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# AS IT WAS THEN:

## Reminiscences of a Huntsville Childhood



*Dorothea Johnston Snow*

History has a way of recording in great detail the lives and deeds of the rich and the powerful of our world. We read of the accomplishments of the most obscure king and queen, ruling lord, military leader, financier, or whatever, and almost nothing of the swarms of 'little' people who made up a much larger portion of the pop-

ulace of their times.

Likewise, we generally see only the monuments erected in honor of the elite, their palaces and great homes, and the public buildings in which their affairs were carried out and which, in many instances, were named after one or another of them.

One could almost come to the conclusion that the world of the past was composed only of the upper classes, and that they floated up there all by themselves with no trace of the huge middle and lower classes that sustained them.

We might even believe that the impressive monuments and residences and cathedrals sprang full-blown from the bowels of the earth!

Yet we all know that during each period of man's existence on this earth there lived hordes of workers and tradesmen. After all, it was always the lowly pioneer who came before the affluent to tame the wild regions, such as ours was a couple of centuries ago, and to pave the way for those with money, who then bought the land for large estates.

The almost forgotten folks actually played an enormous part in the shaping of the past (what would a general do without an army?). For it was they who furnished the labor to build and maintain and, in great measure, to pay for the architectural treasures with which we now associate only the titled, the rich, and the famous.

Though they left faint, if any, footprints on the sands of time, it was they who erected the edifices we now admire, and in a public building, their steps also echoed through its corridors in pursuit of their own, to them equally important, affairs.

Workmen and tradespeople, artisans and servants also went into the castles, manor houses, and mansions to repair, clean, and keep things in order as well as to feed, clothe, and keep the masters and mistresses com-

fortable and able to go about their more pleasurable pursuits.

Many of these, however, never got closer to the mansions of the wealthy than the streets and sidewalks in front of them, or perhaps the side and rear doors, and were perforce compelled to admire them from a distance only.

Not all of them were envious either, for many lived in comfortable, though not so solidly built, homes, and because they were made of wood instead of stone, brick or marble, they did not stand up so well to the passing of time, which is why we see so few traces of them today.

If these modest homes had been preserved as have the grander houses, they would most likely be equally interesting to the historian of today. Fortunately for us there are still a few log cabins around!

These reminiscences are those of one who lived in several such humble houses in the Huntsville area of more than a half century ago--one of the many who passed by and admired and went through and did business within the walls of some of the old and beautiful, and some not so beautiful but nevertheless interesting, homes and buildings that graced Huntsville during the early decades of the 20th century.

They will include also a partial account of the part played by my father Fred Johnston, a builder, owner and operator of a small sawmill on Monte Sano, who helped erect some of these structures. He came south from Michigan around 1905 with his family to make his fortune in the lumber business, but alas, that did not

materialize, so he settled for a much smaller niche in the community. He settled first in McMinnville, Tennessee, where I was born the last of five children, and from there moved to New Market and, a few years later, to Huntsville.

Incidentally, it was in New Market that he built a dam across a creek there to provide water power for a gristmill. What is left of it still stands today, a lasting reminder of work done long ago.

My earliest Huntsville memories revolve around the old Dallas Mill and Village, where we lived in the first house my father built in the immediate area, although the village was not considered a part of Huntsville at that time.

Our house was located outside the village on Halsey Street, and it was while living there that I attended the old Rison School, built before the present one, and made the acquaintance of Thelma Goodson

*This old photograph shows the dam at New Market during construction. Fred Johnston is the man standing on the ladder in the center, immediately to his left is his son Ted, and Dorothea is the small figure at the top standing in the gravel car.*



who became my constant companion. Her father owned and operated a grocery store, located across the street from the Baptist Church now standing on Andrew Jackson Way.

Though neither of us were at that time more than ten years old, we became a couple of free spirits and roamed at will without much parental interference. (Those were the days when parents did not have to worry about children being molested or harmed in any way.)

It was in the Goodson kitchen that I became enamored of Southern cooking, delighting espe-

cially in the slowly cooked green beans, which were a staple of southern diet in those days, and cornbread and buttermilk.

They were far superior, I thought, to the fare I got at home. My mother cooked vegetables only to the stage that one could sink his teeth into them, and she stuck to Yankee yeast rising white bread and thought buttermilk an abomination fit only for pigs.

