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ECHOES OF THE PAST

By Ran'e Pruitt

In this issue of the Review, we are pleased to re-introduce a series of articles entitled "Echoes of the Past: Old Mahogany Table Stories," that were begun in the July, 1974 issue of the Review. 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 became 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.

These stories told by the mahogany table are gathered here and there, and told by members of the family; many have tradition only as authority, the stories coming down thru the ages like the Norse Sagas. The early Ahabamon Indians kept a record of the important events of their tribe's history with a string of pearls, it is said, and each of the pearls had a story of its own that was told to each generation of the Red Man's tribe. The thought is a pretty one, and the mahogany table stories shall be like pearls: Some of them are perfect; others may be dimmed by the years and tears of memory, but if they are not all as some believe or recall, there is still a pearlaceous tinge, and a hundred years from now they will be still on the string of uncertainty, along with the Cook-Pearry controversy. A History, says Webster, is a "record of facts." History, said Dr. Watts--who knows his subjects, "is necessary to Divines." Neither the Democrat nor the table can boast of the divine afflatus, and will accept every pearl that is free from skeletons. For it is our intention to present these stories.

"Written not on tablets of stone but on fleshly tablets of the heart." -as did St. Paul in II Cor. ii-3.

Even Noah Webster is not without a doubtful historiographer: There is now a story told that the famous dictionary man was a great stickler for the correct use of English, and when his wife one day caught him kissing her pretty Irish maid, she exclaimed: "Why, Mr. Webster, I am surprised indeed!"

"My dear, why will you use English words so incorrectly? You are very incorrect--in this little instance. You are the person astonished and I am the one surprised!" Was the wise answer of the sage.

Thus, was the wife's mind diverted entirely from the little osculatory indiscretion of her learned spouse--so the story goes.

The old mahogany table promises to astonish some but surprise very few.

MINNIE F. COLEMAN WRITES HER FATHER'S STORY

Round the old mahogany table, one day we began talking over the number of Old Portraits painted by Mr. Frye, and the idea was suggested that a very interesting story could be gathered in a sketch of his life.

Write to Miss Katie Frye, in care of the Treasury Department, Washington, D.C., where for a number of years she has been an expert clerk, the mahogany table advised, and I eagerly accepted the suggestion, and wrote at once to Miss Katie, receiving very promptly the following letter, replete with facts of the deepest interest--just as pretty a picture of sentiment and romance as could be found in a gold frame or the leaves of a novel: --

Washington, D.C.

September 14, 1909

Miss Virginia C. Clay
Huntsville, Alabama

Dear Virginia;

Katie handed me your letter with the request that I answer it. I will do the best I can, but have not an especially fluent pen, and am now under the weather. To begin: My father was born on September 13th, 1819--just ninety years to the day before the receipt of your letter inquiring about him.

The place of his birth was Reslau, on the border of Bohemia. He was reared in Vienna, Austria, where his father was a large cloth manufacturer. His art education was received at Prague, in Bohemia. His grandmother was a cousin of that grand old Author and Philosopher, Jean Paul Richter. His brother, Christopher, was an officer in the Austrian Army, the most magnificent body of men in the world. His sister, Ida, married the son of Joseph Lanner, "The Waltz King" of Germany. It was in his orchestra that the elder Strauss won his first laurels as a composer--and upon Lanner's retirement Strauss succeeded him as leader of the King's Orchestra.

A digression here may be of interest to you tho not relevant to my father's biography: It was Lanner's custom to compose a waltz each week to the King and, on one occasion, being indolent or indisposed he delegated the task to Strauss, whose composition met with approval, and paved the way to his receiving the title of "Waltz King" when Lanner laid down the baton.

Now to resume my father's history: While at College in Prague, he and a number of students became fascinated with the "Noble Red Man" as depicted by Fenimore Cooper, and they planned to run away to the New World. It was during the Christmas holidays when they were well supplied with funds that they made their start. My father had been the recipient of three purses, one from his "Godfather", who was the Forester to the King of Bavaria, one from his grandmother, and a third from his parents.

After the Christmas visit to their homes, the students proceeded to Bremen to take ship for this country. The others lost courage and turned back, but my father still felt the lure of adventure and the Indians -- so he set sail, and reached New York after a three months' stormy trip.

His cousin, Count Johann Schmidt, was then German Consul to New York. He gave him letters to influential men throughout the country, among others, to George D. Prentice. He, in turn, gave him letters to prominent citizens of Huntsville. There he met my mother, Miss Virginia Catherine Hale, fell in love and married her; then and there terminating his quest after the Red Man. From that year, 1817, until he passed away in 1872, he called Huntsville his home, having also taken out naturalization papers. I append a few of the notable people whose pictures he painted -- Jefferson Davis; Gen. Leroy Pope Walker, and his wife and children; and I think your father, uncles, Clement C. and H. L. Clay, and your Aunt Virginia Clay; Generals Lee, Morgan, Jackson, Forrest, and others of the Conferderate Army I cannot now recall.

