

THE EARLY DAYS OF
PUTNAM COUNTY, TENNESSEE
By Walter S. McClain - 1925

The Early Days – Seventy-five or more years ago, before the days of Cookeville and Putnam County, a few widely scattered families had settled in the vicinity of the future town site.

The amusements of that time were generally house-raising, log-rollings and corn-shuckings for the men, and quiltings for the women – an admirable combination of work and pleasure. At such gatherings, no lines of social cast were drawn and the younger set usually found a suitable place to stage an old-fashioned “break-down” of the Virginia Reel type. Of course a certain amount of liquid refreshment was severed, but, strange as it may sound to us today, it was usually the older men, if any, who imbibed too freely. The music was furnished by one or more of the numerous good fiddlers found in almost every community. The uncorrupted Anglo-Saxon never turns to horns or drums or tinkling cymbals for his music, but is charmed by any stringed instrument - the fiddle above all. Among the old time pieces we might mention, “Arkansas Traveler,” “Turkey in the Straw,” “Natchez,” “Apple Blossom,” “Eighth of January,” “Fishers’ Hornpipe,” “Ricket’s Horpipe,” “Soldier’s Joy,” “Cheatham,” and many others.

Two institution, diverse in purpose but one in drawing power, flourished in antebellum days, to cease almost coincidentally soon after the war. We allude to the camp-meeting and the horse-race.

Singing schools and writing schools both frequently broke the monotony of winter days, affording excuse as well as opportunity for the young people to get together. Experienced teachers went from one settlement to another and usually found good patronage. There were no public schools in those days and the subscription school rarely included more than a half dozen families, and very often was taught at some commodious and centrally located residence. Neighborhoods so fortunate as to possess a church building, however small and inconvenient, used this for schools.

Then, as now, the big game played on the school ground was ball. The ball itself was commonly made of yarn thread of various degrees of density and weight. Various rules prevailed, but the usual arrangement provided for two batter, place about thirty feet apart, armed with paddles about three inches broad. Behind each stood a combination catcher and pitcher. At every strike the batters must hastily change places. The rest of the school, scattered at various strategic points, were intent upon getting the ball and throwing it between one of the batters and the position for which he was headed. To thus “cross out” a batter meant to get his position. Also, to catch a fly ball meant a position at the bat. “Town Ball,” a later improvement had one pitcher, a batter and catcher, and four

bases. The players divided up into sides decided by the “wet or dry” method. It paved the way for baseball.

“Shinny” was a rather rough game for the big boys. Clubs were used to knock a ball from on shallow hole to another, opposing players resisting the progress of the ball. In the excitement of the game shins were often barked, hence the name. It must have inspired the creator of golf.

“Whoop and Hide” was another game especially popular with girls. “Blindford” and “Tag” belong in the same class.

“Bull Pen” was strictly a boy’s game, and a rather rough one, especially with a wet ball or one with a rock concealed in it. “Crack the Whip” was a bit rough too.

Pitching horse shoes was another popular sport for the larger school boys, while “Marbles” never ceased to interest young and old alike. All of which indicates that our grandparents were not so different after all.

Another characteristic of the early days before the Civil War was an excessive politeness between men. We have seen old letters which had passed between them that were effusive in the extreme and full of endearing terms. All are familiar with the almost idolatrous homage paid to womanhood, by these chivalric old timers, but their formal softness toward each other, expressed in stereotyped phrases, provokes a smile now and then. For example, a Justice of the Peace at White Plains, back in the forties, made this entry upon his docket: “Blank, fined five dollars for a potation bout.” There is something really Shakespearean in this polite description of a drunken fight! To say a thing like that calls for the Cavalier cast of mind and at the same time exhibits a fund of unspoiled English, such as only a Tennessee mountaineer, in his isolation from alien influence, could have preserved. “Potation bout,” indeed! How many modern Justices could have thought or cared to phrase it so neatly?

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Walter S. McClain Wins the Highest Honors as a Student

Another Cookeville boy has won distinction away from home. As is known to most of our readers. Mr. McClain has been studying osteopathy at the Southern College of Osteopathy at Franklin, KY during the past two years. He was graduated a few days ago with highest honors, in a large class, and is now a full-fledged Doctor of Osteopathy.

Dr. McClain expected to enter immediately upon the practice of his profession, and would probably have located here, but for the fact that the college management persuaded him to remain and accept the chair of histology in that institution. He has also been made editor and manager of the Southern Journal of Osteopathy.

The Herald is proud of Walter's accomplishments as a student, and only voices the sentiment of the entire community when wishing him continued and ever greater success.

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