I remember well the rows of neat and, for the most part, well kept mill houses on streets leading to the red brick cotton mill, where most, of not all,

*This view of Washington Street looking south was taken in 1932; however, it gives a good idea of how the downtown looked when Dorothea and Thelma spent their Saturdays going to all the movie theatres. The Lyric can be seen on the left, although it is in a new building since much of this block burned in 1930.*



of the occupants earned their living.

The village was almost like a feudal stronghold in its self sufficiency; few occupants strayed from the village except on Saturdays when they ventured into downtown Huntsville to shop for the few things not available in the village stores.

The downtown merchants welcomed their business, though socially and otherwise kept them at a distance as did the other residents of the city proper.

Saturdays in those days found the streets of downtown Huntsville crowded and busy with people fairly jostling each other to trade in the many prosperous stores and attend the movies shown at the three theatres there.

Thelma and I could be found among them, walking each Saturday down Holmes Avenue past its lovely homes set on manicured lawns to the movie mecca downtown.

There we spent all day going, as I recall, to all three theatres so as not to miss a single episode of our favorite Pearl White, Eddie Polo or William S. Hart serial. Each clutched her weekly quarter allowance, and the nickel admission charge to each show allowed a dime with which to stop at the Twickenham Pharmacy, Humphrey's Drug Store, or any one of several establishments with soda fountains where we savored slowly each bit of a huge banana split or some other concoction consisting of ice cream, fruit, whipped cream and nuts!

We also attended movies shown at the Dallas YMCA in the evenings, often on the same

Saturday.

Another of our diversions was walking out into the country, now the corner of Oakwood and Meridian, and gazing in awe through the iron fence that surrounded the fabled and fabulous McCormick mansion and the deer that cavorted on its lush green grounds. To us, it was like gazing upon a real life fairyland castle and we never tired of it. We never, however, laid our eyes on its princess, Miss Virginia McCormick, descendant of the agricultural implement magnate Cyrus McCormick.

Each fall our special delight was a trip to the County Fair, then held at the old fair grounds between what is now Church Street and the Parkway. From early morning until late afternoon, we rode the rides, ate cotton candy and popcorn, and attended as many sideshows on the Midway as our finances would permit...and all by ourselves!

Later, the Goodsons almost broke my heart by sending Thelma away to a private school in Tennessee, thereby ending our childish idyll. But I got even when my father moved us to a small house on Hermitage Street and changed my social status to the much higher one, or so I thought, of 'city' girl.

It was while living on Hermitage that my two brothers returned from army service in World War I--Dick from Camp Oglethorpe in Georgia and Bill from France. In my childish ignorance of such things, I could not understand why my mother cried on such a joyous occasion.

I attended the old East Clinton Street School that was

built prior to the present one. It was a beautiful school, I thought, and I gladly walked, along with most others, from my home on Hermitage.

While living on Hermitage, I discovered the old Carnegie Library on Madison Street. Tiny though it was, it looked as large to me then as the Metropolitan Museum in New York looks today, and it was filled with all those books, free to be taken home and read. During summer vacations I lived in it.

How I pitied one small girl who always came accompanied by one or both of her parents who picked out her books for her! I was so thankful that my parents never interfered in such personal matters, though there was little danger of my picking up objectionable material at that library.

It was there that I met and learned to love the librarian, Mrs. Darwin, who always recognized me and greeted me as a person when I entered the library door and whose home I passed on my way to school and the library.

I fairly glowed when she asked me to stop in at the Darwin home, the lovely old house still standing at the southwest corner of McClung and California Streets, to view the portraits she painted on tiny ovals of real ivory. Miniatures she called them as she introduced me to the exciting world of art. For the first time, I saw a human hand paint a human likeness in living colors, and it thrilled me beyond imagining.

During this time Martha Shreve became a friend of mine. She lived in what was the Chase

*The second East Clinton Street School was erected in 1902 for about \$30,000; it was designed by architect Herbert Cowell and constructed by A. M. Booth, both of Huntsville. In 1938 it was replaced by the present building which is the third public school on this site.*





*The Carnegie Library was located at the northwest corner of Madison and Gates Streets, next to the old city hall. It was designed by Edgar Love and built in 1915, using funds provided by the Carnegie Foundation. In 1966 it was demolished for a parking garage.*

home on Adams Street. Like most of the other big houses at the time, it bore little resemblance except structurally to the beautifully kept, proud mansion it is today. I vividly remember Martha and I roller-skating up and down the upper hallway and playing hide-and-seek in the other rooms which were little used and where furnishings were sparse. I doubt if any of its residents, before or since, enjoyed the old house as much as we did.