Of the United States Army there were -- Logan, Stanley, McPherson, and Mrs. Logan and children. These, with General Logan's other mementoes, were for years kept in Mrs. Logan's home, Calumet Place, in Washington;

but I believe the General's memorials and portraits have been donated to the State House of Illinois.

In the last sixties all of the artists in the United States were requested to compete for a colossal sized portrait of Henry Clay. My father's portrait -- an immense full-length -- was selected and now hangs in the Capitol at Frankfurt, Kentucky.

You will be able to learn more of the people of Huntsville than I can tell you.

Outside of Huntsville I can recall a few only of the social world. You see I was a little girl when he died.

I remember my father painted Mrs. Corinne Goodman and Mrs. Brinkley, of Memphis; and the famous Sallie Ward, of Louisville, when at the zenith of her "belledom."

I know but little of the prices that he received. I think two and three hundred dollars was the average price for bust portraits.

You ask about Ida and me; Ida lives in San Francisco. She spent the two years following the earthquake with us but has now returned to California. Katie is still in the Treasury; Willie, poor boy, died three years ago. I have been happily married for twenty-five years to Mr. Thomas E. Coleman of the dramatic profession. We have one son who will be twenty-four years old today. Another birthday coincidence! He is named for our friend, Mr. Hugh Carlisle, of Gunter'sville; his full name being Thomas Carlisle Coleman; but we call him by his middle name. He has his grandfather's artistic gift -- but we have directed it along the practical lines, and he is a young architect.

Now I am well aware that this long story will need considerable pruning. Use as much or as little of it as you like.

We are much pleased that you desire to write about our father and hope you will send us copies.

Remember us to each of your family and believe me,
Most cordially yours,
Minnie Frye Coleman

In a later letter requesting the full name of Mr. Frye, Mrs. Coleman writes in a letter of September 18th:

My father's name was G. Wilhelm Frey--properly written--but as he had difficulty in getting his mail in this country, the post office people calling it "Fray"-- and everything but Frye -- so he anglized by making it G. Wilhelm Frye, putting the e after the y. The "G" was for George, but he never used that name.

I did not tell you that for ten years I have been taking my "walks abroad" in a wheel chair. I can walk about my flat and am not lame, but the nerves controlling the heart and limbs are weak, and I can only stand three or four minutes at a time.

The mahogany table was delighted with the result of the correspondence regarding Mr. Frye, and actually left a groove of portrait stories, and struck the hypotenuse of sweet Minnie Frye herself:

Don't you recall the time and grand ovation Minnie Frye received when she first began her professional career! A crowd of Huntsville friends greeted her at the Huntsville Female Seminary when she wore a rose colored gown of a soft, clinging material, her hair in waves and parted with a fluffy hood at the nape of her graceful neck; again at the old Opera House, and the round of applause; the shower of flowers, the ready, bright response to the encores demanded. Do you remember what an impetus her recital gave to the elocution here, and the furore of competition it created among Huntsville girls, who tried to recite "just like Minnie Frye"; and the one who recited most like her was the most popular, especially when she recited:

"Come over, come over the river to me

If you are my laddie, bold Charlie Machree!"

How the girls thrilled and audiences stamped and clapped at the finale.--

"Ye've crossed the wild river--Ye've
risked all for me!

And I'll part from ye never, dear Charlie
Machree!"

Just a mahogany leaf from memory for you -- Sweet
Minnie Frye!

Virginia C. Clay

The mahogany table turned to its mythological and literary lore, for its comparisons is one of its recent great reminiscential moods; Egypt had the famed statue of Memnon among its art treasures; it was surmounted on top of a temple, and when the rays of the sun first fell upon it at the dawn of each new day, there was emitted a harp-like sound that filled the natives with the greatest awe and superstitions, and set scientific minds to cogitating the real cause.

At the first real dawn of civilization in Madison County, Hunt's Spring had been re-christened to Twickenham Town, and, in two years reincarnated as Huntsville by a citizenry who were pleased to extend naturalization papers to the memory of John Hunt, who was the earliest pioneer settler in the 19th century; the rays of light grew warm and powerful, and with them came the influence on our vale; there was emitted a sound of axe, hammer, and saw, that fell on the ear as harmonious as a Memnon chord. Again the natives in a wonder fled, and the sounds reached the far outside world, and armies from all nations sprung up, as if sown with a measure of dragon's teeth, as strong as that of Cadmus, and finally drove out the "Poor Los" from their native lair or reduced them to a safe minimum.

Wigwams were replaced by log huts and cottages, and mansions were soon dotted over this

"Valley, steep in sunshine"--

as Carolee Pleasants poetically limed it with her artistic pen.

