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## And Old Views

Patricia Ryan

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# And Old Views

An examination of local newspapers published in 1880 reveals a small Alabama town struggling to recover from Reconstruction and the depression of the 1870s. Huntsville's antebellum prosperity and lifestyle had been swept away, and although fifteen years had elapsed since the end of the Civil War, the void created by their passing had still not been filled. Huntsvillians recognized the necessity of securing a new economic base for the town but were unable to attract the requisite capital to do so. In the meantime, they busied themselves with outrageous attacks on their political opponents during this election year and with the eternal frivolities that form a large part of daily life.

Three of the newspapers operating in Huntsville in 1880 were the *Weekly Advocate*, the *Weekly Democrat* and the *Weekly Independent*, and in reading them, one finds a varied collection of data and opinion reflecting life in Huntsville at the start of a new decade. As the year began, the *Democrat* urged its readers to stick to their recently made New Year's resolutions, but observed that some of those more easily broken for young ladies would be not to "chew gum, use cheap rouge, borrow a novel...hardly ever flirt, powder [her] nose, hint for supper after the opera, whisper in church, envy any girl's bonnet...lay [her] oiled head on his shoulder...swoon just to be caught, sneeze at the table, [and] sleep in [her] stockings." (January 7) The population of the town was

4,977; for the fiscal year beginning March 1, 1880, the city collected \$22,840.92 while its expenditures totaled \$22,785.40, leaving a balance of \$55.52. A barber collected 10¢ for a shave and 25¢ for a haircut; at the same time, tuition at the Huntsville Female College on Randolph Street ranged from \$10 to \$30 for a twenty week term. The town health officer warned against a fresh invasion of malarial diseases due to poor sanitation. During the year a debating society was organized, and the Sells Brothers "Millionaire Confederation of Stupendous Railroad Shows" performed in November. One of the odder incidents occurred at Oak Place, the George Steele home on Maysville Road (now the East Huntsville Baptist Church) A quart size bottle containing arsenic was found in the well, thus contaminating the drinking water. Charges against a couple living near the farm were filed, but the case was dismissed due to insufficient evidence.

Elections played a prominent role in 1880 when city, state and national offices were at stake, and the newspapers quickly took their stands. While the *Independent* remained out of the ensuing controversy, the editors of the *Advocate*, Austin H. Britten, and the *Democrat*, J. Withers Clay, geared up their long-standing feud, both lashing out at the opposition party, its candidates, and often at each other. The first skirmish arose over the election of mayor and aldermen in early April. The mayoral race saw the closest contest on record with Zebulon P. Davis receiving 434 votes to 432 for

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*Huntsville - 1880*

*by Patricia Ryan*

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Thomas W. White and one for S. J. Mayhew. Six aldermen were re-elected, and in addition for the first time, two black candidates were chosen. When the latter were nominated, Clay had remarked, "there is some sinister object in this movement, a Radical cat in the meal tub and we trust that no Democrat is rat enough to be caught by such a device" (March 24); the other two newspapers later chided him into admitting that there had been no party nominations and both were independent tickets.

This fracas had barely subsided when party platforms and presidential nominations were announced. The *Advocate* devoted more and more space to its support of the National Greenback Labor Party and its candidate, James B. Weaver, while its tirades against the opposition Bourbons, as the Democrats were called, grew increasingly bitter. To spread its Greenback philosophy, Britten announced that an extra edition of 10,000 copies would be circulated gratuitously throughout the state in mid-July. The *Independent* quietly supported the Democratic candidate, Winfield Scott Hancock, while the party standard-bearer, the *Democrat*, did so vehemently. The *Advocate's* virulent attacks in one edition prompted Clay to accuse Britten of "reckless and persistent defamation of public and private citizens." He continued, "We can expect nothing better from a hireling press, which to serve the vile purpose of its masters, is ready to 'distort the truth, cumulate the lie, and pile the pyramid of calumny'....Scarcely an issue of [the *Advocate*] has appeared, in which it has not manifested its vemon by throwing its paperwads, saturated with filth and falsehood, at prominent citizens." (August 4) Britten

retorted with, "A Bourbon is an antiquated political jack-ass, braying at the ghosts of dead issues." (October 27) Despite all the bickering, Democrat Rufus Cobb carried Madison County in the gubernatorial race, Greenback W. M. Lowe won the Congressional race, and Republican James Garfield triumphed in the presidential race, although none of the three newspapers had endorsed the latter. All three men won their overall races as well.

