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## The May 23, 2017 Meeting McMillan Museum Coastal Alabama Community College, Brewton Campus 3:00 p. m.



**Our speaker, Coletta Bailey, is shown at a recent Flomaton High School History Fair with three young ladies modeling feed sack aprons.**

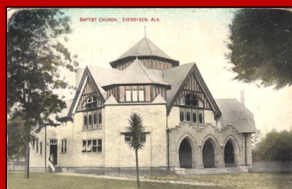
### The Program: "The Farm Fabric- -Feed Sacks"

Coletta Bailey, a member of the Baldwin County Heritage Museum, will speak of the origin of Feedsacks, the popularity of the cotton bag, especially during the Great Depression and World War II, and the end of shipping goods with feed sacks. The presentation will consist of a power point slide show and items made from "chicken linen."

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**Don't forget to bring your favorite finger food for refreshments after the program.**



**First Baptist Church  
Evergreen, AL  
Postcard, 1910**

**Volume 44 Number 5**

**May 2017**

**ECHS June Meeting  
Tuesday, June 27, 2017  
McMillan Museum  
3:00 p. m.**

**Joe Ross and Lee Merritt will present a program on Oxen, training and use.**



**Pensacola Street, Atmore, AL. Postcard from 1910.**

# History of the 1930's Feed Sack Fabric

This history of feed sack clothing is from the Buchanan County, Ohio Historical Society. The article appeared on the web site for Mable and Ethel's Quilt Shop in Sandusky Ohio at <http://www.mequiltshoppe.com/history-of-the-1930s-feedsack-fabric.htm>.

Feed sacks bring to mind poverty of the Great Depression but at the same time there is a romance to the idea that women could make something beautiful from something so mundane.

In truth feed sacks were used for sewing well before the depressions and for several years after. The evolution of the feed sack is a story of ingenuity and clever marketing.

## From Barrels to Feed Sacks

Initially farm and food products were shipped in barrels. The feed sack story starts in the early 1800's, when goods such as food staples, grain, seed, and animal feed were packed for transportation and storage in tins, boxes, and wooden barrels. This was not an ideal method of storage as tin would rust and the hand made boxes and barrels leaked and were damaged easily. They were bulky, heavy and difficult to transport. Between 1840 and 1890 cotton sacks gradually replaced barrels as food containers. In 1846 the invention of the "stitching machine" made it possible

to sew double locking seams strong enough to hold the contents of a bag.

Feed sacks were initially made of heavy canvas, and were used to obtain flour, sugar, meal, grain, salt and feed from the mills. They were reusable, with the farmer bringing an empty sack stamped with his mark or brand to the mill to be filled. This changed when the North East mills began weaving inexpensive cotton fabric in the late 1800's. Feed sacks (or feedbags) were initially printed on plain white cloth and in sizes that corresponded to barrel sizes. For example, a one barrel bag held 196 pounds of flour. A 1/8 barrel bag only held 14 pounds.

The brand name of the flour was simply printed on the side of the bag. Many of the logos on the flour sacks were circular, a legacy from the time when these logos had to fit on the top of a barrel. Women quickly discovered that these bags could be used as fabric for quilts and other needs.

Cotton had been king until the period of 1914 to 1929 when the price dropped out of the cotton market partially because synthetic fabrics like rayon became popular for dresses and undergarments. With the drop in the price of cotton even more companies began using cotton sacking as packaging.

It took a while for feed and flour sack manufacturers to realize how popular these sacks had become with women. Eventually they saw a great opportunity

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**Left: Two women in feed sack dresses, National Geographic, 1947.**

**Right: Instructions from a chicken feed sack.**



**Above: Feedsack Patterns**

# History of the 1930's Feed Sack Fabric

(Continued from page 2)

for promoting the use of feed sacks. First feed sacks began to be sold in colors then, around 1925, colorful prints for making dresses, aprons, shirts and children's clothing began to appear in stores. Manufacturers began to paste on paper labels making it far easier to remove them.

By the late 1930s there was heated competition to produce the most attractive and desirable prints. Artists were hired to design these prints. This turned out to be a great marketing ploy as women picked out flour, sugar, beans, rice, cornmeal and even the feed and fertilizer for the family farm based on which fabrics they desired. Some sacks displayed lovely border prints for pillowcases. Scenic prints were also popular. Manufacturers even made preprinted patterns for dolls, stuffed animals, appliqué and quilt blocks.

It was not hard for the farmer to purchase his goods in feed sacks. The flour industry consumed the largest share of the feed sack market with more than 42 percent. Sugar was next with 17 percent followed by feed, seeds, rice, and fertilizer. These feed sacks came in different sizes, and the quality of the cloth varied with the item it carried. Sugar sacks, for example, were much finer in weave. By 1914, sacks came in 10, 6, 4, 3, 2 and 1 pound sizes, although these sizes varied by manufacturer. President Roosevelt standardized sizes in 1937. A 50 pound feed sack measured 24 x 38 inches. A 100 pound sack measured 39 x 46.

