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Ran'e Pruitt

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ECHOES OF THE PAST

By Ran'e Pruitt

In this issue of the Review, we are pleased to introduce a series of 28 articles entitled "Echoes of the Past: Old Mahogany Table Stories." First published in The Huntsville Democrat beginning in October, 1909, the articles were written by Virginia C. Clay. She and her sister, Suzanne Clay, owned and published the Democrat, which they inherited from their father, John Withers Clay.

"Echoes of the Past" contains stories of family and social activities of early Huntsvillians, and provide an insight into the culture of anti-bellum Huntsville. The articles were based on stories told by members of the Clay family as they sat around the old mahogany table, which first belonged to John Haywood Lewis, Virginia's maternal grandfather in 1825. As the mahogany table was passed down to Virginia, with it came stories of the prominent social life of early Huntsville.

Family tradition provides the background for the stories. During the 19th century, the Clays had been one of Huntsville's most prominent and interesting families. Virginia's grandfather, Clement Comer Clay, moved to Huntsville in 1811 and quickly became an important politician. He served in both the Alabama Territory and State Legislature. He was chairman of the committee to draft the Alabama Constitution and be-

came the first Chief Justice of Alabama. Later he was elected Governor and U.S. Senator from Alabama.

Two of governor Clay's sons were prominent leaders of their day. Clement Claiborne became one of the most distinguished voices for Southern Rights in the U.S. Senate during the 1850's. He later served in the Confederate Congress and was imprisoned with Jefferson Davis for conspiracy in the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. John Withers, the author's father was editor of the Democrat for over 40 years until his death in 1896.

THE OLD MAHOGANY TABLE STORIES

The old mahogany table became very sentimental t'other day and as around its heart the triumvirate sat, ere its lids were closed and the "silence cloth" had struck The Old Home, the turn of converse was toward The Grove-with its sentiments, social glories, fragrant with memories. Mary Margaret Betts, (Grandma Lewis) and Bartley M. Lowe¹ were sent to Huntsville about the year 1811 by their fathers, Samuel Betts and John T. Lowe, from Florida where they owned thousands of acres of land, a part of the Arredondo Spanish tract, on the East coast. Mr. and Mrs. Fenwick, whom Bartley and Mary called Uncle and Aunt, took care of the motherless children with all the tenderness that parents could bestow, and they loved them in life and revered them in death. The children rode three miles to school on horseback: Mary would ride behind Bartley with her arms close around his waist, and-(Here the old mahogany table began chuckling)-for when Grandma was 90 years old she kissed Lucy, Bartley's daughter, with more than usual fervor, confessing with a blush, that:- "I did it because she looked like Bartley. (We laugh) Yes, I always loved him! He was the nicest boy I ever knew! He never teased me, and would have whipt any other boy that dared try it!" This was said with the

spirit of pride and fire of a 16-year-old girl with her first lover and defender. Then she began humming softly:- "Oh there's nothing half so sweet in life, As Love's Young Dream."

Grandma was 14 years of age when she last rode behind Bartley.

Well, we would have laughed outright but the old mahogany table got almost black in the face and looked as if it would like to kick us if its old legs weren't so stiff. We hushed!

The mahogany reminded me and the Old Portraits on the walls of The Grove have gathered together the centuries.

ASHES OF ROSES

Ashes of Roses! Ah, beautiful Past!
In Ashes of Roses embalmed thou art!
Like a shadowy phantom, holding fast
To memories sweet enshrined in the
heart!

Ashes of Roses! Like the passing
breath

Of the setting sun, as it seeks its rest,
On dark clouds that gather to watch

day's death,
Leaves a tender glow, by the Past
carest!

Ashes of Roses! The passions are dead
That held thee to earth with ambition's
fire;

The roses are faded! The tears are all
shed!

And Ashes of Roses now twine the
lyre!

