Early Recollections of Madison County

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I was born in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, in the year 1801, two miles from Lexington. My father was a native of Virginia, and a soldier in the War of Independence. He entered the army the second year and was first at the battle of Monmouth. This battle was fought on one of the hottest days on record, and my father said that after the battle many of the British were found dead on the field without any wound.

He came to South Carolina in Lighthorse Harry Lee's command and participated in the many battles and skirmishes ending in the occupation, and at the close of the war had risen to the rank of Lieutenant of a Cavalry Company. He was in the disastrous charge at Quinby Bridge where, owing to misdirection of orders, the advance was not supported, and out of twenty, only five made good their retreat, all the others being killed or captured. As the survivors fought their way back across the bridge, a sturdy Briton, endeavoring to bar their passage, was cut down by a saber stroke across the face.

Twenty years afterward he and my father met at a horse race in Lexington, Georgia, and renewed their acquaintance under more favorable auspices. Coming southward at the close of the Revolution, my father settled at Lexington, then near the Chickasaw frontier.
As there was continual ill feeling between the Cherokees and whites, a Scouting Company was organized, which my father commanded for over ten years. (On June 24, 1779, at Martinsville, Henry County, Virginia, he had married Hannah, daughter of Miles Jennings of that County. Marriage is on record at Martinsville, Virginia.

The Georgians had suffered severely from Indian hostilities, and for many years, though this tribe bore ostensibly peaceful relations toward the Federal Government, there was a constant predatory warfare waged between them and the white pioneers, the Indian stealing and occasionally massacreing and the whites retaliating with tenfold severity. Occasionally horses would be stolen, a house burned and its occupants murdered or taken captive, then would follow a sudden raid into the Indian country, captives frequently being recovered, towns burned and Indians indiscriminately slaughtered. My first recollections are of a double log house near pine forest, a large cleared field adjoining, cultivated by negro slaves. In summer a table of pine slabs was set in the yard between the dwelling house and cabin. Around this near sunset were gathered my six older brothers and my older sister, tall, lithe and graceful as a fawn, while my mother with her kind loving face sat at the head of the table with my three year old sister at her knee, and my baby brother in her arms. My father, who then was approaching middle age was frequently absent or was detained by business until we small children had retired. The Indians by this time had been gradually forced back towards the mountains, and Lexington was no longer on the frontier. Yet there were scores of old soldiers of the Revolution and veterans of the Indian wars in the country. And on long winter evenings, they gathered around each other's hearths and fought their battles over again, and many were the marvelous
tales of peril and adventure and of hardship that we listened to with greedy ears and glowing faces.

Our country was a veritable land of plenty, the woods were full of game and the rivers of fish, and cattle and sheep and swine fairly swarmed in the woods. We very seldom had wheaten bread, but we had Indian corn in greatest abundance, from which food of endless variety was prepared. I don't think any cotton was raised, but we had linsey and jeans and every family had its flax wheel and a little patch of flax. And then we had plenty of buckskin, the never failing resource of the back woods.

But this country was growing too thickly settled by typical pioneers and my father belonged to that class. So in the year 1806, with his wife and nine children and about a dozen negroes, he loaded up his wagons and pack horses and set his face westward. My father and his two oldest sons rode in front, followed by our two wagons with their negro drivers, then came my mother and the two youngest children on pack horses, followed by negro women and children on foot, and some on horseback, while two of my brothers, sixteen and eighteen years of age, with a trusty negro servant brought up the rear. It seemed to me that we were traveling for a month or months. We traveled about fifteen miles per day over roads not well opened and frequently we had to cut timber out of the road, fill up excavations, and camping by the side of swollen streams to wait patiently for them to subside. We occasionally passed by Indian villages, and my father being well up in the Cherokee tongue was hospitably welcomed and entertained. After we got out of Oglethorpe County we saw no more white people, until we came to what is now Murfreesboro on Duck River, where we found a few white settlers and a grist mill in course of erection.

