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## From the Editor

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## **From the Editor:**

### **In Search of the Bridges of Madison County**

This issue of the *Quarterly* sent me into the hinterland in search of old bridges. I found only traces. A canoe trip on the Flint planned early Spring will yield more. What I did find in my search were wonderfully helpful people. Doyal Bradley of the County Engineers told me to contact Mattie Lou Clay Bishop and her husband Ed who live on the south side of the Paint Rock River facing the Butler Mill Bridge, which was then undergoing its third transformation. Bradley's directions were to go out 72E to the Woodville sign and take a right turn the first chance after that, then go six or eight miles turning right each chance I got. He assured me I would end up at a little old store topped by an old Gulf sign. The Bishop's house was just a few yards beyond that and further I could not go - as the bridge was still under construction.

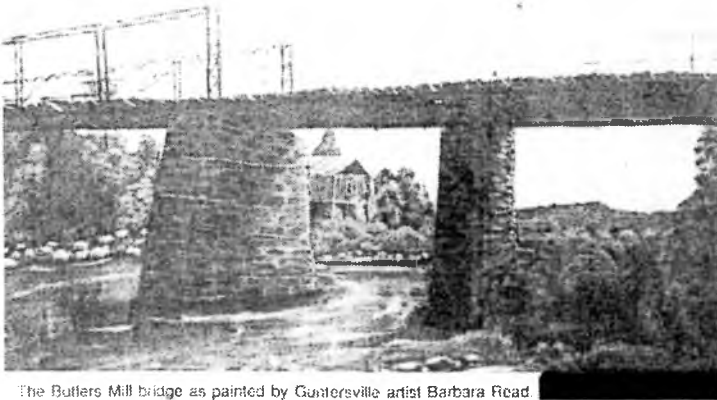
Sure enough, I found my way and the Bishops were at home. In fact, they were doing their daily bridge watching and recording. Ed has video taped the entire construction process. Mattie's family bought the Butler Mill just across the river; so she grew up around this historic spot. Her grandfather, Richard H. Jones, and J. Frank Bevil, his son-in-law, purchased the site in 1916. Then, in 1940, Mattie's father, R. M. Clay, purchased title. In 1974, her brother Sherman inherited it and now she and Ed enjoy title to this unique corner of Madison-Marshall counties, a stone's throw from the Jackson County line.

Mattie Lou and Ed Bishop walk out each day on a scene as rustic, restful and reminiscent of an earlier day as can be found in this area. Her mother, Rose Clay, ran the country store. Since her mom used Gulf gasoline in her car, when the need for a filling station arose, Mrs. Clay put in Gulf. Bridging two counties, the little store with its 29 cent gas, and 5 cent candy bars and colas was a popular way station.

Deeds to the property read like a who's who to the history of the area. Mattie Lou has shared her photographs and records, and HHF member Wenona Jones Switzer has too. Wenona, a Bryant Cobb descendant, and Mattie are cousins. For that matter, as Carlus Page will remind us in his chatty article, everyone was related to someone who was related ...

The theme of this *Quarterly* is bridges of Madison County. Prompted by recent interest in Robert Waller's novel, *The Bridges of Madison County*, your editor went in search of bridges past, especially covered bridges, in our own Madison County. Concrete slabs with no redeeming esthetic value now mark the watery graves of the earlier bridges. The covered bridge at Butler Mill is one bridge that refuses to go gently into the night. Although only a memory now, its spirit hovers.

When the covered bridge was finally pulled down, its logs and planks, from piers and flooring, were strung together to create a ford for mail carriers to cross while another bridge was built at the original site. This second bridge had a split personality, Madison County supplied high steel girders, while Marshall County furnished low railings.



The Butlers Mill bridge as painted by Guntersville artist Barbara Read

The stone piers have proven themselves well-nigh indestructible and proudly bear the new concrete span. The Bishops are pictured standing upon this latest of the Butler Mill bridges. (See photo next page.)

