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# Monte Sano

## Mountain Had Early

### Health Settlement

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By Pat Jones

"Moses, fetch a log or two more heah!"

George Fearn's command appeared for a moment to have gone unheard, and he straightened his slumped shoulders as if to call again. When, from the rear of the row of tiny log cabins at his back, came a muffled voice, slow and wheezed.

"Yassuh, Marse George, I's a-comin' soon's I gets mah shoes on."

"Listen at that rascal - asleep again."

With the remark, the master tossed into the smoldering fire before him a small twig he had been rolling between his fingers.

"That's the mountain air, George," John Martin joined in. "You can't blame [Moses] for that. Why, man,

I can do more sleeping and eating up here than anywhere else in the world."

His remark drew the approval of several others of the group gathered around those burning logs that summer night in 1827.

The season was near the middle of August, but a chilly breeze, sweeping the ridge of Monte Sano after nightfall, had made them realize their small fire was not an unpleasant addition.

As Moses, a short darky with a touch of gray above his ears, came into the circle with more fuel, the reflection was cast upon a scene once so typical of Monte Sano, a scene somewhat primitive in its beginning, but which showed an early forethought on the part of its creators, a never-outgrown step in the general fight for health.

A few feet from the fire stood a T-shaped building, solidly constructed and several times larger than the one or two-room shanties nearby. Its neatness and the freshness of the chinks between its logs indicated that it had not been there long. Attached to the ends of each of the three ells to the house were broad, squatty chimneys of limestone rock, affording patrons the utmost in open-fire comfort.

Windows were no more than holes in the walls, covered with heavy slabs formed by spiking together logs cut away to form the aperture.

This larger structure, known as the Inn, was the headquarters for the little health colony, planned not long after settlers first came from Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia and the Carolinas to till the fertile soil in this section. At its board, nourishing meals were served thrice daily to visitors up from the surrounding territory. Many persons were from Huntsville, the little town gathered down in the valley to the west, not quite four miles away.

The cabins on each side of the inn were no more than sleeping quarters, principally for the women, for when visitors on the mountain were numerous, men curled up in blankets beside open fires, and slept with little thought of wild animals which constantly, after dark, stalked the odor of food to within a few feet of the circle of light. These smaller structures had been built over a decade or more of years, new

foundations appearing as additional families found the health-giving qualities of the spot.

Trees stood in massive growth on all sides forming so thick a forest that the narrowest of footpaths were of necessity meandering studies. Oak, hickory, chestnut, redbud, sweet gum, walnut, prickly ash, cedar, even the rare shittim-wood all were to be found within a short radius of each other.

Down the northern slope of the mountain, only a few feet below the spot on which the circle of men surrounded the fire, was a dell literally covered with flowers, the plants growing amid random rocks, surrounding a tiny chalybeate spring. This source of water, giving forth so cool a supply that the spot had been named "Cold Spring," was the actual explanation for the presence of the houses above. Not a cabin was without its wooden pail of the sparkling fluid, the mineral qualities of which were so revivifying. Babies in arms drank it freely, for doctors had advised mothers of its great aid in teething.

A number of men prominent in county history, who had taken an active part in the development of Monte Sano, were gathered on the mountain that August evening of 1827.

Several had driven up from Huntsville during the day to remain over the weekend; others had been residents there since early in the summer.



Old view of Coe's Roost at Sadler Spring on Monte Sano.

Among them, in addition to George Fearn and John Martin, were General Bartley M. Lowe, "Merchant Prince" of Huntsville, later to become first president of the local Branch Bank of Alabama, and brigadier-general of militia; Levin Wilson Shepherd, early contractor; Samuel Chapman, later circuit judge for a number of years; John Brahan, one of the organizers of the Huntsville Episcopal Church; Dr. Alexander Erskine, Dr. Samuel Breck, John M. Fackler, Preston Yeatman, William Patton.

Others included Dr. Thomas Fearn, active in the early development of the county, and credited with having given Monte Sano its name. Dr. David Moore, member of many sessions of the Legislature and speaker of the House in 1840; Arthur F.

Hopkins, member of the state constitutional convention in 1819, legislator and supreme court judge; Hunter Peal, early county surveyor, who laid the first water main in Huntsville; George P. Beirne, Robert Fearn, Thomas G. Percy, Charles Cabaniss, Martin Miller, kinsman of John Martin, and the Rev. James Rowe, pastor of the First Methodist Church in Huntsville.

These men sat on logs drawn up in a huge circle. Some were engaged in private conversations; others listened to the general talk around the fire, their attention first on one group, then on another.

The minister gazed abstractedly at the coals. His mind was hundreds of miles away, upon his sweetheart attending school in Ohio.



Old log house on Panorama Drive, Monte Sano, 1970 view.

Quite a few of the men puffed slowly at long pipes, filled with tobacco furnished from his plantation by Charles Cabaniss, owner of the first cotton mill in Alabama, whose father had been that extensive Virginia planter who had placed upon the market the famous Caven-dish brand of the leaf.

Seated at the end of a hickory log, his back resting against a small tree, Shepherd, the contractor, held a golden-haired girl, scarcely past her third birthday. She lay in the hollow of her father's arm, her long curls trailing from beneath her left shoulder to emblazon in lovely disorder his rough doublet. At the slightest noise above the ordinary, she opened her sleepy blue eyes, stared silently around the

circle, then nodded off again.