We had left Georgia about the first of March and
it was now near the first of April. My father had for many years desired to go to the great bend of the Tennessee, so tarrying on Duck River, just long enough to lay in a month's supply of bread and salt, he turned southward and traveled steadily for about a week and one fine spring evening we came to Elk River. The stream was clear and the adjoining lands fertile and near at hand was a bold, clear stream pouring its swift waters into the main stream. We skirted along this stream for near two miles northward, when we came to a low limestone ridge from which the stream rose in the form of a fine bold spring, gushing from the face of the rock. Here we rested for the night, our tents were erected near the spring and when I rose the next morning a little after sunrise, the negroes were dressing a fine venison my father had shot, and a large rattlesnake was suspended from the limb of a spreading beech tree near the camp. The day was devoted to an exploration of the country and everyone pronounced it a goodly land. On the third morning the sound of the maul and ax and the crash of falling timber awoke the echoes, soon the walls of a log cabin began to arise, the ridge pole and pieces were put on, boards riven from the heart of white oak covered it, puncheons hewn out from small logs split in the middle floored it. A chimney was built of split sticks, and the white family moved in. The negroes at first slept under the trees. The weather was warm and pleasant, night was hideous with the wail of whippoorwill, hooting of owls and screaming of wildcats and howling of wolves. In the morning, day was heralded by the song of the mockingbird and thrush, the cawing crows and the gobble of wild turkeys in the tall tree tops. All nature was animated and the forest and streams seemed densely populated with beast and bird, flesh and fowl, everything except man.
Our family for months had no visitors. This re-gion did not appear to have been intruded on even by the savage. The Indians had left no traces of settlement in the neighborhood. We had dropped into the midst of an immense hunting ground, with no one to molest or make afraid. We lived from the forest and with an occasional pilgrimage to Murfreesboro, the year was passed by our family in a state of complete isolation from the world. A large corn patch had been cleared up and corn was planted in holes dug with a hoe among the stumps and roots, and bread was raised in more than sufficient quantity for the coming season. The Indian corn on these fresh original lands grew to a height of twelve or thirteen feet and produced two or three large ears to the stalk. We were a mile from the Elk River and the little creek, (Taylor's Creek) on whose banks we settled still bears the name bestowed on it by my father. We had been located here for a year, and were living in the midst of plenty. We had no sickness during the year. We made enough corn for bread, and had made two hominy mortars, by hurning holes in the ends of two large hickory blocks, and we worked the pestles with sweeps and in this way we obtained very good bread. The woods furnished an endless variety of meats, and when winter came, we started a sugar camp in the hills where the sugar maples stood thickest and made a considerable quantity of sugar and molasses. We had salt from Nashville. At the close of the year a road was blazed out all the way and as there was no other wide blazed road, no frontiersmen could mistake the way.

When the next spring opened many newcomers came to the beautiful and fertile region, where we had located and quite a settlement sprang up. This was a very agreeable experience after the solitude of the preceding year, and among the number were some of our relatives, who had followed our footsteps from Georgia,
and who received a warm welcome. But in a year or two hunters began to tell of a country still further south, down towards the Great Tennessee River. They reported this country to be of unexampled (sic) fertility, well watered by many streams flowing south, clear and sparkling as the Elk itself. And one or two adventurous hunters reported that they had found, after following these streams southward, that they all merged into one strong and clear rapid little river, that they called Flint, and when they came to the junction of the two larger streams, they found a well defined path leading from it through thickets and canebrakes toward the mountain that could be seen in the distance. As night approached they had reached the foot of the mountain and encamped near a spring. Next morning they ascended the mountain which was covered with heavy timber, and from a cliff looked down on a vast swampy region with water gleaming in the distance. They treaded southward, ascending as they went, until just before reaching the mountain summit, they came to a spring in a dark mountain gorge, with waters of ice coldness. Skirting the mountaintop, they followed a sinuous mountain ridge, covered with heavy growth of cedar that shut from their view the surrounding country. As they descended they found traces of a beaten path that grew plainer as they gradually descended. Presently the cedar gave place to magnificent oak and poplar growth and they knew that they were at the mountain base, yet they found swamps and marshes on either side. On the north side was a long, dark ravine at the foot of an almost perpendicular cliff of limestone, from the foot of which issued a large stream of water that spread over the swampy country below.

Soon there was considerable inquiry concerning the new region, to which our hunters had penetrated, and my father began to talk of moving further south.
We had been living on Elk River now for three or four years, and the settlements were gradually extending southward, over into new land just purchased from the Indians in Mississippi Territory. My father and his boys and negroes had cleared and cultivated some twenty acres, mostly in corn and pumpkins, though we had a little flax patch and my mother had a flax wheel or two, which was generally kept in motion. By this time a mill had been built on Elk near the mouth of the little creek on which my father settled. I have not visited the spot in fifty years, and they told me that there is now a cotton factory near where the mill stood. At the time of which I speak, the water was carried in a race to the high bank of the creek and its waters projected against an overshot wheel. The building was a mere shed to protect the works, which were crude in character as the stones had been quarried from the adjacent mountains or highlands, but still, crude though it was in character, yet it supplied the most of the neighborhood.

