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ECHOES OF THE PAST

By Ran'e Pruitt

In this issue of the Review, we are pleased to reintroduce 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 Ahbamon 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-Peary 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.
Grimes in the Twenties: Frye From 1847 to 1872:

A home-coming of the old portraits would be great fun and an occasion of general rejoicing and like a gathering of the clans, suggested the Mahogany Table the other day. Many portraits of interest of those now, "gathered to their fathers", have been gathered by the progenitors of the third and fourth generations and carried off to other states to hang on the up to date walls. There were two of Frye's best portraits sent to Waco, Texas, when those of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Lewis were carried out there, and they are in the home of Gabriel Winter, a great grandson; and in Memphis is a portrait of the Fackler Girls, Sallie (Mrs. Pynchon) Elvira (Mrs. Nichol) and Gypie (Mrs. Terry), also painted by Frye, ad libitum with regard to pose and dress. They were all children, but Sallie Wears a gown of plum colored velveteen, and is seated in a velveteen chair in the woods; Elvira and Gypie are in white gowns, with pink and blue sashes: the latter carries a guitar, which she never did play on. It is a beautiful fiction in art from nature.

Mrs. W.T. Morris, (Leila Lacy), has in her Virginia home the group portrait by Frye of the three Lacy girls, Fanny, Leila and Lulu, the daughters of Mr. Theophilus Lacy. In Canton, Mississippi, New Orleans and Georgia are portraits of the George Steele Family owned by Sue Steele, (now Mrs. Hoffman), Angelo Steele and daughters of Ellen Steele Tracy. In Canton, Mrs. Hoffman has a Grimes portrait of her Father, George Steele; Grimes also painted a portrait of Mrs. Steele but a turban of the artist's imagination, was placed on the head, that the original did not think becoming, and she never wore, so she destroyed the canvas.

Speaking of the Steeles said the Old Mahogany Table, George Steele had an unusual history, and one that reflect credit on his name for ambition, energy and thrift. His grandfather lived in Virginia and was an extensive painter, owning several farms; he married the second time a gay young widow who fell heir to most of the property of the old man, his son lost his by a security debt, and moved down to Madison County, Alabama with Mr. William Fleming and "Aunt Sallie" Fleming about 1817-1818 when George was just 18 years old, and only lived a short while after arriving here. In 1823 George Steele married Eliza Weaver, daughter of Matthew W. Weaver, also a Virginian. They had Seven Boys and girls and the family was a happy one. George Steele became a famous contractor, architect and builder, and he knew the
business from the making of the brick to giving the artistic finish in fancy fresco to the interior walls.

He had an airy castle idea of an old Virginia farm that was owned by his Grandfather Steele, and it was his pet sentiment to reproduce the buildings, and raise stock on his Alabama "Fancy Farm," He was unfortunate in the con summation of his dream of Fancy Farm with its fine stock, but in 1837-1838 there arose at the foot of Monte Sano a mansion of three stories, magnificent rooms in the center of an Oak Grove, if not as his fancy painted, yet home with a thousand sweet memories of its grand old rooms, ever filled with happy guests, the flower garden with its gorgeous array of blossoming plants, a fine orchard. While George Steele was accumulating wealth for his family and friends to enjoy, there was no decay of ambition; his children were given the best collegiate education, and his hospitality was princely.

There fourteen rooms in Oak Place mansion: a large brick stable and the servants houses of brick.

In the stately old palor, in 1846, was a memorable gathering of the patriotic young soldiers who were going to the Texas frontier and join the ranks with others who had the Revolutionary vibrations inherited and tingling in their veins to fight with Mexico. It was a tearful parting with sweetheart; and many a lover was moved tell his love and win the promise from his dulcinea to consummate their plighted troth at the marriage alter, when the war was over.

And here were married the Steele girls, Sallie to R.H. Winter in 1857; Ellen to E.D. tracy in 1858; and Sue to C.C. Shackelford in 1866.

The Mahogany Table looked brighter with a dozen or more social memory lights shining from its heart;

How A Presidential Election Was Celebrated In March 4, 1845, Oak Place The Scene Of Historic Occasion

Let me tell you of one great feast of soul at Oak Place. It is an old story to the oldest citizens remarks the old Mahogany Table.

