

*William Edward Alford*

*Dec 29 1916 - Jun 28 2005*

*AAFA #1161*



**December 29, 1916 – June 28, 2005**

Eddie Alford passed away in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on June 28, 2005 after a long illness. Although he had settled in to living away from Samson in his last years, he always delighted in the place that he loved. At the very last, he asked to be taken back “home”. I gently reminded him that Tuscaloosa was

his home now and he said, “Well yes, that’s true. But I want to be where people think the way that I think, and talk the way I talk, and care about the things that I care about . . . and that’s called a home.” Sometimes he was a bit of a poet. Sadly, I couldn’t take him back to Samson—he was too ill.

But his thoughts were still with all those people from that little town in the Wiregrass that he gave most of his life to support and nurture, and in so many ways that most may not even know about. He loved you all so much that a lesser heart would burst.

William E. Alford, Jr. January 2006



About the Author  
**William Edward Alford**  
AAFA # 1161

The town of Samson, Alabama was hardly ten years old when **William Edward Alford** was born in 1916 to a hardscrabble pioneer existence just outside its borders. Among the youngest of 13 brothers and sisters, he spent the early years of his life in the isolated farm communities of rural south Alabama. The deprivations of the times and particularly the hardships of the Depression prevented his obtaining an education past elementary school. However, his enthusiasm for learning produced a well-read, self-educated man who welcomed and embraced new technology. In his eighties, he learned the intricacies of word processing with a personal computer to record the memories that spanned a period from the first automobiles, electricity, and telephones, to the wonders of the Internet.

He moved from the farm to the town of Samson in 1938,

seeking a better life, and filled with the youthful enthusiasm for new experience. The circumstances of his life soon led him to a lifelong commitment to volunteerism and community involvement. He served as a member of the Samson Volunteer Fire Department for 56 years and as Chief of the Department for 46 of those years. He was one of the first men from the rural southern counties of Alabama to go to the State Fire College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1949 to learn the more formal training and operating procedures that are essential to successful firefighting organizations. Throughout his 46-year career as Chief of the SFD, he worked diligently to improve the department until it had emerged from a small hole-in-the-wall facility with very old equipment (including a Model T Firetruck) to a modern facility with multiple firetrucks, rescue vehicles, full safety equipment, and a modern functional building rivaling that of most

professional departments. He also shared the training, experience, and insights obtained from his education with other towns and communities in the area, thereby helping to advance the progress of the entire county.

His vocations over his lifetime were on the streets of Samson where he was involved in the Civil Air Patrol during the Cold War, organization of the first Rescue Squad, wrecker service, clerical work, and finally as the general City Superintendent. He worked in various public-related endeavors throughout multiple city administrations longer than any other official, volunteer or employed, in the city's history. In a sense, his autobiography parallels much of the history of the City of Samson and provides a cultural documentary of very rural life in a small farm-based town that is unique in its perspective.



The Smoke Eater of Geneva County: Autobiography of Eddie Alford

William E. Alford

# THE SMOKE EATER OF GENEVA COUNTY



AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF EDDIE ALFORD

SAMSON FIRE DEPARTMENT  
1938 - 1995

FIRE CHIEF OF SAMSON, ALABAMA  
1948 - 1995

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## "The Smoke Eaters of Geneva County"

### Introduction

When I was a child and our large extended family would get together for a visit, all my young cousins would gather out in the yard, running and playing children's games. The older folk would usually segregate, with the women in the kitchen chatting as they prepared a meal, while the men sat and talked in the living room or on the porch. Both groups would tell wonderful stories of their younger days and howl with laughter, slapping their knees until they cried with joy. I would often slip away from the children's yard play and sit in the room with them and listen intently to every word. The laughter; the emotion; the *stories!* This was important stuff—it caused such an effect on people. Much more important stuff than mere kids' games that one could play anytime.

I spent the first eighteen years of my life in the town of Samson, Alabama and I thought I knew it pretty well from my own experience and the spoken history that I remembered from those days as a youth, sitting and listening at the adults' feet. When I was about thirteen, I became interested in preserving all that wonderful spoken history

of the family and began to write some of it down in a diary with my father's help. But like many youthful projects, it somehow slipped away and was never completed in any detail. Perhaps that was the genesis of this book.

I had begun the diary as a way to learn something about family members that were long gone. When I would visit a cemetery with my parents, I would see on the tombstones a name and the dates of birth and death. I found it so sad that the entirety of a life is reduced to so little—the essence of the person is lost forever. By recording what is remembered of those who have passed on, we can keep alive something of what it was like to have known them. We give life between those dates.

Many years later when my father retired and began to write the "story of his life", I was so very pleased that he would preserve that oral tradition. When my mother's poor health motivated their move up to my home in Tuscaloosa, I began to transcribe his book into my computer as he read aloud from his handwritten copy. I was soon astonished. I only *thought* I had known all about

Samson. After all, it was so small, and not much of anything ever happened. A *lot* happened! *High Noon* shoot-outs in the middle of the street; powerful city barons controlling the politics and the lives of the citizens; unsolved murders; family tragedies and heroics—Mayberry meets Peyton Place. Whew!

My Dad was uniquely positioned to know a lot about the community surrounding him. As the Chief of the Samson Fire Department for 46 years he cared for the town's welfare and devoted himself to that for 24 hours each day; with a constant presence on the city streets most of his long work life he saw their lives unfold; running a wrecker service, he saw their tragedies and hardships; working for the City for over 20 years taking care of its concerns through so many political administrations, he saw the mundane and the sublime. I can't think of anyone but a small-town doctor who may have been so involved with the lives of his neighbors. This personal history combined with a prodigious memory that astonishes me to this day (he can still recite catalog numbers for specific auto parts for almost all the



vehicles in the 1950s when he worked at the Ford Dealership) make him the ideal candidate for such a project.

Our little family was strongly impacted by Dad's commitment to his purpose in the community. We rarely went anywhere out of town since there was always the possibility of a fire and he was best suited to handle that circumstance. Our days and weekends were structured around the need to maintain vigilance over the fire department as well. Every single day he would visit the station (usually *twice* a day), crank the trucks, and check all the equipment to be sure that it was fully operational when it would be needed. Mom and I would sit and wait in the car (not *always* patiently) while he made his endless checks. You would be

surprised how many times the engines would *not* crank and his actions to remedy that situation perhaps saved someone's home or life. Every Sunday (his only day off work) Dad would take me down to the Fire Station to help wash and often wax the trucks and do routine maintenance on them. When I was a kid, I couldn't understand why he was so dedicated—he didn't get one penny more for any of the time he spent on his precious days off. I now know that witnessing those years of dedication taught me more about what it is to be a man and a good person than probably any other life experience. He had that same dedication and commitment in caring for my Mom in her desperate hours of illness and helplessness at the end of her life.

I also now know that there is such a thing as *slow* heroics. Long term, day-to-day activity that is heroic when seen in its entirety and which doesn't attract the same daily attention as the spectacular events of heroes on the evening news. All around you are unrecognized heroes committed and dedicated to improving the lot of their fellows, or struggling courageously with enormous burdens. I know my Dad is my hero and I am proud to be his son.

I recall the ending of the movie, *The World According to Garp*, when Garp has been shot and realizes he is dying. He turns and asks his wife to remember. When she asks what he wants her to remember, he says, ". . . everything!" In this book, Eddie has, for all of us, remembered *everything*.