Those who found they had more feed sacks than they could use were able to sell them back to the store

where they were then resold. Chicken farmers went through a great many sacks of feed so the sale of feed sacks became a side business for some of them.

We usually think of feed sacks being a way women provided clothing and bed coverings during the economic hard times of the boll weevil depression in the south in the 1920s and the Great Depression that followed. But actually printed feed sacks were used for sewing from before these depressions to well after World War II. Even though the economy improved during the 1940s it was necessary to conserve because of the need for war and the Great Depression that followed. Using feed sacks for sewing was considered patriotic and women still enjoyed finding attractive prints on feed sacks. One feed sack could have easily made a child's dress or shirt, and three identical sacks to make a woman's dress.

Magazines and pattern companies began to take notice of feed sack popularity and published patterns to

This comment from <<https://thevintagetraveler.wordpress.com>> "I've been to estate sales where there were dozens of beautiful sacks, washed and neatly folded. And I'm sure the 1930s housewife who saved them would be shocked to find the prices collectors and crafters are willing to pay for her "free" bags!"

take advantage of the feed sack prints. Matching fabric and even matching wrapping paper was available, too. Directions were given for using the strings from feed sacks in knitting and crocheting. A

1942 estimate showed that three million women and children of all income levels were wearing print feed-bag garments.

It's not as easy as you might think to identify feed sack fabric. The paper labels were easily removed from a feed sack and even with older ones the label has often been removed. A course weave is not a good indicator as fabric like this could also be bought off the bolt as well. The best indicator is a line of holes from the chain stitching that once held the sack together.



**To the left, part of the display of feedsack clothing presented by our Speaker, Colleta Bailey, at the Flomaton High School History Fair.**

**To the right, award winning dress in the 1959 Cotton Bag Sewing Contest sponsored by the National Cotton Council and the Textile Bag Manufacturers' Association.**



## News and Announcements

### ECHS Scholarship Recipients

Kelsi Chandler of Coastal Alabama Community College, Brewton Campus, and Hayden Hammond of Flomaton High School have received scholarships from ECHS for the 2017-1018 Academic year.

Kelsi received an ECHS scholarship for the 2016-2017 academic year. Hayden is a recent graduate of Flomaton High School.

\*\*\*\*\*

### APT is Creating an Oral History of the Vietnam Era

Alabama Public Television is creating an oral history of the Vietnam era to inform and educate future generations about the war and the lessons learned from it, and most importantly, to remember the people who were part of it.

From the APT announcement: "Whatever your experience - as a veteran, a refugee, a protestor, or simply an American citizen growing up during this turbulent time - APT wants to know your story."

\*\*\*\*\*

### The Alabama Boomer Project

*The Alabama Department of Archives and History describes this project:*

Born between 1946 and 1964, the baby boomers were eyewitnesses to history. From sitting in Alabama classrooms to fighting in Vietnam, the experiences of this generation changed the world. The Archives has started the Alabama Boomer Project, an effort to add materials to its permanent collections that reflect life in

Alabama in the 1960's and 1970's.

The archives is collecting a wide variety of Alabama-related materials from the boomer generation, including personal papers, and other printed materials. A few examples: letters, scrapbooks, diaries, photographs, clothing, military uniforms and equipment, high school yearbooks, protest posters, buttons and other relevant materials. Anyone interested in donating can contact Registrar Sherrie Hamil at (334) - 353 - 4726 or at [sherrie.hamil@archives.alabama.gov](mailto:sherrie.hamil@archives.alabama.gov).

### Oral History Interviews- Your Story Matters –Part of the Alabama Boomers Project

*From ADAH:*

Did you serve in Vietnam? Did you graduate from a newly integrated high school? Ever see a streaker? Remember bell bottoms and growing your hair long? Your story matters. Tell us about your experiences in Alabama during the 1970's. Our recorded oral history interview will help document Alabama history for future generations.

Want to share your story? Contact Oral History Program Coordinator Hale Aaron at (334)- 353- 3425 or at [haley.aaron@archives.alabama.gov](mailto:haley.aaron@archives.alabama.gov).

\*\*\*\*\*

### Alabama's French Connection: A Symposium on Shared History Alabama Department of Archives & History • June 9 - 10, 2017

From the ADAH announcement of this symposium:

Discover three centuries of fascinating connections between Alabama and French history at the Archives this summer! Join us for a two-day symposium featuring experts from across the Southeast speaking on a variety of topics including Fort Toulouse, Fort Tombeche, the Vine and Olive Colony, wartime alliances, French architecture and material culture in Alabama, and Mardi Gras.

