice of location for the honored guest."¹⁴³ One of Moore's

¹⁴¹ "Model Dairy Cow," *Stevens Point Journal*, January 7, 1899.

¹⁴² Doris Benefield Gilbreath, "Lily Flagg: The Belle of Huntsville," *Alabama Life* (Winter 1980): 30-31.

¹⁴³ Mary Coral Murphree, "Huntsville's Lily Flagg party Set," *Huntsville Times*, June 14, 1981.

great-nephews later said, “My great uncle was real proud of that cow, but he didn’t think enough of her to keep her in the house.”¹⁴⁴ The most common myth that she won first place at the Chicago World’s Fair has appeared in an array of newspapers, including *The Washington Post*.¹⁴⁵ Why are these myths still embraced? When it comes to the first and third, likely because locals remember her as without peer and hate to think she was sold. As to the second, it is just plain fun to imagine a farm animal in the house. Perhaps the novelty of Lily Flagg is why she left such an impression, one that continues to this day.

On July 21, 1981, the 89th anniversary of the Moore party, the Twickenham Historic Preservation District Association threw another celebration for Lily Flagg. Held at the old Moore house, then owned by his great-nephew Harry Moore Rhett, Jr., 400 people attended and marveled at a replica of Lily Flagg.¹⁴⁶ Years later, on October 24, 1992, a Lily Flagg Centennial Celebration took place at the Courthouse Square. In addition to music, dancing, craft stands, and food vendors, the party also had a Borden cow named Elsie in memory of Lily Flagg. As an added attraction, those in attendance bid on how much then Huntsville Mayor Steve Hettinger could milk. Because the event was intended to commemorate Huntsville’s history, Constitution Hall Village and the Huntsville Depot Railroad Museum charged no admission that day.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Mike Kaylor, “Belle of the Ball: Lily Flagg festival keeps Jersey queen legend alive,” *Huntsville Times*, October 13, 1994.

¹⁴⁵ Louise Hubbard, “Lily the Cow received at Cummings,” *The Washington Post Times Herald*, February 6, 1960.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Sylvia Armstrong, “Lily Flagg’s Anniversary Party draws crowd of 400,” *Huntsville Times*, July 22, 1981.

¹⁴⁷ Kari Smith, “Lily Flagg Celebration Planned for all ages,” *Huntsville Times*, October 23, 1992.



Courtesy of Straight to Ale



Lily Flagg Road

Aside from soirees, Lily Flagg is remembered in a variety of other ways in Huntsville. Even though the Monte Sano Dairy was in northern Huntsville, a community south of town took the name Lily Flagg sometime before 1906. To this day, this part of city has businesses, an apartment complex, and even a street named after the cow. Even a Huntsville-produced beer is called Lily Flagg.¹⁴⁸ Huntsville native Doris B. Gilbreath wrote a children's book titled *Lily Flagg*. Lily Flagg was also featured in the novel *The Hotel Monte Sano* by Charles Farley. A journalist for the *Mobile Register* even claimed that Alabama novelist Fannie Flagg had joked about being kin to Lily.¹⁴⁹ In the words of *Huntsville Times* journalist Mike Kaylor, "When she [Lily Flagg] departed Huntsville in 1893, she left a legend that would etch her name in the city's honor roll—along with those like Wernher von Braun, pioneering space traveler monkey Miss Baker, and New York Yankees pitcher Jimmy Key."¹⁵⁰ Once declared "Pride of the South and Champion of the World," Lily Flagg's time in the

¹⁴⁸ "Lily Flagg, superstar cow," <https://dertgerl.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/lily-flagg-superstar-cow/>

¹⁴⁹ Ruth Warren, "Titles and Tales," *Mobile Register*, June 17, 1973.

¹⁵⁰ Mike Kaylor, "Belle of the Ball: Lily Flagg festival Keeps Jersey queen legend alive," *Huntsville Times*, October 13, 1994.

national limelight may have been brief, but her fame lives eternal in Huntsville.¹⁵¹

***About the Author:** Whitney Snow was born in Huntsville, Alabama, and grew up in Guntersville. She received her B.A. and M.A. in history at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. While at UAH, she wrote her thesis on the cotton mills of Huntsville. Upon earning her PhD at Mississippi State University, she became a tenure-track Assistant Professor at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. A specialist in the Twentieth-Century South, she studies agricultural, environmental and labor history. The author of myriad journal and magazine articles, her work has appeared in The Alabama Review, Alabama Heritage, Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture, and Forests, Trees and Livelihoods among others. She is currently working on a book on Cathedral Caverns. True to her Lake Guntersville roots, her favorite pastime is fishing, but she also enjoys classic movies and historical fiction. Whitney resides in Wichita Falls, but spends summers and holidays in Guntersville.*

¹⁵¹ “The Queen of the Jerseys,” n/a, June 8, 1892, Lily Flagg, Vertical File, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.