

Exit 268
Buffalo Valley, Putnam Co., TN
by Carl F. Ledbetter
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Carl F. Ledbetter



When the Indians first came to Middle Tennessee they must have been amazed at the view they beheld on one of their scoutings. Streams flowed from the mountains across fertile land and into the river below Herds of buffalo had already discovered this sanctuary and roamed about the countryside. The Indians returned and camped there throughout the winter. They named it Buffalo Valley.

Motorists travelling west on I-40 begin a five mile decline from Silver Point to Buffalo Valley. Those seeing it the first time surely look in wonderment. Its early morning beauty intensifies when the fog rises

from the Caney Fork River.

At the bottom of the grade, a sign reads: EXIT 268. A stone pillar railroad bridge spans the river to the left of the interstate and one of Tennessee's nicest rest areas is on the right.

In less than the time it takes to watch a TV commercial, Buffalo Valley has been approached and passed. Now, to leave the present time and go to the late 1800's we would find Buffalo Valley an active town. Many roads followed along the hollows and ridges, and there were several in the area: Dry Hollow, Tucker Ridge, Wallace Hollow, Happy Hollow, Smith Hollow, Christian Hollow, Huddleston Hollow, Tom Hollow, Burton Hollow and Bartlett Hollow. It was said, "All roads lead to Buffalo Valley."

THE EARLY TIMES

J.T. Askew, III of Silver Point was born in Buffalo Valley and lived there from 1919 until 1942. His grandfather, John T. Askew, was born in 1840 and moved from Temperance Hall to Buffalo Valley in 1867. In 1925, he was interviewed about his memories of the area. At age 85 he told, "the old log school and church house, about a mile up the Valley, was our only public meeting place."

Askew also told about Green Duke, a man who founded a religious sect after the Civil War. The group was called the Dukites. Duke gained considerable following. He claimed he could handle snakes, drink poisons and would never die. Contrary to his plans, he died as the sect disbanded.

JESSE JAMES' WATERING HOLE

One group that traveled the roads to Buffalo Valley was the Jesse James' Gang. Jesse and Frank James watered their horses and hid out at Dr. Farmer's spring when in Buffalo Valley. One day the James' brothers were in Buffalo Valley and Dr. Farmer brought Frank James to meet John T. Askew. John's brother was about to leave for Texas. When he arrived in Texas he bought a newspaper and read, "Frank James was in Buffalo Valley, Tennessee last week."

The James' Gang organized after the Union Army killed Jesse James' stepfather. They became an issue in state level politics throughout Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee and other states. The liberal candidates for governor upheld the James' gang for helping the poor. The conservative candidates wanted them caught and tried for their actions. Jesse James, also known as F.T. Howard, was killed by a man named Ford. Frank James stood trial in two states and was acquitted. Many people considered him as a good person.

THE CROWBAR TRAGEDY

Before the railroad came to Buffalo Valley, barges delivered merchandise on the Caney Fork River. Young men were hired to work throughout the night to unload barrels of salt and other goods. The railroad came to Buffalo Valley about 1897.

At the age of 13, J.T. Askew II tried to get a job helping build the railroad but was turned down. Later, he was hired as a water boy to carry buckets of water and a dipper to quench the thirst of the construction workers.

Tragedy struck when someone working on the bridge dropped a crowbar. It went through a man working below. Young Askew happened to be nearby and talked to the man. Apparently no one thought his injury was as serious as it looked because he responded to those talking to him. The construction workers decided removing the crowbar would be in his best interest. When they removed it he died.

DRILLING FOR WHISKEY

During the years of Prohibition, whiskey was shipped in barrels to the Buffalo Valley Depot and unloaded on a wooden platform that stood about four feet above the ground. Before long, those wanting a drink of whiskey discovered they could crawl under the platform, drill a hole into a whiskey barrel and fill their container with whiskey. Shortly, the platform was covered with a steel plate and the free whiskey ended.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

Hazel Bates, a retired postmistress from Buffalo Valley, said, "Buffalo Valley thrived during the Roaring Twenties." She continued, "buffalo Valley had five or six stores, two black smith shops, an undertaking establishment, four churches and several other businesses." The community was large enough to support an Oldsmobile dealership.

