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# The Sivley Treasure Recovered

One of the first homes in Madison County was built some time after 1809 around a winding stairway and harbored buried treasure which brought a family descendant all the way from Chicago in search of it. These features made the Sivley home a mile southeast of Merrimack, stand out as the most striking of local estates.

Once an important mansion in the lives of Huntsville's first settlers, this home is forgotten now. Few county residents know of its existence. At its point beside the Big Spring branch, midway between Merrimack and Whitesburg Pike, passersby are few, and those who stop to view it find nothing to indicate its part in history.

The whole atmosphere of the home suggests feudal England. It stands barren-like on a knoll, in next to the last stages of ruin, without even a shade tree to break the force of the wind sweeping across the fields that lead up to the mountains to the south and west.

In reviewing this home, two houses must be considered, one a frame structure, the other a massive brick. Which of these was built first is not known, but it seems likely that the frame superseded the other, for the brick was given the preference in location, standing a few feet to the front of the other.

The Sivleys, according to tradition, came to Alabama from Tennessee in 1809, floating down the river on a flat-boat. The family originally came from the Dutch colony in Pennsylvania, settling next in Hanover or King William Co., Virginia and then moving South.

Four brothers, Andrew, Joseph, Jacob and Jesse, and their wives, are supposed to have come down on this migration. The father, Jacob Sivley, however, must have

accompanied them or followed shortly afterward, for he and his elder son, Andrew, then 26 years old, acquired grants adjoining each other from the government on August 28 of the year they arrived.

Assuming that the frame house is the older, this was built by Jacob on a rise beside the Big Spring branch, a small stream of clear water. All uprights and beams in the structure were fashioned from cedar logs. Other lumber used was from yellow poplar. This building was oblong in shape with a tall chimney at each end, had four rooms and was simple in construction. From these quarters Jacob was to direct his slaves in their work about his farm which he named St. Andrew Plantation.

The son, on the other hand, built his home across the stream from the father. In addition, he put up a dam nearby and formed a pond to supply water for his grist mill which was to be his chief means of livelihood. This was the beginning of "Sivley's Mill", as it has been known even to the present generation.

The father and son worked together ideally to carry on their interests in that section, covering much of the site of the present Merrimack village.

Jacob died in 1816. The following receipt was given his son-in-law, William Fine, on Sept. 20 of that year in answer to a bill from William Nesmith: "To a coffin, six feet, at \$2 a foot, \$12." This box, like all others of those pioneer days, was made of planed boards and fitted with iron handles.

Two years later, Jacob's estate was bought by Andrew. This deed, signed by his heirs, follows in part:

"Joseph Sivley and wife, Rachel; William Smalling and wife, Nancy; John Sivley and wife, Elizabeth; Jesse Sivley and wife, Elizabeth; Bannister Bond and wife, Peggy, all of Madison County. Thomas and wife, Elizabeth, of Limestone County; William Fine and wife, Catherine, of Giles County, Tennessee, which said Joseph Sivley, Catherine Fine, Nancy Smalling, John Sivley, Elizabeth Evans, Jesse Sivley, Peggy Bond, Rebecca Davis are children of late Jacob Sivley, to Andrew Sivley, November 19, 1818."

One noticeable feature of this record, still well preserved, is that the daughters were unable to sign their names, using an X with a witness as their signature, due evidently to a

belief in those days that education was not needed by a woman, as she was cut out only to become the wife of man.

Around this time seems most likely to have been the date at which the brick home was erected on a rise nearby, and with a better view than that of the frame structure. Both were somewhat similar in outward construction, but were vastly different on the inside.

In the basement of this finer home were arranged three rooms, all well finished. One of these, that at the west end, was set aside as the kitchen. Its fireplace, half the width of the room, was large enough to roast a large section of beef at one time. Entrance to the cellar was gained through a door at the west end of the house.

Food was taken from the kitchen up a stairway to the dining room above, which had a cupboard built into the wall in its northwest corner. Another stairs led from this chamber to the top floor, allowing passage up and down without entering the other part of the home.

The main door of the building faced the north, toward Huntsville. This was in two panels, below an arch of brick. Upon entering the home, visitors found themselves in a barrel-shaped hallway, easily 30 feet from its bottom floor to its ceiling. Near the entrance, a winding stairway began its circuitous route to the upper landing, passing just above the door at the opposite side of the house. This was, without doubt, the most picturesque stairway in Madison County.

Two large rooms were located on each side of the hall, one above the other. These measured 30 feet in dimensions, with ceilings 15 feet high. Large windows allowed a view to the north and south.

Fireplaces were built in each room. That in the upper chamber to the east was of an odd arrangement, facing obliquely to the center. On one side, it was flush with the wall, while on the other, its corner stood four feet out in the floor. This probably was so arranged in order that a fire burning on the hearth would not reflect in the eyes of a person sleeping in the section outside the scope of the light.

Three porches, a long one on the north, and a smaller on each of the south and west sides, set off the outer appearance of the building.

In 1832, Andrew sold a tract of land, on which was located the mill pond, to James B. Martin. This sale was

made on the condition that the canal boats would be allowed to pass, and that the company be permitted to use water from this source to fill its lock. Furthermore, Sivley was to retain the right to water his stock from the lake.