Butler Mill Bridge was properly named. Bill Stubno's thoroughly researched article on Butler Mill established that the Cobb Mill was purchased by James E. and George W. Butler in October, 1882. Madison County Commission minutes establish that on February 11, 1884, a special committee was appointed to "confer" with the probate judge and



county commissioners of Marshall County "about erecting a highway bridge over Paint Rock River at Cobb's ford" (Minutes 1882-1892, 83). On August 11, 1884, Commissioner Joseph A. Brown was authorized to "confer with the Commissioner's Court of Marshall County, Ala. relative to the building of a wooden bridge across Paint Rock River at Cobb's Mill" (99). The county treasurer was ordered to pay "W. R. Rison & Co. benefit of Whited, Atchley & Cooper part payment [for] building bridge over Paint Rock River at Cobb's Mill per order Comm. Brown \$600.-" (104). Lastly, on November 3, 1884, the county treasurer was ordered to pay "A Whited, benefit of A. Whited, J. N. Atchley and A. J. Cooper, for building bridge at Cobbs Old Mill, between Madison and Marshall Counties, payment in full of Madison County's share, per order of Comm. Brown \$834.23" (115).

It would appear that as the new bridge took on the name of the new mill owners, Butler Mill, Butler Mill Bridge, and Butler Mill Road became current and remain to this day. Although the Commission Court minutes do not say it, the Butler Mill Bridge was a covered bridge. In 1885, the commission put covers on the Ashburn Ford Bridge over the Flint and Peevy's Ford Bridge over Hurricane Fork of the Flint (122, 142).

Carlus Page evokes fond memories of when Butler Mill Bridge was quite old and he quite young. The Jackson County Historian/Genealogist presents a case for an even earlier bridge at or near the Butler Mill site. Perhaps so. There was an early covered bridge over the Flint River. The County Commissioner Court minutes, dated April 16, 1855, contain the following: "Ordered that the county Treasurer pay Richard Moore seventy-one dollars for sheading the Bridge over Flynt river" (341).

The memoirs of Reverend James M. Mason found in the *Huntsville Historical Review*, October, 1972, and recently available as a reprint entitled "A Schoolboy Goes to War" found in *Old Huntsville*, issue No. 37 witness to a covered bridge over Flint river. A member of Capt. Frank Gurley's Confederate forces assigned to operate in North Alabama, Mason wrote of the skirmishes with Federals garrisoned along the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. He singled out the Yankee occupiers at the Flint River bridge east of Huntsville, commenting:

"...One of the stations occupied by a garrison was the Flint River bridge, twelve miles east of Huntsville. This covered, wooden bridge was converted into a blockhouse, and furnished with bulletproof gates at each end.

When Captain Hambrick united with us, Bragg's army had already turned the enemy's flank, and were upon the march to Kentucky. Part of our duty now was to obstruct the retreat of the force in North Alabama, and a plan was matured for capturing and burning this bridge. Our scouts learned that the doors were kept open during the daytime and that many of the garrison amused themselves bathing in the river. We hoped to be able to get near enough to capture this bridge by a sudden dash. We dismounted in the woods and approached as near as we could under cover. Many of the Federal soldiers were bathing in the river, others were amusing themselves in various ways. We felt that the prize was almost in our grasp. Just then, the sentinel on duty discovered us and fired; those of the garrison nearest the bridge rushed to their arms; the bathers in the river grabbed their clothing and ran into the bridge and the heavy doors closed with a bang ... our plan had failed, and we drew off" (HHR, 8).

James Monroe Mason, the schoolboy soldier, also sheds light on the other subject of this *Quarterly*, Frank Gurley, his family's legacy. Sarah Dudley Edwards has written a loving tribute to her family and dedicates it to her mother, Sara Dudley Hall. The Halls have bridged the generations and the county with the town. Theirs is a legacy of quiet joy and generosity, strength and continuity. The wonderful moon bridge Sara Hall built in her rock garden is a suitable symbol. Malcolm C. McMillan calls Frank B. Gurley "one of the most interesting of all Madison County war heroes." Gurley's role is summarized:

"He was a local cavalry leader who often rode with Nathan B. Forrest. In August, 1862, ... he was charged by the Federals with the killing of General Robert L. McCook, one of the seventeen "fighting McCooks of Ohio," in a guerrilla-type action near New Market, Alabama. McCook, who had not completely recovered from a wound received some months before, was riding in his ambulance without sufficient escort. When Gurley fell into Union hands in 1863, his execution was prevented only by Confederate threats to hang an excess of Federals in retaliation. Elected sheriff in Madison County at war's end, Gurley was again arrested in November, 1865, by the Radicals and held for a time on the old charge of the murder of General McCook" (Confederate Reader, 155).