At one time, the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Christ met in the same building. Some church groups met in a general store or in a residence until a permanent building could be acquired.

A produce house bought and sold chickens and turkeys. The produce was shipped by train to Nashville markets. Turkey drives were made to Buffalo Valley from communities miles away.

THE TURKEY DRIVE AND THE FLOOD



Ethel Carter at 91 yrs.
old.

In earlier years, there were no roads from Granville to Buffalo Valley. Ethel Carter grew up in the river boat town of Granville. She and her husband, Willis, moved to the Poplar Grove Community, east of Cookeville, in 1939. They raised nine children and at the age of 91 she tells about “the good old days.”

This is her description, “I went to school in Granville. I guess there were some hard times but we didn’t know the difference. We lived just fine. We raised nearly everything we ate. We farmed and raised turkeys for a living. Our money from the turkeys let us buy out clothes in the fall of the year.

Selling turkeys was a cash crop and we could get out money before Thanksgiving.

“We looked forward to raising a lot of turkeys. The turkeys started laying through February and March. That is when you got the eggs you wanted to sell because the early turkeys were the best for the market about Thanksgiving.

“We always raised a big bunch of turkeys, we had a big farm for them to roam on, it joined the John Hargis farm in Granville. The turkeys would go to the adjoining farm and hunt bugs, they almost lived on them but they always came home to roost.

“We usually had about 75 turkeys to drive to Buffalo Valley. They had to cut through the hills then, there wasn’t any highways at that time. It was during World War I, it must have been about 1916 or 1917 when we raised all of these turkeys. There wasn’t any poultry markets or pickup trucks like we had in later years. There was no way you could ship them unless you could get them to the railroad. The river boats came into Granville and you could ship cattle and hogs on them but they didn’t have a place for the turkeys.

“Buffalo Valley had the nearest railroad. When it came time for the turkeys to be sold, a week or two before Thanksgiving, my daddy, Tom McKinley, and his brother, Hugh, would drive the turkeys to market. They had to leave early, just as the turkeys came down from roosting. The turkeys stayed together, they wouldn’t leave one another on the drive. There wasn’t any cars or anything to scare them.

“The trip lasted two days. They first day they got to Huddleston’s Low Gap, about half-way to Buffalo Valley and was overtaken by darkness. Roe Huddleston lived there. The turkeys went into Mr. Huddleston’s yard and began flying up to roost. My daddy and his brother told Mr. Huddleston where they were going and he invited them to spend the night. The next morning the turkeys came down, they fed them and went on their way to Buffalo Valley.

“At Buffalo Valley they were put in a big shed, weighed and shipped in a big shed, weighed and shipped to Nashville on the Tennessee Central Railroad. After selling the turkeys, they walked the 30 miles or more back home. That was the shortest way.

“Would you like to know what I did with my money” she asked. “I bought an organ, I ordered it from Sears-Roebuck. I don’t recall how much it cost but I got a real nice one. My mother raised enough turkeys to buy a new rubber-tired buggy. She ordered it from Sears-Robuck. I sold the organ after a few years. The next year, in 1926, there was a flood on Martin’s Creek that ruined everything in the house and washed part of the house away. The organ would have been ruined if I had kept it.

“A lot of people and livestock drowned in the flood. You could see livestock going down the creek. The water went from hill to hill. It had rained all day and the creek was higher than it ever had been. About nine o’clock, it came what they called water sprouts – continuous rain, roaring thunder and lightning. I had a lot of chickens in coops. The only way we could save the chickens was to throw them in the dining room. We went in with one load, all we could carry of big fryers and threw them in there. When we started back we met the chickens and the coops being washed out. We ran into the house, grabbed the boys out of the bed, waded out of the house in knee deep water and took to the hillside. I’m sure we would have drowned if we hadn’t got out of there. It seemed like you didn’t have time to get excited.

“We walked around the edge of the hill to our neighbor, Edgebert Bartlett’s. He was asleep and didn’t know it was raining. When we went back home the flood had moved our house about four feet from the fireplace. Everything in the house was covered with mud and the doors were washed off the hinges. We couldn’t live there anymore so we went to Detroit. Everything was on the boom up there. We stayed five months, “got rich,” and came back to Tennessee. My husband didn’t like public works, he was raised to be a farmer. We made it through, I don’t know how.”