The melodies heard are rippling and
sweet-

An Echo of Rose Leaves' shower, that
 sways
Soft on the ear-to the throbbing heart
 beats;
'Neath Ashes of Roses are buried old
 days!
October 5, 1909 Virginia C. Clay

When this town of ours, with all the country, lay in a forest of great natural fertility, but without cultivation and the great commonwealth of the South's Mother State, Virginia was not yet forty years old, a spirit awakened with enthusiasm for expansion, for adventure and discovery, in the young men. They drifted in droves-these sons of noble sires-from the Thirteen Colonies over the vast virgin forests of the South and middle West, some with a noble patrimony, in dollars and cents, and others with a spirit of thrift and energy that wouldn't die. The revolution had given a rousing shake to the lethargic energies of the people. Minds that had been turned to politics and to speculations-to the neglect of polite letters-became alert with intellectual ambition and culture, and a redundant supply of the best classical literature was ordered from England-for after all, the Mother Country was recognized by her refractory children as superior. Wild forests became fields of richest grain: Cotton was crowned, and minds of those aristocratic pioneers began to expand to the realization that they had a rich heritage of talents as Statesmen, as writers, executives, with a strong commercial influence. Such were the pioneers who made Alabama and who peopled Madison County and Huntsville, and which they have irradiated with their own light, and is reflected back upon them as the years advance.

The Grove was erected by Col. Leroy Pope,² and before the finishing touches were made, he decided to

rise up higher, not Soulfully speaking but residentially above his fellow citizens (ol "Pope's," now Echols Hill). Dr. James Manning³ bought the mansion with its 31 acres of magnificent forest oaks, elms and other indigenous trees. After his death, his widow presented it to her only daughter, Sarah Sophia, who became the wife of Bartley Lowe. It is a brick mansion, of massive build, with a lofty colonnade, (added by Mr. Lowe) supported by commanding, robust Doric columns that measure one hundred and sixty four inches in circumference at the base, and 111 inches around the shaft. It is strictly what an artistic builder might call architectonic, with the columns running from a stone colonnade, with broad stone steps, sixteen modules in height, and surmounted by heavy architraves on entablatures. The top is just below the eaves of the mansion. The front walls were decorated with pilasters of the same order of architecture. Its whole appearance is distinguished by a Palladian character of rich, tho somber ornament indicating that it was built in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. A fine lawn still surrounds it, shaded by venerable oaks, elms, and maples, and latter day queenly magnolias, that bud and bloom each year in a wealth of grandiflora moon-lit blossoms, so white, so stately, as to defy the rivalry of the rippling pink crepe myrtle, the vari-hued, stiff altheas, and the billows of yellow and red lilies, of white and gold daffodils, that sway and nod in the breezes of early spring and summer days. Then the rich verdure of box that outlines the white, pebbly walks, and winding itself into a labyrinthine pyramidal cluster directly in front of the colonnade, and a shower of sparkling jewels spray on the white orchid lilies below, from a fountain-"To whose fall melodious birds sing madrigals."

A ponderous brass knocker marked LOWE is the enunciator. A welcome gracious and sweet is assured from the lady of the mansion, Miss Sarah Manning Lowe,

only surviving child of Gen. Bartley Martin Lowe. Passing through the spacious hall, you enter elegant old double parlors, with the broad folding doors, richly furnished in old mahogany divans, sofas, chairs, tables, and on the handsome mahogany sideboard are the silver candelabras and cutglass that have scintillated from it nearly a century, and gold-framed pier glasses-tell those ashes of roses stories over and over again. And the Old Portraits on the wall, from their gold frames, corroborate them-and the mahogany table says they are true.

Now I will tell you the story about those oil portraits of the Mannings, painted by John C. Grimes⁴ in the twenties and of the Lowes and Davises, painted by Mr. William Frye,⁵ in the '40s and '50s, just as the mahogany table told it to me.

Here is Dr. James Manning, dressed in a colonial suit, with a ruffled shirt, high stock, and a broad cloth suit of an up to colonial-date cut. His face is as beardless as a boy, and was so to death, and his hair brown with eyes that are gentle and kind though a dignity, almost an arrogance is betrayed-that dignity and arrogance that allows no familiarity, permits no breach of etiquette. He carries a handsome gold head cane.

The old mahogany table says that Dr. Manning could be trusted as a friend.