Occasionally were seen the pack horses of settlers beyond the line in Mississippi Territory, they attracted as much attention from our little community as a traveler from the Antipodes would not command. These tall stately men in buckskin clothing were enthusiastic in the praise of the new country beyond the state line, and while a large number of settlers pouring into Elk River country, a considerable number of the old pioneers were going further south. One reason for emigration was that Tennessee was a state and was extending its laws over its new settlements. In 1806-7 the Indians relinquished the vast triangle to the United States, the base of which extended from the highlands and headwaters of Elk to the mouth of Elk River, and whose apex was one hundred miles southward in Chickasaw Island. On (the) Tennessee River there was a heavy emigration southward and a little
town began to spring up at Winchester. Many of the pioneers had spent the larger portion of their lives on the frontiers of civilization and laws and regulations of settled communities were somewhat irksome. While they were naturally peaceful and orderly, yet habit had them fond of old pioneer laws, that usually had been potent for the preservation of order in their communities, and when law was extended over them they generally declined appointments involving administration of the laws, and held themselves aloof from the courts. When, by traveling a dozen miles, they could pass beyond the jurisdiction of state authority, it didn't take long for many of them to cross over the state line. By this time a road had been blazed out from the old town of Winchester, through the heavy forests to the state line, near New Market, and this formed a part of the Great Highway westward through Alabama and Mississippi to Natchez, then the Capital of Mississippi Territory.

The circumstance that somewhat retarded emigration induced my father to emigrate further south, the Chicksaws had generally been very friendly to the settlers, but the settlers hated the Cherokees and their hatred was fully reciprocated. About this time the air was full of rumors of a general Indian war, and my father who had fought the Cherokees for some twelve or fifteen years felt the old war fire reviving and came to Alabama, in order to be in the van of the battle, should hostilities actually commence. So in the spring of the year 1810 he sold his improvement on Elk River, and came southward down the newly cut road until he struck Flint River at old Brownsboro, where there was a considerable colony of old friends, who had preceded him and who, at that time, formed the extreme southern settlement in the county, east of the mountains.

At that time a considerable little village was
forming at Hunt's big spring, known as the town of Twickenham, and my father settled on a high hill, north of Brownsboro. A horse path, leading from Brownsboro to Huntsville, had been made on the south boundary of the section line from Flint River to Huntsville mountain. The lands had been surveyed the year before and the settlers could follow the newly blazed section lines to the mountain, from which to Huntsville a road was blazed out nearly on the line of the present Belle Fonte road, but many years passed before a wagon road was opened. All the people living on Flint, who drove wagons to town, went up the river to the old Winchester road, crossing the river near the factory, then known as Wood's Mill. On the west side of the river they skirted around the mountain through the open woods, through the Mastin Farm, and around by the Green Bottom Inn, just opened by John Connally, a famous sportsman and prominent man in his day. Horton's mill above the Three Forks and Brown's mill half a mile west of old Brownsboro had not been built and our grinding was done at Huntsville, at a mill put up west of town by John and William Badlum. I being one of the younger boys officiated as a mill boy, at first being accompanied by an older brother or a negro man or boy. But as I grew older I frequently made the trip alone.

Men now living in this country can have but little conception of the richness and beauty of the region between Brownsboro and Huntsville. With the exception of the mountain spur now known as Cedar Ridge and then covered with a thick grove of stately cedars, it was one continued grove of magnificent Poplar interspersed in the lowlands with Oaks, Walnut, and Hickory. It was a case of the survival of the fittest for there was little or no undergrowth, and the forest titans had reserved so much space for light and ventilation that, where trees were not prostrated by storms,
wagons could easily be driven anywhere over the woods, and in riding through the beautiful open forest a deer on the run could be seen for a quarter of a mile through the forests. The mountain was rather difficult especially on the eastern side. The path wound among low jagged cliffs of Limestone, and it took experienced steering at some points to prevent our meal bags from coming in rude contact with the sharp rocks leaning up on each side of the trail. At this time but little impression had been made on the unbroken forest east of the mountain. There was a house at Nuchol's spring near Cedar Ridge, and some two or three along the base of Monte Sano near the cool sparkling spring on south side of the Moore plantation. From Huntsville to the mountain-top was one unbroken forest with small clearings made south of the road, one by Moses Vincent at Underwood, and another near the old Calhoun quarters. There were a few straggling log cabins on the path from Steel's corner out as far as the Fleming place, and several new houses among the trees from Holmes Street down Green Street. Toward the pike from Steel's corner, the road wound around a large pond, where the water stayed all summer and which was full of green briars and old stumps and logs, to where the ground began to rise into a considerable knoll, where the Court House stands. Here stood at that time a little frame building used as a Court House and another north of it for a jail, which in a year or two were replaced by brick buildings, a source of wonder to the young natives.

