

## EARLY IMPRESSIONS OF OLD CARTHAGE, TN

By Dewitt McGinness

I remember well the first time I saw Carthage, Tennessee. It was on a clear, crisp, early January day in 1896, and I had only a short time before passed my fifth birthday.

I was the youngest among several children. I was in a wagon partially filled with household effects with others of my family who were moving from our former home on a farm near the little hamlet of Buffalo Valley in the adjoining county of Putnam, some 20 miles to the east. Other members of the family were either in another wagon or on foot driving livestock along the road en route to our new home which was to be another farm lying along the south bank of the Cumberland River about a mile or more distant from and opposite to the county seat of Smith County, Carthage.

We had passed along under the "bluff" opposite the little village which was obscured from view by trees and other impediments, until we came to an opening near its end. We stopped to admire the engaging view open to us. There it lay before me, Carthage, the court house in the square, with its tower and classic lines of architecture; the church spires; the beautiful, maple-shaded "Front Street," and the "college" at its extreme north end. Battery Hill, a lofty and pointed peak, which commanded the Cumberland during Civil War days, rose sharply behind and provided a pleasing and romantic background for the college.

I could have never known then that someday I would stand thrilled before the cathedral spires of Milan, Cologne, St. Mark's, Notre Dame, or the classic dome of Michael Angelo's St Peter's, but I know that I have never been so completely enthralled or bewildered as on the occasion of my first view of the college. This same college was later to greatly and deeply influence my future life. When I sometimes consider the agitated and restless nature of my early youth, I am convinced that the embryonic bud burst wide open into full bloom on the occasion and it was to nag, bedevil and pursue me relentlessly many years after.

I had not previously known thrill or excitement life was simple in a rural community, it was a vast improvement over the narrow and restricted life and boundary of my former home.

I could see Carthage over the river, and during Christmas holidays the golden balls of fire shooting skyward from roman candles. I was becoming more imaginative and eager. New interest developed and new friends were made. In times of high water, we could see steamboats plying up and down the Cumberland brilliantly and electrically lighted at night, a source of ever increasing wonder to me. Life ceased to be prosaic, and I was eagerly scanning the horizon.

I do not quite remember my first trip to Carthage. I just remember occasional visits with our butter and eggs and chickens to be exchanged for sugar and coffee and other household necessities. We (my mother and I) would ride, or walk to the riverbank, ferry

across, and then walk to town from the other side. The stores and people dressed in "store bought" clothes never ceased to amaze and intrigue me.

I was now approaching the age of nine, and almost four years had thus passed in my new surroundings. My oldest brother was attending school in Carthage, and soon it became known that we were to sell the farm and move into town. My elation knew no bounds, for I thoroughly disliked chores of farm life and was beginning to be a dreamer. I passionately wished to know what was over the horizon.

We moved into the old Dr. King residence, next door to the "Fisher House," one of the town's three taverns, and I found myself right downtown engulfed in its swirling tides of humanity up to my neck. There were the stores; with their showcases filled with dazzling and unknown articles, the Court House with its beautiful lawn and shade trees, medicine shows, music, laughter, and gaiety. I was beginning to see and do things. I had arrived. I was urban!

The King house, which always remained the "King House," until its demolition, became a boarding house for boys and girls coming to Carthage to attend Joseph W. Allen college.

Carthage was situated at the confluence of the storied Caney Fork and the Cumberland Rivers. Opie Reed had known the "water of the Caney Fork" and had recorded his impressions in his book of the same name. The town was laid out and built upon a ridge running north and south, sloping in both an easterly and westerly direction and toward the Cumberland on the west, and on land donated and surveyed by Colonel William Walton, pioneer soldier and engineer who surveyed and built the old "Walton Road" connecting east and middle Tennessee. "Front Street," running along the crest of this ridge was occupied by the white residents and "Back Street," paralleling and down the hill for on block to the east was inhabited by colored folk. The combined population totaled no more than eight or nine hundred people, with a ratio of approximately two white to one colored family. It may have been even more evenly divided. It is well to remember this when one considers this amazing town and its more amazing inhabitants, both white and colored.

One had to pay tribute to enter Carthage. A toll road led northward and three ferries - upper, middle, and lower-furnished the only methods of ingress and egress. The upper and lower ferries were operated by manpower, the middle, the aristocrat of the three, by a gasoline motor contraption which, amidst groans and grunts, ferried passengers to and from the depot and terminus of the seven-mile branch railroad, connecting with the main line of the Tennessee Central running from Nashville to Knoxville. Here, then, was truly a Shangri-La.

I entered Joseph W. Allen College about the fourth grade and was numbered among its approximately 300 students, almost half of whom were from out of town and housed in boarding houses and private homes within the town. Thus, in this small village was an

abnormally high percentage of young people in relation to the adult population. Social life, then was both gay and stimulating.