A continuing economic slump slowed business activity during the year. Early in 1880 it was announced that the citizens of Huntsville proposed to print a twenty-five to thirty page booklet describing the lands, minerals, water power, manufacturing facilities, markets, climate and social advantages in order to induce immigration and capital to the area. Transportation facilities were inadequate, and the townspeople formed various groups to raise funds to construct or improve the roads to surrounding cities. The Tennessee River Improvement Committee met in Huntsville in January to petition Congress for larger appropriations for the Muscle Shoals Canal, but the bill was defeated in the House of Representatives. Talk of a new railroad line surfaced several times but none was established, leaving the citizens with only an east-west line, the Memphis & Charleston; connections for north-south travel had to be made in Decatur. While Britten advocated that "Huntsville must not stand still. Progress is the word" (February 18), the editor of the *Independent* lamented, "A rabbit was chased around the Public Square Wednesday morning and ran into Mr. J. B. Laughlin's undertaker's shop. This is interpreted to mean that Huntsville will be a dead

place in nine months if we don't get another railroad." (February 26)

Cotton prices ranged from around 8 1/2 to 10¢ per pound early in the year and averaged about 12¢ in December. The season must have been a successful one as the *Independent* noted that more than one thousand bales were shipped from the depot in three days; however, the following week it stated that due to a premature winter not half the crop had been gathered. (December 2 and 9)

On a less happy note, in April notice was served on the First Presbyterian Church that unless the balance of their mortgage was paid, the church would be sold; the trustees voted to assess each member with his or her share of the debt and thus averted foreclosure.

Tight money had its usual effect on the housing industry. Real estate sales were sluggish, and the *Advocate* stated in September that there were not a half dozen vacant houses in the city. Alterations and repairs to existing structures proved less expensive than new construction, and during the year the Baptist, Episcopal and Cumberland Presbyterian churches were refurbished. Dr. M. C. Baldrige purchased the Jeremiah Clemens house at 219 West Clinton Street and was said to be "thoroughly renovating and repairing the house." (*Advocate*, February 18) The extent of this alteration is unknown for it was not until 1884 that the second story was added to the house, and presumably, it then took on its Italianate features. J. Henry Landman added another story to his residence and enlarged it with a cottage style front. A house facing Franklin Street on the Constitution Hall

Park lot was to be enlarged and converted for the storage of cotton; again it is not known if this was done, since in 1882 the old buildings were razed and new ones constructed.

New construction was equally slack. It was announced in February that James M. Moss had purchased for \$550 one and a third acres, a portion of the site of the present Municipal Building, on which he proposed to build a residence, mill and grain elevator, the latter to meet a long felt need in the city. On West Clinton, two residences were erected, and Henry McGee constructed an ice house on his hotel lot (site of the Terry-Hutchens building) for his new ice machine, which would turn out 24,000 pounds daily. On the same street a new store was built. The local firm of John G. Baker & Company put up the mausoleum over the grave of Dr. Burritt in Maple Hill Cemetery. The desire for a hotel on Monte Sano was discussed, and Henry McGee announced an interest in erecting one, but it was 1886 when another group, the North Alabama Improvement Company, began the work. Throughout the year William Myers advertised as a builder, contractor and dealer in sash, doors, blinds and dressed lumber. The newspapers reported he had received the contract for the repairs to the Episcopal Church; but, it is not known how much or what other business he had. In December the *Democrat* announced Myers had sold his real estate and planned to move to Jacksonville, Florida, but at least by 1888, he had returned to Huntsville. One other builder to advertise was James M. Hutchens; no architectural listings appeared.

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