He came from England to America with the two Bibb brothers, William Wyatt and Thomas Bibb,⁶ who became the first two Governors of Alabama.

Thomas Bibb and James Manning fell in love in Huntsville, and presented their sweethearts with their miniatures, set in gold, painted on ivory, and brought from England. Dr. Manning wooed, won and married the daughter of Mr. Robert Thompson, (better known as "Old Blue Thompson" because he was known to keep his money in a blue bag and, humoring the personal allusion, had his portrait taken holding his blue bag).

Sarah Sophia Providence was an heiress, young, fair, attractive, and her presence lent dignity to the Manning mansion at The Grove, and as an ideal aristocratic matron and mother in the gold frame she appears. Mistress Sarah Sophia Providence Thompson wears an ashes of roses gown of silk, made in the most distractingly charming Empire style. A rare wide lace ruffle around the throat and sleeve relieves the very pronounced simplicity of the gown; a high crowned hood-fitting cap of flimy rare lace worn on the aristocratic head makes the wearer appear twice as old as she really was, for she was married in her early teens, and her first child Felix Manning as a lad of five years is in the portrait with his mother.

On the wall opposite her mother is a portrait of the beloved daughter, Sarah Sophia, quaintly gowned in a blue silk Empire, trimmed in lace (Those laces of Mrs. Manning and Mr. Lowe are in the family still, and will probably be cherished by wee year-old Sophie Lowe Young, the 5th generation bearing the name of Sophie.) Close to her mother is Sophie Lowe Davis in a small oval frame. She became the wife of handsome Nicholas Davis, who bought The Grove, keeping it in the family for the century that closed on August 23, 1909. We of this generation knew dear "Miss Sophie;" she left a ray of sunshine that illumines her memory and Mr. Frye in her portrait caught a sweet moment. Tho not a cantatrice, she sang songs of the heart, in voice sweet, responsive and with beautiful patrician hands she played her accompaniments on a harp, clearly and rythmically. And-

Her harp is here, its silver string
Is mute since she last wak'd a parting lay;
To sweep its chords would only bring
to friends a tuneless tale of its decay
Yes there it stands, slow mouldering,
Its sweetness gone, its passions quel'd,

'Round it Ashes of Roses loudly cling,
Like wither'd hopes in memory held!

There is a hush, as in the gloaming,
the silence cloth is laid with more than
usual tenderness on the old mahogany
and we quietly slip away for awhile.

Virginia C. Clay



The Grove

GRIMES IN THE TWENTIES

FRYE FROM 1847 TO 1872

THE GROVE has two portraits that are cherished for the patriots that they represent-Robert Joseph Lowe⁷ (the father of Robert J. Lowe of Birmingham), and William Manning Lowe-as handsome a couple of boys as could be seen anywhere. Mr. Frye painted the future soldiers in the early '50s. The first toe-in of war in 1861 that fired the patriotism of the South, aroused the Madison County boys to action, and in Col. Egbert G. Jones's⁸ brave command they marched away, Robert J. Lowe in the Huntsville Company, marching with his bold comrades. William M. Lowe was then 18 years old and was a student at the University of Virginia. He was given his orders from home not to leave the University with the boys who joined the regiment ranks, but to remain with his books at school. The home orders were not obeyed-he ran away, joined Col. Jones's brave men in the first engagement at Manassas, where the Fourth Alabama Regiment made a name for the military annals of Southern history, unparalleled for courage.

On the battlefield, Robert J. fainted and had an attack of congestion of the brain caused from camp fever, and his boy brother was shot in the forehead. Col. Hugh Lawson Clay brought them home to die. After six weeks of acute suffering Robert died, believing that a federal bullet had killed his brother and his body was left on the battlefield at Manassas. William's skull was seriously fractured, and had to be trephined; the tiny bone removed from his skull was preserved by his sister, Mrs. Clinton Davis, (Sue Lowe) and is still in her desk. William recovered,

"Still the glint of his steel blue eye

Told of a spirit that wouldn't die."

and again he entered the Confederate ranks at Murfrees-

boro, and remained till the war closed, courageous to the last-living to be the joy and comfort of his family. What a glorious voice he had! How the rich, mellow tones rang out in "Tenting Tonight," and in what tender notes did he sing his own composition, "Jeanie Morrison;" and "The Harp that once thru Tara's Hall" was never awakened to sweeter melody than when the chords were swelled by William Manning Lowe.