The college was a two-story structure, the first floor of which housed the primary department with music, elocution, and art rooms, as well as other class rooms; the second floor contained a large chapel, library, laboratory, and class rooms. A belfry and tower pointing skyward gave the lines of a church or cathedral. Barns, for the convenience of out-of-town students who came in by horse back, wood, tool, and janitor's sheds, and two or three other outhouses, made up the group of structures known as the college. A baseball field and fairly spacious and well kept grounds comprised the campus.

The headmaster, R. L. Couch, was as strict and stern a disciplinarian as ever wielded a hickory lash, and his wife, "Miss Annie," who headed the primary department, was no less adept in her own right. Decorum, discipline, attention, and strict application to duty were required and prevailed, and there were few indeed who did not profit from this remarkable educator and his equally remarkable staff.

We worked hard at school; we played hard after, usually to the hour at night when streets must be vacated and all students entered upon studying at their places of habitation. Violation of this rule was not tolerated, and woe to the boy or girl who was caught on the street "after hours" at night.

The Alpha and Crescent Societies provided outlets for cultural and social activities, with prepared programs each Friday afternoon. All except primary students must belong to one or the other, but the choice was left to the individual. Rushing and pledging activities were indulged in much the same manner as present day college fraternities and sororities. The annual debate between chosen members of these societies high-lighted and concluded the week of entertainment preceding the Christmas holidays. Plays, concerts, readings, and stunt nights were given to which the public was invited. The enthusiasm for the debate was unbounded with rivalry bordering to that of political campaigns. The victors took over the town for several days thereafter with little rest or composure for the vanquished.

What manner of men inhabited this village? Well, let's take a look. Benton McMillin, nationally famous and able member of Congress for 20 years, twice Governor of Tennessee, and United States Ambassador to Peru. His stunningly beautiful, talented and gracious wife now heads the United States Civil Service.

Joseph Myer, a Jewish immigrant, settled in Carthage about the close of the Civil War. He acquired a substantial fortune, and erected a turreted and castle like mansion on Cumberland Heights. The style of architecture suggests a culmination of some boyhood dream while roaming the valley of the Rhine. His son, W. W. (Ed) Myer succeeded to his huge mercantile establishment, but devoted the later years of his life to scientific research of Indian life. He was well known and active member of many archeological and scientific societies. Herman Myer, another son, later moved to New York to become one of that city's important pearl dealers at 41 Maiden Lane.

Judge T. J. Fisher, as able a jurist as ever graced a bench, could, with equal ability, have graced and honored the bench of the United States Supreme Court.

John R. Aust, a brilliant and able lawyer, was to become an outstanding chancellor on the bench of the capital city of Nashville.

Chester K. Hart, a youthful but brilliant attorney, at present, and for many years past, serves as a Superior Judge at Nashville.

Judge J. M. Gardenhire, cousin to Benton McMillin and successor to Judge Cordell Hull, sat on the bench and rallied a brilliant record to his credit. He was called from partial retirement to head the RFC for the Middle Tennessee District, a position which he now holds.

Kirby Fitzpatrick Spanish War veteran and member of the legal firm of the three Fitzpatrick brothers, later became a prominent and able political and civil leader of the State of Oklahoma.

Colonel A. E. Garrett, Civil War veteran, member of Congress, stately and aristocratic scion of the golden days before For Sumter.

Hale and Lee, able legal firm in matters of chancery and equity.

L. A. Ligon and H. B. McGinness, who remain of the Carthage bar, with long and honorable careers in service of their state and nation.

Smith County Historical and Genealogical Society: Quarterly Newsletter, Volume XIV – No. 3, Summer 2002, pgs. 57 – 61: This article was published in the Carthage Courier on March 28, 1946. This was the first in a series of reminiscences published in subsequent issues of the paper.

Note: This story is the first of three installments of reminiscences by a former resident of Carthage, DeWitt McGinness, son of Victoria Jared & the late F. P. (Felix Patterson) McGinness, who grew up here but who has lived in San Francisco for many years. For the last twelve years he has been director of the Federal Housing Administration for the state of California. Mr. McGinness graphically portrays conditions and personalities of Carthage around the turn of the century.