Co-sponsored by the Alabama Bicentennial Commission and the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

Cost is \$25 for the general public, \$15 for Friends of the Archives members, and \$10 for students. Includes lunch on Friday and breakfast on Saturday. One-day admission is also available.

The full schedule for the two day symposium can be found at <http://files.constantcontact.com/1991ff79001/d2135af3-e5e9-4f0f-9387-d24e0c95f0a5.pdf?ver=1494534219000>.

## Post Cards and the Wade Hall Collection

*As part of the Alabama Bicentennial, the Wade Hall Traveling Postcards Exhibit will be shown in every county in Alabama.*

*The following article is taken from an Alabama Public Television program by host Don Nobles on January 10, 2017 on the collection of Wade Hall and on post cards in general. The book being reviewed is Greetings from Alabama: A Pictorial History in Vintage Postcards.*

The late Wade Hall was a singular man. A native of Bullock County, Hall taught for 30 years at Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky, all the while writing and editing a score of books—poetry, biography, studies and anthologies of Kentucky and Alabama literature. He wrote on country music and Southern humor. He endowed the Hall literary prize at his alma mater, Troy University, and saw his book “Conecuh People” made into a successful play.

Hall was also a tireless, not to say obsessive, collector. At the time of his death in 2015 he had amassed over 100,000 books, photographs, Civil War documents, works of art and of course, postcards. His postcard collection extends from the late 1800s to about 1950, in black and white and in color.

His volume of Kentucky postcards, “Greetings from Kentucky,” was published in 1994. Now, New South Books has issued “Greetings from Alabama.” This collection of 400 cards is only a fraction of the total. In his Foreword to the book, then-Dean of Libraries at UA, Dr. Louis Pitschmann, tells us Hall had 25,000 postcards, 2,000 of which depict Alabama locations. Pitschmann quotes Wade Hall as saying his intent was “to document in words and pictures the culture that has shaped me and was beginning to fade as people adjusted to new ways and inventions of the 20th century.”

In the Introduction to this volume, partly reprinted from the Kentucky volume, Hall teaches the reader

about postcards.

Postcards began about 1873 and collecting became a craze from the 1890s until after WWI. Hall says tens of thousands of people attended postcard shows each year. There were postcard clubs. People collected and traded cards and set them, like stamps, in attractive albums.

People who cared about and studied postcards were called deltiologists, from the Greek deltos, meaning writing tablet or letter.

There were images of nearly everything: towns, churches, colleges, city halls, restaurants, a lot of motels and hotels, mansions, Confederate statues, waterfalls, marketplaces complete with cotton bales, all kinds of businesses. Aerial views were very popular.

There are even underground photos, of Cathedral Caverns in Marshall County, for instance. Some postcards had jokes printed on them. Hall says there have been, over time, more than 10,000 different Santa Claus cards.

You could have a card made, with you on it, standing in front of your house or, if you wished, pretending to be a cowboy in a saloon. Photographers had studio sets made, with costumes.

This volume covers the state of Alabama geographically, beginning in the southwest corner in Mobile County and ending in the northeast corner in Jackson County. Naturally the big cities are more fully represented but there are cards from everywhere. Readers will be interested to see the changes in a place like Dexter Avenue in Montgomery, or Dauphin Street in Mobile or University Boulevard, then called Oak Street, in Tuscaloosa. And it is a treat to see photos of churches, statues, parks or government buildings which for one reason or another, fire or urban renewal, just aren’t there anymore.

I found this collection a real pleasure to peruse (<http://apr.org/post/greetings-alabama-pictorial-history-vintage-postcards-wade-hall-nancy-dupree#stream/0>).



**Black and white photographic view of the front of the Arends House hotel with guests on porch and steps. The hotel was built by John N. Arends in Brewton, AL in 1881. Postmarked March 31, 1910. .**

## Photos: Choir Performance on May 2, 2017



**Thanks to Corey Williams of the Brewton Standard for These Pictures of the Escambia County (Atmore) High School and Middle School Choirs at the Performance on May 2, 2017.**

**At the Left, Director Conrad Webber is shown at the piano, back to the camera, with part of the choir.**



**Picture above shows a full house for the performance.**

**At the right, the soloist for one of the gospel numbers with the Microphone.**



**Photos: Choir Performance on May 2, 2017 (Continued)**



**Top photo, Mike Edwards introduces the Choir and its Director. Mike coordinated the Program for the Historical Society.  
Bottom photo, Director Webber conducting the choir.**

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## A Southern Sugar Cane Mill



### By Theobold and Darryl Searcy

Aah !!! It must be autumn. The aroma of open-fire smoke is in the air. The mornings are crisp, and a dusting of frost has appeared on rooftops in early morns. The farmers have harvested their crops, except for just one. Now it is time to get serious about the sweetest chore yet to be tackled – cutting the sugar cane and making syrup.