While living on Hermitage, I remember taking excursions up an old dirt road toward the mountain to what we irreverently called the County Poor House. Remains of its foundation are still there. The whole area that is now Fagan Springs resi-

dential district was then covered with cedar trees, and the gushing spring was a popular picnicking spot.

Happy was the day though when I went from the East Clinton Grade School to Huntsville High School on West Clinton Street. It meant a longer walk to school but I did not mind. We walked everywhere in those days because if your family, like mine, did not own a car, and not many families did, you walked and thought nothing of it.

I vividly remember my first day at Huntsville High when the spelling of my name was questioned. Miss Annie Merts, bless her, questioned the fact that I spelled it Dorothea instead of





*The West Clinton Street School was erected in 1916 as the Huntsville High School; in 1927 it became an elementary school when a new high school was completed on Randolph Street. Prior to its demolition in 1973, this school served as the temporary Civic Arts Center.*

Dorothy. But I informed her that my older sister Vera, who was seventeen at the time of my birth, had seen it spelled so in a book she had read and insisted that my parents spell it the same way. Miss Annie still remained skeptical, I think, and felt that I was trying to improve my totally nonexistent image.

In the basement of the old high school I discovered the private art classes of Mrs. Maybelle Metcalfe, then the only art teacher in Huntsville. There were many piano teachers, elocution teachers, and sewing teachers, but she was the only one who dared to teach art.

I immediately called on my

brother Bill, who was living and working in Indiana, to finance art lessons for me. He did so for four years during which time I won several red and blue ribbons at the County Fair, the only place that our works of art were ever hung.

It was during this time that the Times building was going up, and the sight of it made our hearts swell with pride. It slashed the skyline of Huntsville, alone and awesome, until it was challenged by the Russel Erskine Hotel. My father helped build both of them.

He also built several of the large homes on the eastern end of Eustis Street. I remember that vividly, too, because I

made a habit of stopping by his place of work and conning a nickel out of him for an ice cream cone. I was an ice cream cone fiend at the time, and if he could find a nickel in the pocket of his overalls, I got it.

During those days of suffering in the heat without benefit of air conditioning or even fans at school, many of us stu-

dents walked home via the Big Spring because the grotto-like area was as cool as the inside of a cave and was made more so by the spray of its fountain which rose high in the air. There we stayed as long as we dared before climbing the rickety wooden stairs to the equally rickity buildings above on West Side Square known as Cotton Row.

*The Big Spring and Cotton Row have played major roles in Huntsville's history. The town was founded in this location instead of on the Tennessee River because the Spring guaranteed the settlers a constant source of pure drinking water. With an average output of 20 million gallons of water daily, the Spring supplied Huntsville with all its water until 1954. Cotton Row, as seen from the Spring at the turn of the century, opposite, received its name from the many cotton buyers whose offices were housed along West Side Square. The Row was razed in 1966.*



All the short while we lived on Hermitage, the sight of Monte Sano in the distance had beckoned to my father. Up there was a lot of timber to be cut on shares, he reasoned, from which his portion would bring in more cash than he could make working for others. So he rented the old Sale cottage, and we moved from Hermitage to the top of the mountain.

It seemed a paradise to us kids. I, my brother Ted, and nephew Billy Mitchell, who lived with us at the time, became blithe spirits and roamed every inch of the mountain and gloried in it, while my father moved his small sawmill from site to site, cutting down trees and sawing them into lumber.

Now, I never pass an old tree stump in the woods on the mountain that I do not wonder if it isn't the remains of some tree that my father cut down.

At that time the top of the mountain was a summer retreat for some of the affluent citizens of Huntsville. Some of the summer cottages were small and rather plain while some would have served as year-round homes anywhere. Without air-conditioning, the summer heat of the valley was pretty oppressive, but the mountaintop was always at least fifteen degrees cooler, so it was a popular spot.

Ted, Billy and I spent many fall days gathering an ample winter supply of hickory nuts and black walnuts. There were many nut-bearing trees on the mountain then, and it was just a matter of picking the nuts up from the ground after a hard frost or tossing a limb into the branches and dodging those that fell. Now one rarely sees a nut of any kind up there, and

I cannot help but wonder what happened to the once abundant harvest.

