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HUMOROUS HUNTSVILLE HAPPENINGS

by Patricia H. Ryan

“The Good Old Days”—the mere mention of the phrase is guaranteed to stir the true southern heart with longing for the storied plantation past. Iconoclastic as it may seem, the halcyon past, in reality, wasn’t so hot, especially for Southerners after “Our Late Unpleasantness” of 1861. Granted life was pretty terrific for the monied few, but for the vast majority, times were exceedingly grim, especially when assessed against modern culture. In reading Huntsville post-bellum newspapers, one is struck by a number of oddities that on the surface are quite amusing. A second glance provides insight into a society just industrializing, a time when editors ran the gamut from childlike simplicity to bitter invectives to proselytize their readers. This varied sampling has been culled from late nineteenth century and early twentieth century newspapers with the hope it will entertain and perhaps inform. Consider then the following fascinating facts.

On numerous occasions local editors expressed concern about livestock freely roaming about the town. In 1879 J. Withers Clay of the **Huntsville Weekly Democrat** warned:



The hogs have begun their periodic depredations—rooting up sidewalks, undermining fences, breaking into enclosures, and injuring yards and gardens. Ought not our City Fathers to pass some ordinance for protection against the trespasses of hogs and cattle—say to force owners of stock, either to keep them up, or to put rings in their hogs’ noses (as was once required here by town ordinance) and to put yokes or some other contrivance on their horned

cattle of vicious propensities, to prevent them from opening gates and breaking through fences? A great many persons (like myself) have experienced serious loss, every year, from stock trespasses. [January 29, 1879]

By the turn of the century the problem was somewhat remedied with the establishment of a city cow pound:

The city is enjoying a fat income from persons who allow their horses, cows, etc. to run on the public thoroughfares. If any of the city ordinances are being enforced, the one prohibiting stock to run on the streets is one of them. The 'pound' was headquarters for about fifteen cows, four horses, and five shoats yesterday. The city averages an income of about \$25 per week from the 'pound' depot. [Weekly Tribune, July 25, 1899]

While one might conclude that penning up loose animals was indeed a sound idea, the city ordinance requiring such was not uniformly popular. In 1907 the **Evening Banner** told of the "outcry" at the Dallas Mill village against the enforcement of the ordinance forbidding cows to wander at will. Rumors arose of testing the law in court, but it appeared that the talk came to naught.

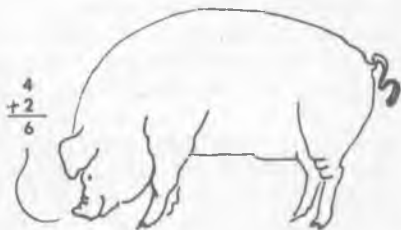
The animal problem persisted as late as 1918, when the city took firm steps to eradicate the health menace:

Hogs within the city limits must go! So says the city council at their recent meeting. They decline to repeal the original ordinance and Mayor T. T. Terry has instructed the police and Dr. Carl Grote, the health officer, to see that all hogs now within the city limits be removed at once. It makes no difference where kept, at livery stables or any other place. The health of the city in the

future demands it, to say nothing of city officials. [Huntsville Weekly Democrat, March 6, 1918]

Other persons approached the hog problem with considerable imagination. Take the clever Professor Gessley for example:

Professor Gessley, the man with the wonderful hog [Romeo], announces to the good people of Huntsville that he will be in the city in a short time with his educated porker—a swine that will enumerate, read writing, subtract, multiply and divide—in short, a lightning calculator. Will read the Declaration of Independence and will tell the time of day by a watch. This Professor of Hogology is a wonderful individual himself, having been born without arms. Of course he will be patronized. [Huntsville Independent, March 23, 1876]



The wanderlust of hogs and cows was not the only problem to contend with. Consider the din created by 9,000 chickens, geese, ducks, and turkeys which were housed in the Memphis and Charleston depot coops prior to shipping. And the following blurb cautions one to be careful when strolling along the north side of Randolph Avenue:

Two hives of bees that have made their home in the Cabiness residence during years past were moved yesterday by P. J. Thullen, the bee man. He found in one place a colony that



had been under the floor two years and sixty pounds of honey was found. In another part of the house over the ceiling was a colony of bees that had been there over fifty years. The industrious little insects had grown up with the children of the place and had never given any trouble. Both colonies have been moved out to more convenient places. [Weekly Mercury, August 20, 1913]

Scientific (and unscientific) experimentation upon the animal population occurred during the Victorian era. In 1890 William Kemmler died in the electric chair in Auburn, New York. The local newspapers carried a number of articles about this new humane form of execution and apparently stirred the curiosity of one John P. Spence, who

tried an experiment of death by electricity upon a large gopher yesterday at the telephone office. The trial was successful, the gopher dying instantaneously as the application was made. [Huntsville Daily Mercury, August 13, 1890]