Mackenzie, in his "Man of Feeling", said there is a rust about everyone at the beginning. There may exist just a little oxide that steals over the sensibilities of some, caused by the uncongenial social atmospheric conditions in their environments; but to view thru the long vista of years, society in the distance--just a peep at such a world as Grandparents lived in, and to invest it with all the pageantry of sentiment, poetry and imagination soon wears off the oxide--and after all it is a glorious privilege. The sun's rays have softly touched the memory and sounds from Auld Lang Syne are emitted and fall sweet on the ear. All the diversified

scenery of the affections may proclaim the evanescence of those days, yet the love of roses--without the thorns--if alone transferred to paper, will blossom in friendly fields forever; in their transmigratory state, the fragrant spirit of the leaves will wander in the rich garden of memory, sparkle with the dew of attar--and--Lo!--

"We will gather fragrance for Life's
Wintry day!"

Well, there are too many grand, old landmarks left in the brick and mortar sentiment of the old homes still here to allow them to vanish.

There is the Beirne home, a splendid specimen of that old-time sentiment; it was built by Governor Thomas Bibb, the son-in-law of "Old Grandpa Blue"--as Mr. Robert Thompson's present day descendants call him.

This home was presented to Adeline Bibb Bradley, the daughter of Governor Thomas Bibb, Alabama's second Governor, and thru some unfortunate financial mismanagement it was sold for a debt, and Col. George P. Beirne was the purchaser.

The story goes that Mrs. Bradley was first informed of the sale by a servant. She was seated on her rear porch when a Negro gardener walked in her garden and began digging. He was summoned by Mrs. Bradley and asked what he meant.

"Miss 'Liza saunt me fer ter plant de taters", he replied. "Miss 'Liza" was Mrs. Beirne.

"Didn't you know dat Marse George done bought dis place?"

Just imagine the surprise and chagrin that this domestic queen experienced! It was hard indeed! Raised in the lap of luxury, yet her spirit was not broken--her energies were not debilitated. In an humbler home she moved and still reigned the queen of her little kingdom called home.

Susan Wells Bradley, eldest daughter of Adeline Bibb and James Bradley, became the wife of Thomas Wilson White, and the mother of twelve children. The wedding occurred in this old mansion.

On the walls of the dear old home--On the Hill-- is a portrait of Governor Thomas Bibb's daughter, Mrs. James Bradley, with her baby Susan on her lap.

This portrait was painted by Grimes in the early twenties--at the same time that those of Sarah Sophia Providence Thompson Manning, with her little son Felix, and Susanna Claiborne Maclin Withers Clay, with her son John Withers, and Pamela Thompson Bibb and her little son William, were painted and some dozen or more famous "Early Settlers", whose beauty, grace and gallantry were handed down to us thru "art preservative" and from a gold frame on canvas.

These old Portraits on the Hill are rarely limned: The one of baby Susan and her dainty mother is one that wins attention. The mother was scarcely 17 years when she married and in her 19th year when this portrait was painted. She is very lovely; seated in her red velvet arm chair; her gown is dark blue silk with tiny black figures; her beautiful throat is modestly exposed, and the empire waist is finished with a high ruching of the filmiest reallace, and a full string of red coral entwines the throat, clasped with gold. From her shell-like ears, are long pendant "ear bobs" of coral. The glossy dark hair is dressed in two loops slightly over the forehead and caught in a high coil, surmounted by a tall empress comb of tortoise shell. Tho in her teens, yet a dignity of the matron is hers, as with a mother's art, she holds chubby Baby Susan in close embrace. Susan is in her first short dress richly embroidered with a ruffled cap to match.

Now, says the old mahogany table, if you would really like to see a flesh and blood replica of baby Susan just look at her granddaughter, Nan Fickling, daughter of Susie Wells White--Mrs. Frank Fickling.

Fair Adeline and Baby Susan are on the right side of the folding door, and on the left side is her handsome and artistic young husband in a suit of black, full ruffled shirt, high collar, and a black stock cravat. A typical gentleman of the Old School.

At the right of the mantel, is "Old Grandpa Blue" seated in a red velvet chair; dressed in a suit of dark blue colonial cut, double-breasted, with the brass buttons and a white stock collar. His gray hair is combed straight up in the center, and forward at the temples.

Pruitt: Echoes of the Past

And the Woods caught the strains the
 glad Echoes rang;
The Heavens o'erhead formed a canopy
 blue
Above the brown throne of the Mountain
 in view;
Then Twilight's soft hands, with purple
 quilt deep,
Hid the wrinkled-faced Monarch, who
 went fast asleep
In all the gay robes, that the Frost and
 Sun lent;--
And Night reigned supreme o'er Love
 and Age blent!

Virginia C. Clay