Hunters freely roamed the woods, daytime and night, when the baying of their hounds announced another raccoon or 'possum treed. And forest fires! Never a dry season passed without one spectacular display of flame and smoke which volunteers fought to bring under control, if a hard rain didn't beat them to it. Strange

*The Monte Sano Hotel was opened in June, 1887, as an elegant summer resort, which successfully attracted many wealthy and famous guests for several summers. However, various problems forced its closing after the 1900 season, and although plans were often made to reopen it during the early part of this century, they came to naught. The hotel was abandoned, fully furnished, with only a caretaker living in the 200 rooms. In 1944 the property was sold for salvage.*



though how the burned over areas soon became lush and green again. No state park existed there in those days and no one seemed to know or care who owned the 'worthless' land, so hunters, picnickers and hikers roamed over it at will with little thought for such mundane matters.

However, the memory of the once nationally known health spa, located there during an earlier era, was still warm and

bright. The old hotel still stood where only a chimney remains today to remind residents of its former glory. We kids played inside its spacious interior as the doors were not locked. Inside were many of its furnishings, including billiard tables, balls and cues, and a register containing the names of some of its famous patrons from all over the country. The old building had not been vandalised even though it had been vacant for many years.

Remains of the old dummy line, over which had run a railroad of sorts carrying visitors from the railroad station downtown to the hotel atop the mountain, were still plainly visible winding and twisting up the mountainside.

Living on the mountain made a freak, of sorts, out of me. For the year or so that we lived there, I walked down the mountain every day to the high school on West Clinton Street and back again. Though I left before it was light on winter mornings and arrived home after dark, I could not understand why my mother worried about me. The only time I remember being scared was during a late afternoon storm, a real humdinger of thunder and lightning.

The old toll gate, for which Toll Gate Road was named, was operative at the time. I remember hearing my folks laugh about a certain Doctor Walker rushing to answer a call, roaring down the mountain, and forgetting about the pole across the road--which he smashed through without stopping!

There was no mail delivery on the mountain in those days so I was appointed the family mail picker-upper as I passed the red brick post office build-

ing that sat atop a rise between Randolph and Eustis, a block east of the Square. Every afternoon I walked up the steep steps and asked the kindly clerk at the window for the Johnston family mail.

Again we moved, this time to a small house my father built at what is now the juncture of Toll Gate Road and Bankhead Parkway. I thought I was practically in town then, and what a short walk to school--a distance that would make any modern high school student blanch!

One of the highlights of my daily walk was a stop at the tiny grocery store of 'Pinky' Gormley located where Wells Avenue became Monte Sano Pike, as the road was known then. It was there I charged my daily ice cream cone to my father's account and munched happily on it the rest of the way home. It was during this time, too, that I began attending Sunday School at the tiny, white framed Cumberland Presbyterian Church which stood in an area on the south side of Wells Avenue, now taken over by Maple Hill Cemetery.

Our last stop in Huntsville was a small house on Wells Avenue where the power transformer now stands. There I became friendly with Annie Davison, and we walked to school together and back as far as the Woolworth store where she worked after school and Saturdays.

A private school stood then where the playground of the old Huntsville Middle School was located. A rather small, red brick building, it was to us a symbol of segregation, though not racial.

Annie and I graduated from high school that year and to

me fell the honor of being valedictorian of the Class of '25! A real achievement it was for me, and I was made to feel quite special. Nowadays the only school honors handed out seem to go to football and basketball players.

Soon after, the family packed up and returned for a long sojourn in its native Midwest. Years later, however, my life came full circle when my son Dr. Donald Snow accepted a position at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, and I returned to Huntsville to live.

A walk down Randolph Street today is a real nostalgia trip for me. Almost without exception the same houses still stand there, though they seem to have lost some of their Old South character, probably due to the influx of outsiders in the past few years. The YMCA looks exactly the same as do many of the store buildings around the Square. The only thing missing is the lovely, old, columned Greek Revival style courthouse and with it the cool green lawn and the spreading trees that once shaded the benches where sat folks from city and country, swapping gossip, just resting, or in some cases, snoozing or whittling.

Yet, the more Huntsville changes, the more it remains the same.

And who am I to say that the view from the west side of the Square overlooking Big Spring Park, with the Von Braun Civic Center in the distance, isn't an improvement over what it was in the days of my youth?

*Continued on page 17*