PASSENGER TRAINS AND FREIGHT TRAINS

The railroad stored cars on its sidetracks until they were loaded. A pump house stood around the bend on the road to the Center Hill Dam. Water was pumped to the water tank that stood near the Presbyterian Church. Flag stations were located along the tracks. Awaiting passengers stood at the flag stations and signaled the train to stop. Four passenger trains and several freight trains came through Buffalo Valley. The “Shopper” took passengers to Nashville. They could return on the “Midnight Train.” The “Noon

Train” went to the east and the “Afternoon Train” went west. When the “Noon Train” blew its whistle the men working in the fields came out for lunch. If then train ran late, they ate late.

Vela Maxwell and her husband Earnest, operated a general store. The store opened about 1925 and she closed it in 1975. It was the last of the old stores to remain in business. She told about a man who rushed into the store, and with all sincerity asked her husband, “What time does the eleven o’clock train arrive?”

CLOSING THE BANK OF BUFFALO VALLEY



Buffalo Valley Bank in 1915, Buffalo Valley, TN

In 1912, with a capital of \$5,100, the Bank of Buffalo Valley was established. Dr. Samuel Denton and Senator Jim Evans became the bank’s most important figures. The Bank of Buffalo Valley was short lived. By 1926, it had failed. The bank wasn’t insured but every depositor was paid in full. Dr. Denton and Jim Evans considered each depositor as their responsibility and saw that each depositor was paid in full.

Money wasn’t the only way the depositors were paid. Dr. Denton owned a Model T Ford and gave it to a depositor to settle an obligation. The new owner of the car decided to drive it into his barn. As he went into the barn he hollered, “whoa, whoa!” and drove through the rear wall. He never drove the Model T again.

The community made up money and bought a Model A Ford for Dr. Denton. He wasn’t confident with the car and always drove in second gear.

THE DECLINE OF BUFFALO VALLEY



The old Buffalo Valley Bank in 2002.

The Bank of Buffalo Valley failed in 1926 and the community experienced two major fires. The loose-leaf tobacco warehouse, Medley’s General Store and the building next to it burned. The Great Depression came, some businesses closed and some residents moved away to find work. World War II took many young men from the community and many settled away from Buffalo Valley after the war.

Buffalo Valley, once a place where the Buffalo grazed and the Indians camped through the winter, grew to become a prospering town in the Roaring Twenties.



The old Alcorn’s General Store, 2002.

The post office and formerly the Bank of Buffalo Valley was the last of the old buildings in service opened in 1868. A new post office opened in 1991. Only two of the old buildings remain, the old post office and Alcorn's General Store. The two empty buildings stand side by side.



The New Post Office, Buffalo Valley, TN 38548

Just across the Smith County line, less than a mile from the old post office, cars exit and enter the interstate rest area. Hardly any of the thousands stopping there daily have the faintest idea of the activities that once occurred in Buffalo Valley. It is no longer a thriving community. Few realize they have passed what was a busy town, and few realize they have rested near the spring where Jesse James and his gang hid out. To them it is the rest area near Exit 268.



Jesse James and his gang used to hide out at this spring.



The Buffalo Valley School has been well preserved and now serves as a community center.



The old post office, formerly the Bank of Buffalo Valley, (left) and Alcorn's Store (right) are the last remaining business buildings in Buffalo Valley. Both buildings are vacant. Directly in front of these buildings run the railroad tracks.

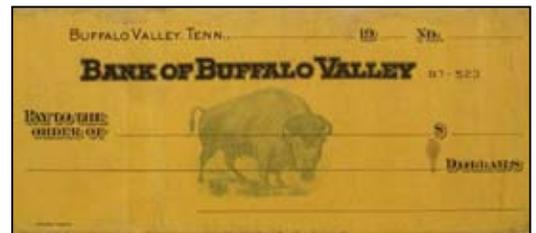


Photo of an old check once used by the Bank of Buffalo Valley – check owned by Carolyn Shanks Huddleston.



Certificate of Membership in the Cumberland Electric Membership Corporation # 978, Virgil Timothy Denny of Buffalo Valley. Signed 21 May 1940. Office now located at 138 Gordonsville Hwy., South Carthage, Tennessee.