Shortly after the middle of the century, Andrew, approaching the age of 70, felt that his days were numbered. Rebecca, too, was climbing in age and showing a feebleness that urged her older husband to relieve her of all responsibilities and worries. So he made plans for their retirement.

In 1853, he sold the plantation containing 750 acres to his son, Joseph, for \$15,000. This change of property was made on the condition that the buyer would take care of his parents as long as they lived. The mill was included in the sale.

Then came his will. Andrew had eleven children, as follows:

Elvira (1813-1833) who married a Mr. Cooper; Deborah, married Jack Harris and lived near Gunthaven, Miss.; Hamilton, born 1807, married Sarah Jane Baker; George W., (1830-1857); Lucy C., (1822-1834); Rawley, born on the flatboat while his parents were on their way to Alabama, married Eliza Jane Burleson and lived near Raymond, Miss.; William B. (1826-1840); Martin; Joseph, married Clara Marshall of Alabama; Elvira, first married to a Mr. Wallace, later to Oliver Vassar Shearer of near Birmingham. The name of the eleventh child is not known.

Of these children, only four were mentioned in the will, the others either having died or severed connections with the parents.

According to his will, Andrew left his wife, the former Rebecca Denton, 11 Negro slaves and the furniture of the home, specifying that the slaves were to be divided among the children upon her death. His three grandchildren by the name of Sivley, all descended from Jacob, were willed \$1,000 each. The four resulting from the marriage of his daughter to William Faris, were left a similar sum but Hamilton was guardian and trustee.

The remainder of his estate was to be divided among his children, Rawley, Elvira and Hamilton, and among the children of Martin, deceased. It was explained in the will that Joseph had gotten his share in the payment on the home

allowed him.

The last time a Sivley's name was recorded on the deed books of this county was in 1870.

Among present descendants are, from Joseph, Miss Lucy Landman of Huntsville; Joseph Landman of Memphis and George P. Landman of Chicago; from Hamilton, Mrs. Moore Moore, wife of a Memphis physician, and a Mrs. Fields of Washington, D. C.

Laura M. Landman, who first was married to Robert Randall Kelly and later to Thomas J. Young, both of Huntsville; Emma E. Landman, who was married to J. F. Young, and Arthur S. Landman are all deceased grandchildren of Joseph.

Joseph, the member of the family to last own the home, had five children. They included Mary Frances, who was married to George P. Landman, former prominent local cotton broker; Anna Rebecca, who was married to D. J. Jones; Elvira J., who was married to Richard Halsey, all of Huntsville; Sarah Estelle, who was married to J. R. Little; Raleigh, N. C., and Archie, who died while young.

This home, today is a poor monument to the fineness which once lay about the winding stairway in its very heart. Mill tenantry and poor upkeep have carried it into a dilapidated state.

Its cellar door stands open to the passing tramp, to the wandering animal or food-seeking fowl. Trash is piled in all corners, while ashes from the last tenant's fires are heaped high upon its hearths. Windows, devoid of panes, allow the wind to whip the dirt about on its floors. Boards from crates now take the place of the door of fine woodwork that once hung beneath the archway at the front. Even the railing of the winding stairs has partly been carried away. Chimneys at each end of the house are in good condition, but cracks follow the four walls from the ground to the shingled roof now covered with tin.

Outside, porches are gone and there are no signs that there ever was a lawn. A plowed field runs up to its front doorstep. A few feet away, a pit marks the site of the ice-house where was stored ice from the pond below. The mill was razed years ago but the old frame house appears far sounder than the main dwelling.

Few persons are present visitors, from the standpoint

of curiosity or interest at this home. Last February, there came to the estate an expensively dressed woman in a fine car, driven by a chauffeur in uniform. She was from Chicago, she said; and the granddaughter of a Sivley. After looking the place over and getting her bearings, she left.

The next day, however, she appeared again, this time ordering her car up a narrow winding road to the small family graveyard, surrounded by cedars some half a mile from the house. Nearly two hours later, she departed without coming near the old home again.

This visitor left her mark behind her. In the southwest corner of the burial ground, ten feet from a large grave stone and at the base of an immense cedar tree, she had her chauffeur dig. First, in order to do so, he cut away the roots on that side of the tree, some of which measured six or eight inches in diameter. Soon, he uncovered a brick vault, four feet square and two and one-half feet deep, extending under the tree.

What was taken from this vault, which certainly was not once a grave, is not known. It may have been a fortune cached there by her forefathers, perhaps during the Civil War. This wealth may have been in the form of gold, silver or jewels. Again, it may have been valuable papers buried there so many years ago, with a tree planted on top of it, that roots from the seedling, and even the tree itself, have grown to a massive size.

Whatever she found, this woman doubtless was one descendant of a historic family who believed the cryptic message left for her on a map found in her grandsire's strong box.

(Ed: Part of what was once the Sivley property was purchased for use as the Huntsville Airport, west of South Memorial Parkway, after this story was written. The old homes are no longer in existence but the tiny cemetery and the old tree with its damaged roots, are still in existence at the end of an abandoned runway. 1969).