Ellie Lowe, fresh, fair and sweet as a flower, in a low neck gown of sheerest white organdy, very tiny in the waist and very full in the skirt looks at you with eyes to old and solemn for a girl. She died in the '50s, aged 16. Mr Frye painted her life-size three-quarter portrait.

The mahogany table began to smile and said: Those old times before the Civil War, were funny old times; there was a difference from the times now-a-days. Now, Week-end House Parties are considered the most elegant thing, with the invitation to come Friday and leave Sunday night, or as early Monday as possible. The Grove House Parties were an endless chain, that began the first of January lasting until December 31st. Week-end! No end, for fifty years; old Janus didn't have time to look back: He positively had to adopt the rubber neck system to keep both faces on the future. It was a common occurrence to have a dear friend ride up in his coach to nurse the baby, and little Dinah to play with the bigger children, mama's maid, papa's coachman and special man servant, and, if the races were on, little black Pompey "to ride Mahsr's prize mare." They came unawares, but that was nothing. Everybody was delighted! The Darkies scurried. Mint juleps were served in cutglasses. "Big pot and little ones?" They had no use for little pots; everything was big; two dozen, with cream gravy by the half gallon, and everything else in proportion-"kase Mahsr's niggers et fum de white folks's table, dey sho did." The third

story of The Grove was one large room and used as a banquet hall, where a collation was spread that would have made Lucullus green with envy. The dancing and singing was in the double parlors below, and the fiddlers were all colored and home raised, and Virginia Reels, by Money Musk, Ole Mollie Har and Arkansas Trav'ler, and Hop Light Ladies stirred the very soles of every lad and lassie, and even the dignified matron would

"Tap her dainty heel

To the merry, merry music of the Old Virginia Reel."

Barbecues were held on every Fourth of July out in The Grove and during all political campaigns. May Queens were crowned and Flower Queens were wreathed. At every festival, a house party was welcomed. Then they had guests who came with big trunks and hat boxes. Every prominent citizen in Huntsville kept open house then, and the length of visits indefinite. Now a dress suit-case is all sufficient; a blueflame oil stove, a tin Dutch oven, or a gas hot plate-and no certain cook-is a means of defense against the all the-year-rounder guests-especially when the appendix of the old mahogany table is cut out, and finances cut down.

THE OLD PORTRAIT PAINTERS OF THE PAST

The mahogany table began by telling some stories about Old Portraits, and lolled about The Grove, with all of its fascinating old-time graces oblivious of other portraits and their painters.

Grimes painted the portrait of Mrs. Manning and Mrs. Lowe in the early twenties, and other prominent family groups. A misty story is handed down that he was a young artist with talent, a handsome face, poetical temperament and a delicate constitution. He came from Philadelphia, found all of the big brotherly and sisterly love his artistic nature craved-and failed to receive in his own City of Brotherly Love. Mrs. Mary

Mastin Irby-who was a sister to the late James and Gustavus Mastin-felt sorry for the struggling, delicate artist and she took him in her home as a member of the family. The Irbys then owned and occupied the brick cottage on the corner of Green and Gates Streets now occupied by Waddy Matthews. Here Grimes painted and dreamed in luxury. Many of the most prominent families were prototyped by his facile brush, and perpetuated with a license of poetical fancy for the years and generations to come. When the young artist was making arrangements to leave Huntsville he expressed deep gratitude to his benefactress, Mrs. Irby, and a desire to remunerate her; all she desired was a portrait of himself-which he painted-limning his features with a Byronic touch, artistic, poetic, a mournful vibration of the poet, who at that time is drinking to the dregs a cup of life, love, fancy in the Eye of Greece, flirting with Theresa Macris, swimming the Hellespont in the Astral of Leander, or dreaming on the beautiful violet-crowned Acropolis-then in 1824 dropped in the sea of a wakeless slumber at Missolonghi, when the world became awakened and thrilled by the spirit of the most daring genius since the days of Shakespere.