Today the Orwellian claim of "government interference" is frequently voiced, and our ancestors faced much the same. In 1899 the city council passed ordinances to

make it unlawful for any female to enter any saloon, pool, or billiard room. Also to prevent lewd women from riding bicycles or on horseback within three blocks of the public square. [Huntsville Weekly Mercury, August 23, 1899]

The "lewd women" were apparently more of a threat to themselves than to society at large, for in one day in 1899 three attempted suicide—Mollie Teal by shooting herself, Gladys by eating match heads, and Sady O'Grady by drinking laudanum. Charles Lane of the **Weekly Tribune** glumly surmised that "all of the unfortunate women may recover."

To impress the citizens with the necessity of obeying laws, Lane issued the following warning:

The Mayor gave instructions to the police this morning to arrest everyone who is found riding bicycles on the sidewalks, and the fine for the first offense will be one dollar and for the second it will be enough to make the purse of the cyclist look like an elephant stepped on it. [Weekly Tribune, May 22, 1899]

No ordinance, however, could protect the city's fair ladies from this 1895 delicacy:

The residents of Holmes Street saw the first bloomer girl that has appeared on the streets of this city Thursday. She was riding a bicycle and wore the regular bloomer costume with cap and leggings. To their credit we state that she was not a Huntsville girl, but seemed to be some tourist, as she was accompanied by a man and appeared from the direction of the Dallas Mills.

As each lady would see the woman pass, she would gasp, display a look of amazement and then run to the gate and watch the spectacle until it disappeared in the dim distance. [Huntsville Weekly Mercury, September 25, 1895]

Equally eye-opening was the case of Gustave De Agnero, who in 1898 wished to purchase the Huntsville Hotel, an antebellum structure on the site now occupied by the First National Bank on Jefferson

Street. De Agnero, a member of the hospital corps of the 69th New York regiment, believed that the hotel was quite valuable and cabled his father the following:

Please deposit money. He is about to sell the Huntsville Hotel. It will cost about \$5,000,000,000, but is well worth the money, so rush it quick. [Weekly Mercury, September 21, 1898]

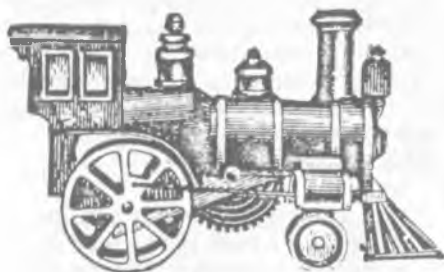
The unfortunate De Agnero was hastily committed to the government hospital for the insane in Washington.

The following passage directs its satire at a city street crew, whose work was apparently unsatisfactory to the editor of the **Weekly Mercury**:

The grass is about to run over the graders on Echols Street. We suggest to the city authorities that this quartette of so-called laborers be reinforced, and that this work be pressed before the grass season really opens up. If, in a mild week in January, the growth of grass can create a doubt as to where the hands have been working, by the middle of May they would be out of sight in fifteen minutes. As we don't desire to see any of the city's valuable street hands drowned in a heavy spring dew, we suggest that they be equipped with a fog whistle or dew bell, so that in [the] event they get in danger they can ring up Superintendent Blake or the Chief of Police. [February 1, 1893]

This final excerpt was penned by the ever-trenchant "Crocus," the "facetious correspondent" of the **Panola Record**, and reprinted in the **Huntsville Advocate**. The sarcasm was directed toward railroad travel in 1866, a time when the southern rail network was incomplete and war-ravaged.

We came by the way of the Orange, Lemon and Alexandria Railroad, and would say to persons who are tired of life, and in a hurry to get through, try this line. You leave Washington in the evening, and, as a general thing, arrive in Heaven or Richmond the next day. Each train is provided with a surgeon, undertaker, amputating table, and other 'luxuries,' besides this it has some of the finest coffins I ever expect to see. Hospitals are established along the entire route and in case of fatal accident the bodies of strangers are immediately embalmed. The arrangements are so sure on this road, that many persons have their limbs taken off and embalmed before starting, to avoid delay while on the cars. [August 22, 1866]



These frivolities obviously do not depict any sort of serious portrayal of Huntsville life. That would require countless additional excerpts detailing low or nonexistent health standards, rancid food, foul water, rampant disease, incompetent physicians, and inhumane medical practices to only scratch the surface. H. A. L. Fisher once noted that history is "one damn thing after another." True, and sometimes it's even one silly thing after another. ★