A trip to Huntsville Mill was a great holiday for the boys, as sometimes a dozen or more would come along together. In the crowd was generally some older person, who could put up sacks for unfortunate boys, who were dragged off by the sacks or the saplings, and needles and thread also, were forthcoming.
repairs in case of damage. We generally started at sunrise or before and reached our destination in two or three hours, and as we tarried until all had obtained their grist, we reached home near nightfall. Thus we managed to spend the greater part of the day in town and no exposition of the present civilized period ever delighted our souls, as did the wonders of the new and growing little city, Huntsville. We wandered around the spring cliffs and waded in the wide and sluggish waters in the swamp below. Somebody had started a tan yard, just below the spring at the foot of the hill, and making of leather was a new revelation to us. Then came the brick yard and bricklaying and the carpenters and masons at work and there was also a cotton gin run by Dr. David Moore and a distillery above the mill owned by James Clemons. As evening approached we set out in time to reach home before night fall, and turning around the Cedar Ridge and circling around the point we would frequently hear the scream of the catamount, that infested the rough and honey combed rocks covering the upper ridge and listened to many blood curdling stories of adventurous hunters, who had encountered wild beasts in their wild and difficult lairs up in the black cedar groves.

In the year 1810 and 1811 there was but little increase in the population of the Flint River Colony. There were rumors of Indian wars and the little triangle which had projected itself beyond the state line about twenty-four miles along its northern limit, and tapering to a point at Chickasaw Island on Tennessee River would have been in serious danger, surrounded on all sides by two such powerful and warlike tribes as the Cherokees and Chickasaws. But fortunately both of these tribes remained friendly and when hostilities began the seat of war was south of the mountains on the waters of the Coosa and Tallapoosa. Huntsville had grown to a town of seven or eight
hundred inhabitants and was driving a profitable trade with the Indians, among whom even at that time civilization was advancing. But many who had sought land at the land sales in 1809, delayed bringing their families to the new territory at a time when the temper of the Indian tribes was unsettled, and war appeared probable. But the settlers were not easily intimidated by fear of Indian hostilities. A large number of them had come from Georgia and Tennessee, where there had been continual hostilities between the races until the beginning of the present century and the rising generation, who had heard their fathers fight their battles over again, longed for an opportunity to emulate their deeds. But with the year 1811 hostilities seem to have passed away, and settlers began pouring into the country east of Flint River.

Out toward Hurricane Creek, a large colony of German settlers were locating, among whom was Jacob Derrick, a wealthy man who bought large bodies of land near the Indian boundary in 1809. Ben Lawler, John Lamberson, Henry Harless, Richard Pockrus, and John Paueur, whose descendants scattered over North Alabama and many of whom now comprise some of the best citizens of Madison County. John Brown purchased a large tract of land near Brown's village. The old town was laid off into divisions and in the year 1812 it was second to Huntsville in population and importance. Its population rapidly increased and it was the headquarters of the Flint River Navigation Company, that at an early day shipped cotton and produce down the Flint River.

A large settlement soon gathered around the village, among whom were the Hewletts, Lambersons, Taylors, Peeveys, Massingales, Browns, Lawlers, Cottons, Scotts, Jordans, and Derricks, who rapidly cleared and opened for cultivation the fine, fertile lands on both sides of Flint River. The settlement extended
up Flint River to Three Forks, where Haughton's mill was erected and where the second voting place in the county was established. Everybody lived in log houses of various grades, from humble cabin daubed with clay to the hewed log house with plank floors, shingle roof, and cracks chinked and finished off or pointed with lime. Lumber was all sawn at Saw Pits by hand; it was a serious task to saw out the plank for a first class dwelling.

