



Mr. Edenton

By Russell Rawlings

Attorney Sambo Dixon Writes Book About The Hometown That He Never Really Left

“I don’t know much about anything, but I know everything about Edenton.”

Samuel Bobbitt “Sambo” Dixon is telling the truth, sort of. He does know everything about Edenton, where he and his family have occupied the same house, Beverly Hall, for seven generations. Nine if you count the in-laws.

But don’t let him fool you. He knows a lot of other stuff too, including a great deal about the practice of law. He maintains a general practice in a law office that rests less than a hundred paces from his back door step, specializing in capital murder cases.

He’s tried more than a hundred of them.

“I love representing people charged with capital murder,” Dixon said. “My job is to make sure they don’t die. I take that very seriously, and have a lot of passion for doing that.

“You can get a lot more passion out of that than you can out of writing a will, or doing a divorce.”

Dixon recently discovered, or better yet rediscovered, another passion: writing.

“To have a creative outlet is great,” said Dixon, the author of “Stayin’ Put: Short Stories from Edenton.” The book is a compilation of 23 stories edited by Anne Rouse Edwards, a longtime Edenton resident who also serves as Dixon’s mitigation specialist.

And therein lie the origins of this book.

“Sambo takes indigent defense cases,” Edwards said. “He is one of the few lawyers, particularly in this district, who take on those kinds of cases, because they are nasty cases and they’re hard. By general statute, on a capital case, he has to have co-counsel, and also by general statute he has to have a mitigation specialist.”

The cases also require a great deal of travel.

“We’ve been to Philadelphia, New York, Texas, all over the place,” Edwards said. “We would talk, and Sambo would tell me all of these stories, which were great because

they were long trips and I knew most of the characters he was talking about.

“He kept telling me these stories, and I said ‘Sambo, you’ve got to write some of these things down.’”

And he did. Slowly at first, dating back to 2002, but his pace quickened when Legacy Ink Publishing showed interest.

“I told Sambo that we’ve got to get some critical mass here,” Edwards said, “and then he got into it. It was like opening Pandora’s Box.

“Sambo is really good on his feet. He is great verbally, which is why he is so good in his position as a defense attorney, but writing is not his greatest skill. I was the old English teacher, tearing these stories apart and rewriting them, and Sambo would come back and tell me that was fine so long as I didn’t give him any of that Duke or Charlotte language.”

Edwards, course, is a native of Charlotte and graduate of Duke University. She also

holds a master's degree in English from the University of Virginia.

"She uses French words," Dixon interjects. "Nobody where I am from talks like that."

Dixon fashioned himself a fine writer in his youth, and with good reason. His teachers often read aloud his compositions to the entire class, without attribution, at Virginia Episcopal School.

"When I went to (the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Doris Betts called me up every day and said, 'Son, you can really write.'

"Then I got to law school, and my first grade was an F in legal writing. I freaked out. I never made anything below an A in my life. That's my favorite story in the book."

Dixon refers to this story as "The Village Idiot." The actual title is "Law School."

"All of my stories were from 1961 forward," said Dixon. "This is the way I remembered things. A lot of it is about growing up in a big old house when you don't have quite enough money and it's falling down around you, and you've got four generations living in there at one time.

"It was fun to grow up like that."

It was fun catching turtles in the fountain in the garden, or at least it was until the snapping turtle latched on to his lip.

"That was when Nora and Bee appeared," Dixon writes. "Nora (Bonner) had worked for my family for years, and Bee (whose real name was Eula Beulah Beatrice Beetlah Heckstall), was my nanny."

Yes, Dixon admits, his family had "help."

"I just wrote about it as it was," Dixon said. "There was no social commentary. I was concerned about that, because there's a lot of civil rights stuff in there from a white child's point of view, but I have gotten great reviews.

"I just described it as it was, and most of my friends who are African American, I have been pleasantly surprised with their reaction. I grew up like this and I had to own that — the fact that I grew up in this big house and all of that, with a crazy, multi-generational old Southern family that was just a little nuts."

Dixon handles those aspects of the story well, such as the boycott of the local grocery store and his first encounter with the local civil rights leader, Golden Frinks.

Dixon was 10 at the time, and the situation was tense in Edenton. His parents had ordered him to stay in the yard, but Nora didn't get the memo.

"Nora came early and often," Dixon writes. "She loved to go shopping,

and would buy groceries for us, and usually, at the same time, some for herself. We all shopped at the P. & Q., named for the first owners, Mr. Phthisic and Mr. Quinn. It was a little downtown grocery store in a building that looked more like a Quonset hut."

A confrontation ensued when three young men accused Nora of breaking the boycott and knocked her groceries to the sidewalk, smashing a jar of grape jelly.