James Monroe Mason joined Capt. Gurley's forces, explaining that "General Bragg who was then maturing his plans for the march into Kentucky, gave to Frank B. Gurley of Forrest's Regiment a commission as a Captain of Cavalry, and ordered him to organize these men into a cavalry company, and operate in rear of the enemy" (HHR, 5). The veteran's account relieves Gurley of any culpability for the death of General McCook. The whole encounter was an accident of war. He describes the "panic-stricken" scene,

"We overtook a buggy containing two Federal officers. Firing on them as we came up with them, one was wounded and the other surrendered and hastily stating that the wounded officer was Gen. McCook, appealed to us for help. Capt. Gurley who was with the head of the column stopped and caused the General to be carried into a house nearby, where he expired in a short time, the fatal shot

had passed through his body from the rear, ... By whose hand the fatal shot was fired is not known, as three or four were firing at the same instant (10) ... Among the trophies of this fight was the sword which was presented to Gen. McCook by the Congress of the United States, which bore upon its blade an inscription commendatory of his gallantry" (12).

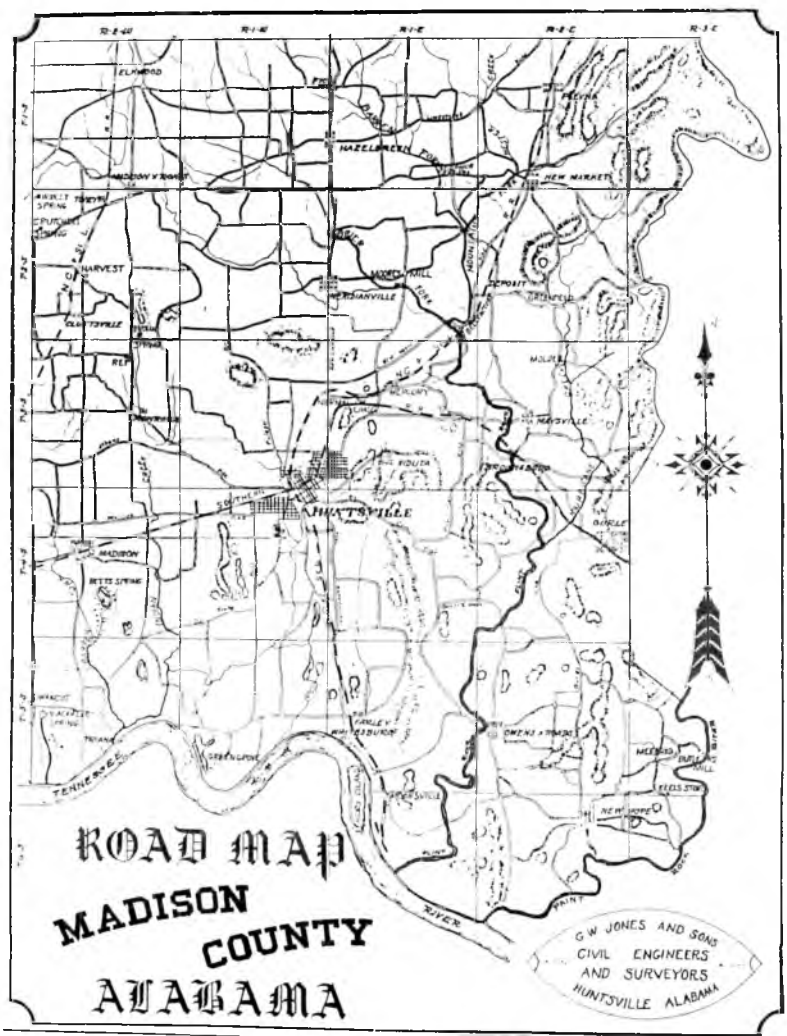
Captain Gurley returned the sword to the McCook family after the war.

Forrest acknowledged the extraordinary bravery and tenacity of his North Alabama warrior by presenting him a fine pair of pistols on one occasion and a very fine horse on another. Upon the withdrawal of Federal occupiers on August 31, 1862, Mrs. W. D. Chadick wrote in her diary:

"Frank Gurley [local guerrilla cavalry leader] has been in and arrested James Hickman [Negro trader and hotel proprietor who had traded with Federals during the occupation] and John King, [clerk who must have also traded with the enemy.] and gone again. Returned at 5 o'clock with a company of cavalry. A perfect crowd of ladies and gentlemen rushed to the square to greet them, and Capt. Gurley was literally crowned with wreaths of ivy and flowers" (McMillan, 172).

Kudos to Harvie Jones who accompanied me to Gurley one Saturday and took photographs of the Hall House, Killarney and the Frye Portrait of Frank Gurley and to Malcolm Tarkington for his assistance. Lastly, information and photographs are still sought in the search for the bridges of Madison County.

*Elise Stephens*



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