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The Kellys Of Jeff

Born of an early settlement around a spring forming the head of Indian Creek, from the Kelly home at Jeff has grown a community listed on United States postoffice records as Jeff, named for Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy.

As closely as can be determined from records, the first part of this mansion was built soon after 1828 by Benjamin O. Wilburn.

Due to a recent remodeling, passersby doubtless view this home with the idea that it is a new structure located on the site of an older dwelling. Nothing about it indicates that one part of it once served as a postoffice for the little frontier colony at the spring.

Today, the residence of Lawson and D. E. Kelly and family, it stands almost at the center of 640 acres of land, an entire section, acquired by J. O. Kelly, their father, from Wilburn in 1853. About it is almost every feature required to make a village, all the result of diligent work and saving on the part of the Kellys.

This tract was patented by various settlers in this county at different times during the three or four years immediately following the land sales of 1809. Each of the four quarter sections involved in the 640 acres, passed through several owners before reaching the Kellys.

The spring, only a short distance away, from which come the waters flowing southward to form the Hurricane fork of Indian Creek, drew the first white settlers to that section. A deed on the sale of a nearby area, dated prior to 1820, has the following reference to this water source: "...lying immediately at the head of Price's Big Spring."

The first houses erected around the little pool were of

the crude type planned not so much to protect their occupants from the elements as to shield them from an occasional arrow of a passing Indian. In their midst was a blockade to which the settlers might flee during a sudden outbreak of hostility among the Redskins.

The only part remaining from the early settlement is a one-room structure which was moved by Wilburn and made a part of the Kelly home. This evidently served the pioneers as a postoffice, for one of its doors bore the usual slot for letters.

Wilburn made his first purchase of land in 1828, buying a quarter section from John Walker and wife, Huldah, for \$800. The following year, he added more, and repeated this act in 1834 and 1835, acquiring a quarter section each time. An odd feature about the Walker tract was that this owner had gotten it from Isaac Jamison and wife, Margaret R., for "six thousand weight of good mercantile seed cotton."

As the first area Wilburn bought is that on which the home stands, there is reason to believe that this man began his home soon afterward, for his additional transactions, following so closely, indicate that he was starting a plantation. The adjoining tract on which the spring is located was added to the farm later.

Just when Wilburn moved the old postoffice up from the spring and added it to his home is not known. The settlement there, however, is reputed to have broken up around 1845 because of repeated outbreaks of malaria fever.

Wilburn, who is buried on the Luke Matthews place nearby, died before Kelly acquired the property. A few years later, his widow was married to Tom Graves, a young man accused of marrying her for her money. Rumor even has it that the woman died a mysterious death.

But anyway, on Sept. 12, 1853, Joshua O. Kelly bought the entire tract from the Wilburn estate. His father, David E. Kelly, had come down from Brunswick County, Virginia, with his brother, Josiah, (their younger brother, Billy, came a few years later) and had settled with his wife, Nancy, near Meridianville some time prior to 1820. Later, he had moved to a plantation on Pulaski Pike, five miles east of Jeff.

David's children included Laura, wife of James Phillips; Amanda, wife of Samuel Davidson; Martha, who died single

at the age of 54; J. O., who married Sally B. Strong, of near Meridianville; W. S., who died at 82 in Texas, and Thales, who died at Corona in Walker County but is buried in the Kelly Cemetery in Madison County.

J. O. married Sally Strong, whose old home still stands on a hill overlooking the highway a mile south of Meridianville, on June 12, 1850. Their children follow:

Sue, wife of James R. Burwell, parents of Kelly Burwell and Mrs. N. B. Stump of El Paso, Texas; D. E., who wed Eva Thompson; J. O., who died in 1928; Lawson; Lena, wife of Judge George Malone of Limestone County; Lula, who died single; and Nanny, wife of Henry B. Malone of Limestone County, parents of Rebecca; Mrs. George Harsh of Memphis; Sally B.; Mrs. Horace Leeper of Denton, Texas, and Nancy of Athens, Alabama.

Finding this land he had bought to be a fertile tract, J. O. began at once an active farming career. Cotton was his main crop. Each year, many acres of this plant were cultivated with the aid of slaves and disposed of on a profitable market. Before he could increase his estate to a safe standpoint, however, the Civil War came on.

Kelly was entering his 46th year when the struggle began, but he volunteered at once, enlisting in the Fourth Alabama Cavalry under Forrest. His battles included that at Shiloh and all of those between Chattanooga and Atlanta. He escaped without wounds.