"Nora grabbed the young man closest to her around the neck with her right hand and squeezed as hard as she could," Dixon writes. "The man yelled, 'Turn loose of me, you crazy old lady!' Nora held and tightened her grip. She said through clenched teeth, 'Pick up Nora Bonner's grocery from that pavement.'"

Frinks intervened, and at Nora's insistence, the groceries were collected and placed carefully in a new bag. Then, upon finding out that Sambo was Dick Dixon's son, he hugged him for what seemed like five minutes to the author.

"I knew by the way he was hugging me that I was in no danger," Dixon writes. "He then looked at the crowd and said, 'Okay, boys, let these two pass. This boy's daddy was my playmate when I was growing up, and them Dixons, they is good people.' I had no idea what he was talking about."

The book, released late last year, has been well received, not only in Edenton but throughout the country.

"I don't know how someone from Cleveland, Ohio, would know about it," Dixon quips in his typically self-effacing manner. He even makes light of getting shot at in court, by his own client no less.

"It has been fun," Dixon continues. "The whole process has been fun. Several hundred people showed up at the first book signing. It has gotten a lot of exposure without really trying."

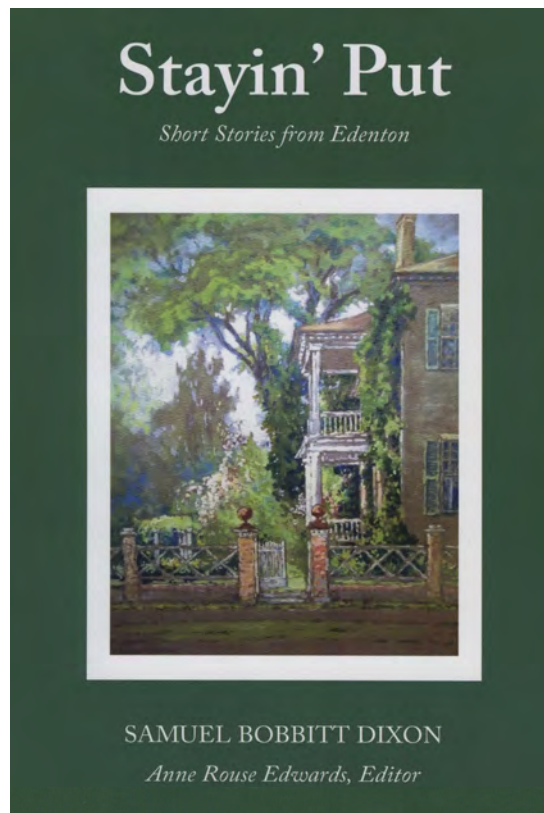
That stands to reason, considering Dixon knows everyone in town.

"Still, you've got something here but you don't know if everyone else should know that," Dixon said. "I don't want to say I am private because I am not, but it was weird to put some of those thoughts in front of everybody else to look at.

"I was nervous, especially before the first book signing. It was like walking down the street naked."

In addition to going away to school, Dixon also spent a year abroad and practiced law in Raleigh for three years with the Smith Anderson firm. But there was never any doubt where his heart lay.

"I had a cousin who died and had lived somewhere else who was brought back and buried at St. Paul's,"



On the cover, the Dixon homeplace, Beverly Hall.

Dixon said. “My grandmother told me, ‘Don’t let that happen to you.’ I sat there and thought about it and thought, it’s time for me to go home.”

In other words, Dixon said, “Don’t live somewhere else your whole life wanting to live here. Come back to your small town.”

Dixon did just that in 1991, and neither he nor his hometown have ever been the same. In a town that remembers history by the century, Dixon is a champion of its preservationist spirit, as evidenced by his lead role in the restoration of the 1767 Chowan County Courthouse.

Do the math: that’s nine years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

“A lot of things we do here, you might say that is going to happen in other towns, but it is not going to happen here,” said Dixon, a 2008 recipient of the NCBA’s Citizen Lawyer Award. “If there is a problem in the community, we are good about trying to figure it out ourselves.

“Like when the movie theater almost closed up. We thought about what can we do to make the movie theater stay open downtown. Nobody’s got a downtown old movie theater, but we do. We got a campaign and everybody bought \$100 gift passes.

“Everything is about giving ‘blood,’ it’s all about giving back. You give, you get, in stones. That’s the reason you ride around and look at this town, and ride around the rest of the towns in eastern North Carolina, the difference is the ethic of giving back to the community by everybody here.”

And nobody is making a bigger difference than Sambo Dixon.

“It’s like my grandmother told me,” Dixon said. “When you come back to town, come back riding a white horse, not waving a white flag.” *.NCL*

“Stayin’ Put: Short Stories from Edenton,” is published by Legacy Ink Publishing and is available through samdixonbooks.com.