For the accommodation of my father's large family, he built a square log house about twenty feet square with a side room. The floor was made of White Ash plank sawn at Saw Pit, the house was covered with chestnut shingles and stood with but little change, and without being recovered for nearly fifty years. The kitchen and smokehouse and negro cabins were crude long cabins daubed with clay and several of them had dirt floors. East of the house was a slough or lagoon with many springs running into it and some boiling up from its bottom. The water in this lagoon was clear and cold with tuckahoe trees growing in the stream and along its borders. It was always swarming with fish and a haul or two of a seine, generally supplied both white and black with ample supply of fine fish. From this slough to the river was a body of rich bottom land covered with tall green trees over topping the heavy cane brake that covered the entire surface. The road from Huntsville skirted the hills and crossed the river half a mile above old Brownsboro and a thick grove of Beech extended down the river on its eastern side. Small game was abundant and occasionally bears and wolves were slain in the river bottoms, and cat-amounts and panthers in the mountains.

I and my brothers during these years did not eat much idle bread! My father at this time, careless in his business matters, had left his farm to the care of my older brothers and the negroes. These slaves
were part of my mother's inheritance from my grandfather's estate, who had died and for that day had left a considerable estate. My mother's consisted of two or three men with their wives and young families and the labor of three or four men, and about the same number of boys had to support some thirty in family, black and white, and to do this, more land had to be cleared. So every spring there was a new ground of several acres to be grubbed and the brush and logs piled, and on the canebrake, part was planted and cultivated with the hoe alone. The older laborers had to cut the timber and split the rails, the boys drove the oxen, hauled rails, put up fences and cut cane roots and grubs with the hoe and mattock. There was but little money in circulation now and agricultural implements were scarce and dear and many common tools and implements were made of wood. The soil was wonderfully fertile, the season regular and a failure in crops was unknown. Our hogs and cattle kept fat all the year round in the care used, and a little corn fed to the hogs in the fall made plenty of fine port for the whole year. During the winter months there was wild game, either fish, flesh or fowl served at our daily meals with corn bread in abundance, and nobody was ever in lack of an abundance of the actual necessities of life. Sugar and coffee or tea was seldom seen. I do not think there was ever a pound of tea in my father's house, and I have frequently heard him say, that he never to his recollection ever tasted the beverage. There was a large quantity of good whiskey made in the country and nearly all the heads of families drank it habitually, yet there were but few drunkards in the community. Nearly everybody wore homespun clothing, jeans, linsey, and buckskins in winter, and cotton and flax homespun in summer. In an assembly of forty or fifty boys in summer at church or elsewhere you would not find half a
dozen wearing shoes or coats, until they were seventeen or eighteen. Whether at a corn shucking or quilting, at church or a wedding, the crowd appeared barefoot and in shirt sleeves, their shirts washed white as snow and ornamented with copper or dyed suspenders fastened before and behind with a large bone or pewter button. We wore hats of plaited grass or straw in summer and of wool or fur in winter. The hatter’s trade was a flourishing one and anybody could get a good fur hat that would last five or six years, who could furnish a hatter with raccoon or beaver or otter skins enough to make two hats.

In the year 1812 our peaceful community was disturbed by rumors of war with the Indians. It was known that there had been some bloody battles fought in the northwest and traders who traveled south of the river among the Cherokees reported that their friendly spirit towards our people had cooled and that missionaries from the northwest had stirred up a feeling of enmity towards the whites much to the chagrin of Edward Gunter and other Indian chiefs in the tribe south of the Tennessee. Some of these chiefs were half-breeds, of great wisdom and foresight, who owned large property in land and slaves, and were earnestly desirous that their subjects should become civilized, and who saw nothing but destruction to their people in a war with the white settlers. While no one doubted the fidelity of the Indian chiefs, yet it was very questionable, whether their influence could restrain the young men of their tribe from joining a Confederacy that Tecumseh and his brother were organizing to unite the tribes from the Ohio to the Gulf in a general Indian War, and many settlers who had bought their lands in the new country had delayed removal of their families until the trouble had passed. But General William Henry Harrison's successful campaign in the Northwest culminating in the hard won victory at
Tippecanoe allayed the apprehensions of the whites and confirmed our neighboring tribes in their friendship. But the fact that we were at war with Great Britain aroused the military ardor of our people and military companies were organized and drilled thoroughly in the settlements, forming the nucleus of the companies that afterwards took part in the campaign.