While he was away fighting, stirring times were occurring at his home. Mrs. Kelly was a hearty woman and a true Southerner. To live with her during the war came her sister, Sue Strong, Another Rebel at heart. These two were outspoken in their support of the Confederacy, and this brought scores of Yankees there to bother them. Things about the plantation were torn up generally and 17 fine horses were carried away at one time. But the meat salted down was saved. This was taken up on the mountain nearby and stored, with a high fence around it to keep animals away.

Yankees often occupied the lower part of the home, so a guard was placed there to protect the family. On one occasion, a colonel was sent out with a force from Huntsville to burn the home, but this man standing there on watch talked the soldier into leaving the building unmolested.

J. O. came back to his home a poor man, but the fortunes of war were not enough to dishearten him. He freed his slaves, who had lived in a row of cabins at the side of the home, giving each of them a supply of food and a sum of money. Several of them remained with him. Among these was Fanny Strong, an old Negro mammy who died around 1912 or 1913. Her substantially built one-room log hut, with its large fireplace, still stands in the yard.

With the help of those slaves who refused to leave their master, he began his reconstruction, his family growing up about his feet. This effort on his part, working amid his then fenceless fields, was a success, for again he farmed wisely.

In 1885, two of his sons, who had reached manhood by that time, formed a partnership in the mercantile, blacksmithing, ginning and farming business under the firm name of D. E. and J. O. Kelly. Excepting the W. R. Rison Banking Co., this is the oldest establishment in the county still under the direction of the family which founded it.

Three years after this business was formed, D. E. was appointed postmaster, a position he has held since. When the postoffice was established there, the name of the community was changed from Jefferson Davis to Jeff, due to a government postal regulation requiring that names of additional settlements be short. His commission is the third oldest in the United States.

In 1888, D. E. married Eva Thompson and moved into a separate home which he had had built on the farm. Their issue included Thompson R., married to Adelene Rhyne, Lexington, Miss.; Aurora, wife of Homer M. Rowe, Lincoln Co., Tenn; J. O., married to Eula Russell, Maury Co., Tenn., and Mary Lena, wife of Jeff Davis Luten. Children of Thompson, who now live in the old home with their parents, grandparents and great uncle, Lawson, represent the fourth generation of Kellys to occupy it.

J. O., the progenitor of all the Kellys to live in the home, born March 17, 1826, and died on March 8, 1897, almost 71 years to the day after he was born. A writer of that day had the following to say about this man:

"He had a most exalted idea of what a Christian should be, and feeling that he did not measure up to this standard, he soon withdrew from the church and did not reunite with

it until the Summer before his death. This obituary, in addition, explains that J. O. Kelly was tender-hearted and that he was a friend to the needy, discounting bills to widows and handing out food to the poor.

Mrs. Sally B. (Strong) Kelly died May 19, 1915. After the death of this elder pair, J. O., Lawson and Lula, all single, continued to live in the home. But after Lula's death, D. E. and his family, who had moved to the dwelling he had built nearby, returned to the old mansion, where they have resided since.

The home today has only its surroundings to bespeak its age. Remodeled 20 years ago and brick veneered in 1928, the building now appears almost as a new structure, both inside and out. The double porch formerly in front was tossed aside for white columns, floors and window frames were changed, but not the sills and corner posts of hewed poplar.

Twelve rooms, eight of which were from the original house, now make up the home. These are fitted with antique furniture and decorated with many beautiful family paintings, both landscape and animal sketches, all the work of Lula, who was particularly gifted in this line. Many of the doors still seen there are of the original handfluted type. A mantlepice of fine workmanship is found in the dining room.

The beauty of no mansion, however great, could excel that of the lawn at this home. A thick sod forms a carpet, which, even when mowed, allows one to sink in up to his ankles, while tall cedars furnish almost a solid blanket above. This is set off still further by rows of well trimmed boxwood, perhaps 60 or 70 years old, on each side of the walkway leading from the roadside to the front door.

Flower gardens, bordered with scores of nursery plants, are on all sides of the house. The two biggest of these, one of which was started by Sally Kelly shortly after the Civil War, stand nearest the road.

The settlement around the home now, due mainly to the partnership formed in 1885, resembles a town in many ways. There is a postoffice, a telephone switchboard, a blacksmith repair shop and a general merchandise store. In addition to these, the Kellys have established a nursery, a gin, and a sweet potato curing house. They have in-

creased the plantation to 2500 acres, much of which is an orchard, for they probably ship more Early Harvest and Transparent apples and Keiffer pears than any other firm south of Virginia. In addition to this, they have a large cattle business.

J. O., one of the partners, died in 1928, but the firm has continued under the old name.

One of the biggest prides of this family as it directs the business in the little community of Jeff is that not a foot of the land bought by J. O. Kelly in 1853, or any of that added to the tract later, has been covered by mortgage since they acquired it.



J. O. Kelly