1870 census 9<sup>th</sup> Civil Dist. Putnam Co., TN

Dwl: 36 Family: 36

**Alcorn, Robert S.** 45 M W (Value of real estate, 5000) (Value of personal estate, 4050) Farmer TN

**Alcorn, Martha** 38 F W Keeps House TN

Alcorn, Mary F. 15 F W At Home TN

Alcorn, George W. 9 M W TN

Alcorn, Albert S.J. 6 M W TN

Alcorn, Robert L. 3 M W TN

**McGinnis, Felix P.** 21 M W Farm Laborer TN

Census Place: 1880 District 9, Putnam Co, Tennessee

Source: FHL Film 1255275 National Archives Film T9-1275 Page 170D

	Relation	Sex	Marr	Race	Age	Birthplace	
<b>Filex P. MCGINIS</b>	Self	M		M	W 30	TN	
	Occ:	Dry Good Merchant			Fa: TN Mo: TN		
<b>Victora MCGINIS</b>	Wife	F		M	W 23	TN	
	Occ:	Keeping House			Fa: TN Mo: TN		
Olley E. MCGINIS	Dau	F		S	W 3	TN	
					Fa: TN Mo: TN		
Houston B. MCGINIS	Son	M		S	W 1	TN	
					Fa: TN Mo: TN		
Samuel DENTON	Other	M		S	W 26	TN	
	Occ:	Physician			Fa: KY Mo: GA		

1900 census 1<sup>st</sup> Dist., Carthage, Smith Co., TN

Dwl: 124 Family: 125 Line: 27 – Surname is difficult to read ....

**McGinnis, Felix P.** Head 50 M W July 1849 Married (24 yrs. married) Hotel Keeper TN TN TN

**McGinnis, Victoria** Wife 43 F W November 1856 Married (24 yrs. married)

(7 children born, 7 children living) TN VA TN

McGinnis, Ollie E Dau. 23 F W January 1877 Single School Teacher TN TN TN

McGinnis, Hugh B. Son 20 M W July 1879 Single At School TN TN TN

McGinnis, Josie Dau. 18 F W September 1881 Single At School TN TN TN

McGinnis, Roscoe Son 16 M W February 1884 Single At School TN TN TN

McGinnis, Virgil L. Son 14 M W March 1886 Single At School TN TN TN

McGinnis, Allie May Dau. 11 F W July 1888 Single At School TN TN TN

**McGinnis, Dewitt** Son 9 M W August 1890 Single At School TN TN TN

Lee, James O. Boarder 26 M W July 1874 Single TN KY TN

Washburn, B. Boarder 31 M W October 1869 Single

Haynie, John Boarder 23 M W May 1877 Single

Welsh, Sallie Boarder 23 F W June 1877 Single

1910 census 1<sup>st</sup> Dist. Carthage, Smith Co., TN

Dwl: 96 Family: 97 Line: 57

**Mcginnis, Felix P.** Head 62 M W Married (33 yrs. married) Merchant Grocery Store TN TN TN

**Mcginnis, Victoria** Wife 53 F W Married (33 yrs. married) (7 children born, 6 children living) TN VA TN

Mcginnis, Ollie 31 F W Dau Single TN TN TN

Mcginnis, Houston B. 29 M W Son Single Lawyer TN TN TN

Mcginnis, Josie 27 F W Dau Single Stenographer TN TN TN

Mcginnis, Allie May Dau 21 Dau Single TN TN TN

**Mcginnis, Dewitt** Son 19 M W Son Single TN TN TN

1920 census 1<sup>st</sup> Dist. Carthage, Smith Co., TN – Carthage Town

Dwl: 70 Family: 174 Line: 68

**Mcginness, Felix** Head Owns Home 70 M W Married Postmaster Post Office TN TN TN

**Mcginness, Victoria** Wife 64 F W Married TN VA TN

Mcginness, Ollie Dau 42 F W Single TN TN TN

Mcginness, Allie May Dau 30 F W Single TN TN TN

1920 census Los Angeles Township, Petia St., CA

Dwl: 258 Family: 277 –

(Note: D. Clinton McGinnis is living with a family as a boarder: census hard to read)

**McGinnis, D. Clinton** M W 27 Single TN TN TN Travelingman Hosiery

1930 census Carthage Town, Smith Co., TN – South Main

129 Dwl: 19 Family: 21 – Enumerated by me on April 3, 1930, Albert S. Whitley

**McGinnis, Felix P.** Head Own Home (Value of real-estate, 4000) 80 M W Married  
(26 yrs. old 1<sup>st</sup> marriage) Retired TN TN TN

**McGinnis, Victoria** Wife 73 (19 yrs. old 1<sup>st</sup> marriage) TN VA TN

McGinnis, Ollie Dau 53 Single TN TN TN

McGinnis, Allie May Dau 36 Single TN TN TN

Drake, Josie Dau 47 Married (20 yrs. old 1<sup>st</sup> marriage) TN TN TN

(*Mary Josephine McGinness md Guy A. Drake*)

Drake, Guy Son-in-Law 44 Married (27 yrs. old 1<sup>st</sup> marriage) TN TN TN

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