The original of this portrait is now in Mobile and is owned by Mrs. J. T. Schley, (Bessie Mastin). Huntsville is not entirely bereft. When a young girl, our own sweet artist, Miss Howard Weeden, made a copy of that old portrait of Grimes and it now hangs, a treasure trove, on the parlor walls at the Weeden home, across from the old Irby home. Miss Kate Weeden owns it. Go to see her and she will show it to you and tell you all about it. You know Grimes painted the Bradleys, old Blue Thompson, Clays, Bibbs, and no telling how many other pioneers of the aristocracy.

These Old Portraits, with a very few exceptions, were not satisfactory to the originals or their families but kind old Anno Domini has given the proper distance;

retrospectively, the perspective is pre-eminently correct: All of their blemishes are thrown in the darkness, their beauties are brought out to view, the whole finely softened chastened by the melancholy light of our regret. The images now rise up in our hearts through shades of memory; like a spirit from the tomb, already invested with the purity of the better world-and all the more lovely, because they melt in our embrace.

The old mahogany table though bright, and always polished, was a little rough when rubbed the wrong way, and with a decided gape at the thought of those vandals who dared relegate to the attic the portraits of those dear old fathers and mothers or grandparents who gave them all that life is worth-a good and true name-who built the County, the town, the foundation of our magnificent county's commonwealth.

Such people have no genuine heart of oak, even, and are unworthy of a place round the mahogany table-it shows a common deal table streak.

The old mahogany sleepily closed its lids as it said:-
"Let's talk about Mr. Frye next-for I am bored now."

Virginia C. Clay

¹Bartley M. Lowe, Merchant, Brigadier General State Militia. Born in Edgefield, South Carolina, and died in New Orleans, La. Moved to Huntsville and became a successful Merchant, until the financial revulsion of 1837 swept away his fortune. He was elected Brigadier General of Alabama Militia. Owen, History & Biography, vol. 4, 1072.

²Leroy Pope (1765-1844). Born in Virginia, came to Alabama in 1809. He was the first early developer of Huntsville. He named the town Twickenham; however, the name was soon changed to Huntsville in honor of John Hunt.

³Dr. James Manning came to Huntsville from Elbert Co., Georgia. He was accompanied by other prominent citizens and thus "stripped the town of its vital forces." Dr. Manning was described as a man of "great wealth and modesty." Betts, Early History of Huntsville, 22-23.

⁴John C. Grimes (1804-1837). Portrait painter and teacher of drawing and painting. Native of Kentucky working in Huntsville, Alabama c1820, 1836, Nashville, 1834.

⁵William Frye (1819-1872). Portrait and landscape painter. Born in Bohemia and migrated to the U.S. to paint American Indians. He settled in Huntsville in 1848 and became an American citizen. His most famous landscapes are the Big Spring in Huntsville & the Chalk Cliff of Demopolis.

⁶Thomas Bibb, Planter, Merchant, Member of Constitutional Convention of 1819, President State Senate, and acting Governor of Alabama. Born in 1784, in Amelia Co., Virginia. Died September 20, 1839, in Huntsville. Owen, History of Alabama & Dictionary of Alabama Biography, vol. 3, 147.

⁷Robert Joseph Lowe, lawyer, born at Huntsville in 1861. He was a member of the State Legislature, 1888-1889; a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1901. He served as First Sergeant of the Madison Co. Rifles, 1879-1880. Owen, History of Alabama & Dictionary of Alabama Biography, vol. 4, 1072.

⁸Egbert J. Jones, Colonel, C.S. Army. Born about 1820 in Madison Co. Died at Orange Court House, Virginia, in 1861. Graduated from law school at the University of Virginia. In 1844 & 1845 he represented Limestone Co. in the Legislature. He was intensely Southern in his political views, and was elected Captain of one of the first companies that left Madison Co., which became part of the 4th Ala. Infantry Regiment, C.S. Army on its organization at Dalton, Ga. in April 1861. Died in battle at Orange Co. Court House, Virginia.