Little did those visitors of 1827 see of the future that awaited the mountain. They knew that it was a healthy location for both children and adults, that only a short stay there brought a remarkable change in both appetite and general feeling, and based on this certainty, they already had made plans for greater development.

Their ideas had seemed farfetched and utterly ridiculous to the average "hard head" settler who saw only cotton land as soil worth looking at twice, but the bracing effect of the air up on this 2,312-acre plateau, 1,700 feet above sea level, gave them confidence.

Shaped like a large, jagged U, this range, a terminal ridge of the great Cumberland chain, covering an area west of Flint River and running southward toward the Tennessee, possessed many natural phenomena of both beauty and oddness. Topped with sandstone, its soil was gray and porous, and dried rapidly after rainfall. Furthermore, numerous springs of chalybeate, alum, sulphur, magnesia, limestone and free-stone water had been found running from beneath rocky cliffs on its sides.

Cold Spring was the most prized of them all, registering a temperature of 55.4 degrees Fahrenheit, the coldest water in Alabama.

In a year or two, a girl's school was to appear on a point only a few feet from where the fire burned that night. This seminary, a healthy institution conducted by none other than the Rev. James Rowe and his young wife, was to attract pupils from many miles around, and was to afford them all of the classes considered proper for young ladies of that date. Then was to come Viduta, the little town given the Italian name, "view." Laid off on the northern end of the mountain, its streets orderly lined and numbered, this settlement was to be inhabited by many prominent families and to include many substantial homes before the Civil War.

Coal mining was still another topic slated for a chapter in the mountain's history. Started under the initiative of two men, who had noticed that Monte Sano

was the most southern point of the great Tennessee coal fields, this industry grew until it became a fairly lucrative business for those involved. Tunnel openings were made rapidly at certain points along the upper rim on the plateau during the score or more of years the activity lasted.

Finally, as a fitting climax to the century in which its qualities were discovered, Monte Sano was to blossom forth into one of the best-known summer resorts in the South.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars were to be spent in development, bringing to a head the dream of those men who first frequented the mountain. The spot was to become the toast of pleasure seekers, who gathered from all over the United States and from several foreign countries -- millionaires, celebrities, social leaders, prominent business men -- each following the holiday trend of the gay 90's.

Only a part of this could those patrons of 1827 see. They could pray and weekly visualize, but it remained for their hopes to be transplanted into the minds of future generations before there could be realized even a part of what they had planned.

The first piece of Monte Sano land entered, oddly enough, was that of Charles Cabaniss, whose son, Septimus, was to marry Virginia Ann Shepherd. A patent for this 80-acre tract (in the northwest quarter of Section 29, Township 3, Range 1 East)



Soldiers' Guardhouse, Monte Sano, 1888. In order to escape the scourge of yellow fever in 1888, U. S. troops stationed in Florida were sent to the healthful atmosphere atop Monte Sano. Due to the demands of the soldiers for transportation between the mountain and Huntsville, the promoters of the Monte Sano Railway, eyeing the lucrative military trade, hurried to complete their dummy line in 1889.

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was obtained from the government on Sept. 18, 1809.

On this land, which extended over a part of the heavily wooded slope and valley toward Chapman's mountain, Cabaniss built a two-room log cabin as a temporary home for his wife, Lucy Ingram, and four children. Later, he was to remove them to a plantation two and a half miles northeast of Hazel Green, on which he grew tobacco and built the first cotton mill in the state.

The next man to enter a mountain tract was William Patton, who on July 11, 1811,

obtained a patent for 40 acres, covering the later hotel site and a part of the immediate slope toward Huntsville. The third entry was by Judge William Smith, U. S. senator and congressman from South Carolina. He acquired 160 acres even farther west from the top of the plateau than that gotten by Patton.

Then five years before Alabama became a state and the same length of time after Madison County was formed, was recorded the first step toward development on the mountain. On Jan. 3, 1814, John Martin received title to 80 acres (east half of the

southwest quarter of Section 28, in Township 3, Range 1 East), the future location of the town of Viduta.

The register certificate of payment for this land had been obtained from William Sharp, government land agent, by George Fearn, Dr. Alexander Erskine, John Brahan, Bartley M. Lowe and Thomas Fearn, who had planned the health settlement. In order to procure a patent with more convenience, however, they had transferred the certificate to Martin, selected to acquire the grant and to hold it in trust until details were ready to actually begin the town.

For four years after 1814, land on the mountain was taken up rapidly. Then during the next decade, not an acre was entered.

In 1828, however, began a rush for patents which continued through 1835, then dropped off just as had been the case after 1818.

Three tracts of land were entered soon after John Martin procured a patent for the site of Viduta. The next day, Jan. 4, 1814, his kinsman, Martin Miller, acquired the title to a quarter section. So did John Brahan the following August. Three months later, the same number of acres were registered in the name of Hunter Peal.

Although the land was patented at an early date, a number of years were to pass before buildings were erected at any point other than on that particular part of the Viduta site where the group had assembled on that night in 1827.

