

10-1-2020

Book Review - Six Inches Deeper: The Disappearance of Hellen Hanks

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Recommended Citation

Dickson, C. (2020). Book Review - Six Inches Deeper: The Disappearance of Hellen Hanks. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 57(4). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol57/iss4/20>

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Off the SHELF

Six Inches Deeper: The Disappearance of Hellen Hanks by William Rawlings (Mercer University Press, 2020: ISBN 9780881467338, \$18.00)

It had been a rainy month in the mild, southern town of Valdosta, Georgia. On November 24, 1980, Fred Blanton took his crew and began to prepare his recently purchased timber land for plowing, making way for what he hoped would soon become fruitful cropland. Blanton expected to find roots and stumps, typical debris from a defunct timber tract. Instead, he and his crew found something peculiar: a two-foot by four-foot plywood box. Even more startling was the contents of the box: the dismembered remains of a human skeleton. In the book *Six Inches Deeper: The Disappearance of Hellen Hanks*, author William Rawlings recounts the harrowing true events that led up to the discovery of the plywood box and the fallout from its unearthing.

The skeletal remains belonged to that of missing Wilcox Advertising secretary Hellen Hanks, who disappeared on August 31, 1972, eight years before the box was eventually found. Suspicion fell naturally on her husband, James Hanks, but later pivoted to her former employers. Foxy Wilcox and his son, Keller Wilcox Jr., were the owners of Wilcox Advertising, a well-known Valdosta corporation that specialized in outdoor marketing and

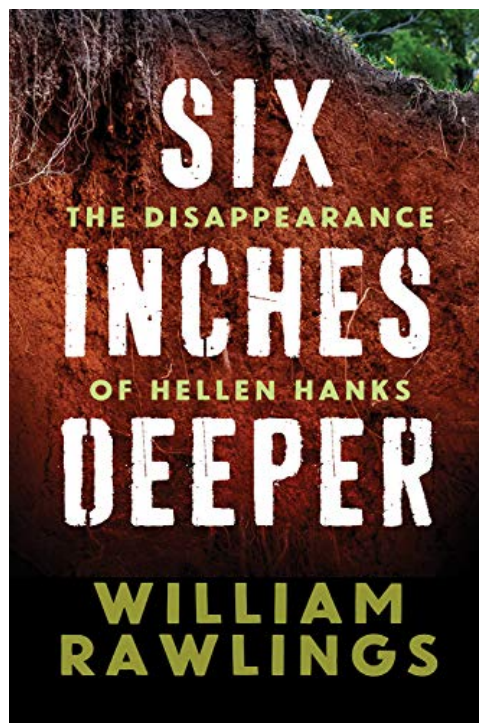
billboards. By all accounts, they were Valdosta royalty: educated, wealthy, and renowned business owners in the area. Which is exactly why the residents of Valdosta could not fathom how members of one of their most prominent families could be convicted of murder. Two Black employees of Wilcox Advertising, Lorenzo

Marshall and Ed Wrentz, were also implicated, which suggested the possibility of racial profiling in the case. Were they in fact the perpetrators of this crime, or did they merely aid in its cover-up?

There are secrets lying just beneath the surface, and Rawlings baits readers in with clever foreshadowing tactics and short chapters. When famous lawyer Bobby Lee Cook was hired to represent the Wilcoxes, members of Valdosta's elite were sure of a win for their beloved family, but could public opinion sway the jury? The well-researched information and facts

presented to readers will leave them with more questions than answers. Rawlings's chronological report of Hellen Hanks's murder trial includes snippets of quotes from newspaper articles and actual comments from suspects in the case, which serves as a constant reminder that this book is nonfiction. This shocking case brought Valdosta to the world stage, and the story was so sensational as to be confused with fiction.

Rawlings also presents a multitude of legal facts and definitions, included in footnotes, which



help readers with little to no understanding of a court of law and clarify obscure legal terms. At the core of this story is the Hanks family, nearly forgotten. Barely a tear was shed by the public eye for Hellen's violent death and brutal dismemberment. Rawlings deftly shies away from conjecture and bias, leaving the reader to draw their own conclusions. True crime

enthusiasts and history buffs will enjoy reading this complex tale of murder and intrigue. Its final chapter begs the question: is justice truly blind, or can wealth tip the scale?

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