As another Presidential election and inauguration has made history during the past year, the minds of the elder voters revert to the great campaigns and elections of the past, with old and new methods compared.

A little northeast of Huntsville, and nestled at the foot of Monte Sano, and shadowed by its lofty cedar-grown heights, almost hidden by a grove of majestic oaks, that surround it is one of those fine old residential representatives of seventy years ago. It is big, with a refreshing air of hospitable thoughts intent pervading its entire architecture, massive stone porches, broad halls, and elegant rooms, said Gath, in a letter to the Philadelphia Times, large enough to drive a team thru, and famous as the scene of lavish hospitality in days gone by.
So effectually do the oaks shield the old mansion,
that one must drive up to its portals, ere aught but the
verdure of the trees and grandeur of the mountains is revealed.

Captain George Steele, the owner, architect and builder
of this monument of that beautiful past, was a politician,
honest as the day and a good Democrat.

During the Presidential campaign of 1840, Capt. Steele
picked out among a fine stock, a splendid ox that had never
worn a yoke, named him Van Buren, and said he intended to
celebrate the election of the next Democrat President with a
grand free barbecue, and serve Van Buren ox roasted whole.

He was doomed to disappointment, Van Buren was defeated.
Nothing daunted, Capt. Steele kept the ox on fattening
diet, and in four years celebrated the inauguration of a
Democratic President, when James K. Polk was received by a
triumphant and happy party in the White House.

The ox had grown in grace and luscious physical propor­
tions and he was slaughtered for the feast given at Oak
Place in March 1845.

Four thousand citizens from Madison and adjoining counties
and States with pleasure accepted the generous and courteous
invitations, scattered broadcast to Whig and Democrat alike,
and partook of the Van Buren ox, stall fed and roasted whole.

All kinds of vehicles, from the lowly ox cart to the
elegant carriages drawn by dashing teams were brought into
requisition to bring the poor, the rich, the high and low,
welcomed alike.

Long tables were arranged under the majestic oaks. On
the center table, was a magnificent cake pyramid, four feet
high, surmounted by a figure of President Elect, James K.
Polk. This pretty conceit in confections Captain Steele ordered
from Nashville, sending his own team to insure its safe de­
ivery.

The barbecuing was the work of Mr. Smoot, an artist in
that line, and Van Buren went thru the barbecuing process
for twenty four hours. With his handsome horns highly polish­
ed he presented a very luscious spectacle, stuffed with turkeys.
There were pigs and lambs barbecued, hams boiled and their
accompaniments in jellies, sauces and bread without stint;
ice cream and cake, and immense cutgrass bowls of syllabub.

Matthew Weaver Steele, the gallant youn son of the host,
just home with College honors, delivered the address of welcome
and Clement Claiborne Clay, a handsome young lawyer and a
future statesman was the orator of the day.

Every man present received a hickory cane cut from
Monte Sano, and the most prominent citizens were presented
with canes highly polished by the well known slave, Charles
Peck, and adorned with silver ferules and heads of gold or
silver, engraved with name of receiver and the date. Mr.
Steele's daughter, Mrs. S.S. Hoffman, still has several of the
canes, and in the Old Home is the silver head of the cane
inscribed with the name of John H. Lewis. After the speech-
making, feasting and handshaking, a string band of the best
picked bankoists, guitarists and fiddlers, from the planta­
tion slaves, in happiest mood, played the Reels, Jigs and
other dances, and in the grand old rooms, aristocrats and Democrats cut the pigeon wing, dang Auld Lang Syne, danced the Old Virginia Reel in gayest mood.

Few are left, sighed the Old Mahogany Table, who recall those happy hours, the majority are "beyond the Sunrise, who joined hands on that occasion, in which a social scene was represented in Huntsville, such as was never enjoyed before, and never attempted since.

Ah! the instruments are shattered, and the strings are snapt in twain, and the fiddlers are forgotten, and will never play again".

Maybe it's all for the best, that it is out of style, said the old Mahogany Table Cheerily, to serve such feasts as that served at Oak Place. With my appriffix gone I don't believe that ox Van Buren would set well on my constitution, to use a vulgar expression, pardon the frequent references to my lost appendix bit it is a fact that everybody who has once had one, loves to talk voluminously about the dear departed help'em eat, and I am not different from others, save in the quality or the appendix cut out my middle. Sobs the head of the Mahogany Table.