

THE "BLOODY EIGHTH"

Siftings from Putnam County Tennessee by Mary Hopson, pgs. 4 & 5.

The Eighth District is a very large district which includes several communities; Boiling Springs, Twin Oak, Thomas, Nash Chapel and Ozion Community, and a small community, Davis, which had a one teacher school. After the Center Hill Dam came in and water backed up one had to cross Caney Fork River, where the Cookeville Boat Dock is now or go around by Burgess Falls in White County to get there.

In later years the schools were consolidated and the children were bussed to the nearest schools, Baxter and Cookeville. We didn't have electricity until TVA came in the 40's. We studied by lamplight, cooked our food on wood stoves, and got our water from springs and wells.

Nash Chapel School was first located down toward Cookeville Boat Dock. Known at that time as Pleasant View, a one teacher school. When Clearance Heard's home is now. J. R. Nash furnished the land to cut the lumber for the framed schoolhouse which was called Nash Chapel School until the year ___? When the brick building was erected at one time it was a five teacher school. There were no buses. Oscar Myatt drove a covered wagon and transported the children that lived a long distance from school.

Children that attended high school at Baxter Seminary or Pleasant Hill lived in dormitories and paid their tuition and board by helping with the chores, such as laundry and the kitchen. Boys worked on the farms and did various odd jobs for their tuition.

The Bethlehem Church is one of the oldest in the community. It was established in the early 1800's, first a log building with clap boards over the windows that had no glass. In later years, it was moved to its present location and was a weather boarded structure, later replaced by a brick structure.

Most of the community got their mail from Silver Point post office except Boiling Springs. Until Center Hill Dam was built. Mr. Fuston Dyer carried the mail on horseback across Mine Lick Creek coming through the Thomas Community on to the DeKalb line and across the creek again back to Silver Point. If he couldn't ford the water, he would come around by Baxter and sometimes the mail would be delayed.

Several of the boys were called to service during the war and some died for their country.

The voting precinct years was under oak trees. If it rained, it was held in the barn on John Nash's farm. In later years it was moved to Twin Oak school building which now is a community center and the County Court change it to the Seventh precinct, but the community is still called the 8th District, and sometimes because so many were killed or wounded, it is called the "Bloody Eighth."

* **W. F.(uston) Dyer** died this week at the age of 70 following a lengthy illness. He was a well-known retired mail carrier from Silver Point.

Born in the Bozarth community near Silver Point, Dyer attended Pleasant Hill Academy and after graduation moved to Texas for a short time. Then he returned to Tennessee and taught in DeKalb County's schools at the turn of the century.

Dyer became a mail carrier in 1905 and delivered the mail in rural Putnam county for the next 30 years before retiring. Afterwards he operated a general store in Silver Point until falling into poor health in recent years. (Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN, Jan. 7, 1951)

Source: Putnam County Tennessee 1850 -1970 by Mary Jean DeLozier, pgs. 199 & 200.

Crime, Pride, and Prejudice:

Putnam County had its social and antisocial life. Because of small disagreements residents often held bitter grudges for years and even generations. Physical violence was common. "A bloody fight relieved the monotony of the unusually long reign of peace at Silver Point...Mine Lick (Baxter) then had a little shooting affair," reported the Cookeville Courier in 1893¹⁰. The eighth civil district became known as the "Bloody Eight" because of the numerous knifings and shootings which occurred there, but lawlessness was not confined to any one area of the county. Moonshiners operated illegal stills in isolated covers and killed revenue agents who ferreted them out. "Toughs" stopped trains and demanded articles of baggage.

The most highly publicized crime of the period was the murder of Cham Vestal, a prominent Baxter businessman, in 1907. Crowds packed the courtroom to witness the trial, argued by Knoxville, Nashville, and Cookeville lawyers, of Vestal's bookkeeper and widow. The jury acquitted the defendants.

Press Editor Smith attributed most of the lawlessness to drunkenness, but he also waged a campaign against the common practice of pistol carrying. "Brave men and gentlemen do not have to go armed to the teeth – a walking arsenal," he declared."¹¹.

Part of the community's pride was racial. Most white citizens apparently blamed a large part of the lawlessness of the area on negroes. Brawls, stealing, sexual promiscuity, and "general cussedness" were expected of blacks. At the same time whites practically discounted blacks as citizens. "In Cookeville and Putnam County we have as fine a class of citizenship as can be found anywhere in the world," wrote Elmer Wirt in 1919. "We are Anglo-Saxon from the core, with scarcely a tinge of foreign blood flowing though out veins."¹²

¹⁰*Cookeville Courier*, 1 June 1893, pg.5 - - ¹¹*Press*, 7 February 1901, pg. 4 - - *Herald*, 15 May 1919, pg. 1.

Source: Rural Life and Culture in the Upper Cumberland, edited by Michael E. Birdwell & W. Calvin Dickinson, pgs. 59 & 60: Saints, Sinners, and Dinners on the Grounds, The religious legacy of the Upper Cumberland by Larry Whiteaker.

The most significant impact that organized religion had on the Upper Cumberland, other than a spiritual one, was its imposition of a code of conduct for "respectable" people. This code was not unique to the region and, indeed, was in evidence throughout the nation in the late nineteenth century. Sometimes called the Victorian code or Victorian morality, it had been shaped and refined for decades by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, and other major denominations to provide guidelines for the American people, who sought to live moral and respectable lives. With rare exception, the Upper Cumberland churches of all persuasions endorsed these guidelines and, at time, made them even more rigorous.

In addition to obeying the Ten Commandments, area residents who wished to retain their respectability (or gain it) did the following: joined a church, attended services regularly, supported the preacher, refrained from drinking alcohol, stopped making alcohol, opposed individuals and businesses that manufactured or sold alcohol, stopped gambling on horse races, cockfighting, and the like, condemned fornication, and

ceased cursing (at least in public). Some of the stricter groups banned makeup and short hair for women, forbade dancing and other “frivolous” activities, and in the twentieth century, frowned on movie-going.

This not to imply that the religious groups promoting this code were always successful. **Parts of the region – such as Putnam County’s “bloody eighth” district**, where feuding and murder seemed almost recreational activities – remained immune to the code’s influence. At times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, moonshiners flourished, bootleggers provided liquor, gamblers plied their trade, and even a few prostitutes provided their services. Area residents danced and attended movies, and women wore makeup and, in the Roaring Twenties especially, cropped hair and raised the hemlines on their skirts and dresses. Rebellion against the code was found in virtually every community. And even the church services occasionally came under attack. In rural areas, especially, many of the adult men and teenage boys stayed outside the church building when services were under way. They gossiped, told jokes, chewed tobacco, smoked, whittled wood, and, occasionally, drank alcohol. The young men often disturbed the young women inside by standing outside the building windows and calling the women by name or nickname, throwing things at them, and, in general, trying to get their attention. More violent incidents sometimes occurred when the young blades on the outside attacked a man sitting too close to a woman claimed by one of the outsiders. “Disturbing religious services” was one of the more frequent charges sheriffs brought against those they arrested.

But the church groups promoting the code of conduct fought the “rebels” tirelessly, even to the point of becoming involved in politics to get laws passed to ban alcohol, close down gambling dens, and stop businesses from opening on Sundays. Not until the 1960’s would the moral code begin to fray at the edges and a more liberal code of conduct develop in the region.

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