

# Sanders Atchley guided Sevier County Bank 38 years

*By Carroll McMahan*

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In 1931, Sanders Atchley returned home following a family vacation to discover that he had been elected Mayor of Sevierville by a write-in vote. Although Atchley had served as an alderman for the past six years, he had not been campaigning for the position.

Sanders Leander Atchley was born March 27, 1871 on a farm about five miles from Sevierville. His birthplace was later flooded by the impoundment of Douglas Dam.

He was a son of Pleasant Lafayette "Fate" Atchley and Anna Rule Atchley. Born only six years after the end of the Civil War, Atchley and his siblings who included his sister Victoria (Wade) and brother Theodore Atchley grew up hearing stories about their uncles, Caleb and John Rule.

The Rule brothers were passengers on the SS Sultana, when the overcrowded steamboat traveling up the Mississippi River exploded on April 27, 1865. Caleb survived and John was drowned.

Atchley attended Union Grove School and at age fourteen enrolled at Nancy Academy in Sevierville. His first vocation was farming. In 1893 Atchley bought half interest in a country store at Catlettsburg, becoming a partner with his uncle, Millard Fillmore Atchley. Later he went into the milling business operating Catlettsburg Mills. The mill later moved to Sevierville and was known as Sevierville Grain and Feed Co.

On February 2, 1898, he married Marusa V. Chambers. She was a daughter of Archimedes M. "Art" Chambers and Elizabeth Calvert McMahan Chambers. In 1865, her father built a mill and log dam on the east prong of the Little Pigeon River in Sevierville which was known as Sevierville Mills.

Sanders and Marusa were parents of two daughters and one son. The older daughter and son died at a young age. Only the younger daughter Anna (McClure) lived to adulthood.

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In 1911 Atchley entered the banking business as assistant cashier of Sevier County Bank, two years after the bank was founded. Three months later he was selected cashier and held the position for 38 years. In 1917, he hired the bank's first female employee, Zula Brown, with a salary of \$35 a month. She was a bookkeeper and Atchley's secretary. Walker Mize was assistant cashier.

Except for the banking holiday proclaimed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on March 6, 1933, Sevier County Bank remained open throughout the depression. The bank reopened March 13<sup>th</sup>.

When the East Tennessee National Bank in Knoxville folded in early 1933, investors in Sevier County panicked. A run was made on all three banks in the county. Depositors wanted their money! Atchley did what he could to help the farmers and other scared customers.

Ambrose Paine, president of the bank at the time, sent his son Tom, armed with a handgun, to Knoxville to get more cash. The money was in paper sacks. Paine and Atchley worked the teller cages and Walker Mize piled the money up on a table in front of the fireplace. Customers lined up daily in the street outside the bank to withdraw their deposits.

The money was on display behind chicken wire for people to see the bank had money. One man came everyday to get his money. When the bank reopened, Atchley instructed the man to take his money out the back door so other customers would not see him leaving with his money.

A well-respected farmer, Luther Robertson, helped the bank stay open during this time. He came into the bank to cash a check he had received in Knoxville for the sale of hogs. Observing the fear and anxiety, Robertson decided to deposit the check instead of cashing it; showing other investors he had faith in the bank.

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Not everyone was appeased with action taken by the bank. In fact, one local citizen was so angry about the depression and the banking situation in general that he threatened Atchley's life.

Atchley and his family lived for many years at the corner of Main Street and what is now Parkway. He purchased the house from Pink Maples for \$2,500 in 1910. The house was on the same lot where Atchley once attended Nancy Academy. At the time of the threat on his life, the Atchleys moved from the master bedroom to an upstairs bedroom.

On an extremely cold night in December of 1937, Atchley and his wife were awakened by the smell of smoke. The house was totally engulfed with flames. Unable to escape down the stairway, they fled to the outside porch. A neighbor brought a ladder which the Atchleys used to escape the only section of the house still standing.

The house and all its contents were lost. His nephew Dwight Wade, Sr. took Atchley to his store (Wade's Department Store) the next morning to dress for work. Always the professional, Atchley reported to work on time. The Atchleys built a beautiful new two-story white brick house on the same location. The building still stands and is now a jewelry store, The Golden Carat.

A devoted member of the Sevierville First Baptist Church, Atchley was in the forefront of raising funds to build the new church building in 1924. He was the secretary and treasurer of the Sevierville Hosiery Mills and the New Central Hotel. In partnership with Walker Mize, he also owned the Palace Theatre.

During Atchley's tenure as cashier, Sevier County Bank withstood two world wars, the depression, and several major floods. Yielding to the will of the voters, he accepted the office of mayor in 1931 and served in the position for two years. Due to the demands of his profession brought on by the depression, he did not seek re-election.

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Sanders Atchley died January 27, 1949 at age 77. A few months after Atchley died, the board of directors brought in Ross. B. Summitt, who guided the bank for the next six decades.

In 1986, Atchley's daughter, Anna McClure, donated the new public square area that includes a beautiful fountain with a quote that reads: "The riches of a city are its good citizens." Sanders Atchley was truly one of Sevierville's good citizens.