A southern cane grinding is similar to New England's maple syrup cooking. There, the maple trees are tapped in the early spring for as long as the sap is flowing, with syrup boilings taking place whenever the holding tanks are full with sap. Cane grinding, on the other hand, was usually done in one to two hectic days, making it more suitable for a work party. At our place the work party usually occurred on Saturday when men could leave their work jobs.

Here, in lower Alabama, the deep south sugar cane was always the sweetener of choice, and during our time in the 1940s almost every small farm or garden had a cane patch to provide the year's sweetening. As well, any surplus could be a welcome cash crop for a family. During WW-II sugar was rationed by the government, along with several other food items, so cane syrup at times provided the only means of sweetening for cookies and cakes. Our father was

not a great farmer, but he did plant a large garden and about an acre of sugar cane. Other small-time farmers in the area did the same. He made our living doing other work and farming was, more or less, a part-time job that kept his boys busy and out of trouble.

The authors of this essay, named above, were young teenagers in the 1940s (one six years younger than the other) and we had to combine our recollections to come up with enough information to make a story worth writing. Our mother died in late 1943, and the events of the sugar cane mill came after that time. During and after WW-II, families and communities were scattered as jobs and travel modes became more attainable, so social events such as our syrup-making party started fading away.

As we look at our lives now, and we've grown older, many of us pine for the days when there was time, energy, and desire, for the rituals that solidified families and communities, as well as making necessary work into good fun. We are the last of a breed who can remember the syrup-making parties, hog-butcherings, barn building, quilting parties, corn shucking, pea shelling, and other events staged by country folks. Young people today would find such things boring and not worth remembering. Gross, they would say. But, they will remember the college

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campus protest marches, the drug over-doses, unemployment, abortions, and welfare checks. What a difference eighty years can make in a culture.

Our daddy's little cane patch stood on about an acre of land alongside the garden. Harvest time was usually between late October and Thanksgiving. The longer the cane stands in the ground the sweeter the juice. Also, the juice in the stalk is sweeter near the ground than is the juice near the top of the stalk. Sugar cane is one plant that helps prepare the farmer for harvest by naturally letting the leaves become dead starting at the ground and extending upward on the stalk about four feet or more.

The first step of harvesting is to strip the leaves from the stalk by using a tool called a stripper. In our young days, the farmer made the stripper by using a handle made of hardwood, measuring about five feet long and about two inches in diameter, usually part of a limb cut from a tree. Attached to one end of the handle are two thin strips of wood, oak or pecan, measuring about twelve inches long and one to two inches wide, one strip on two sides of the handle. The strips are very thin – similar to a large knife blade. The worker places the cane stalk between the two strips, or prongs, near the top of the stalk, and comes down with force to the ground. All the dead leaves will come off and fall to the ground. Then, a second worker comes along with a machete and whacks the top from the stalk, which contains the green leaves, and cuts the topless stalk off a couple inches from the ground.

Working with the stripper and the machete requires the person to wear gloves and long sleeved shirt to shield against cuts from the cane leaves. They are sharp like a saw blade. The bare stalks are placed in a row along the ground and are ready to be loaded onto a wagon and hauled to the grinding mill. Our little cane crop and syrup-making mill was nothing like the places in Southern Louisiana where a cane field may cover hundreds of acres of rich delta soil, and in most instances the juice is milled for white, granulated, sugar, not syrup.

Our dad owned an eighty-acre tract of farm land, divided by a county road. A slight slopping hill was on the western edge of a forty-acre parcel from which

a bubbling spring was supplying crystal clear water. The cane mill was built near the spring so as to take advantage of the ample water supply. We recall the brisk fall mornings walking down a dirt trail beneath some magnolias, oaks, and tall pines to take the children's place at the mill. Children could watch from the safe zone – "Sit over there and stay out of the way," was the order.

It was there that the long furnace of iron rocks and red clay was built to support a large vat, or sometimes referred to as the evaporator pan, measuring about four feet wide, twelve feet long, and twelve inches deep. The sides of the vat were made of aluminum and the bottom was all copper. Inside the vat were several dividers that opened at one end, rotating from the end of one to the opposite end of the next one. When the steaming juice is pushed in one direction it flowed into the next division, and so on, until the fifty or so gallons of liquid ran from end to end of the vat like a river flowing around successive elbows.

The boiling juice had to be in almost constant motion to avoid scorching, but the copper bottom to the vat was helpful in this regard. The device to keep the hot juice in motion was a tool shaped like a large garden hoe, often homemade by the farmer, and consisted of a long handle (about eight feet long) to which a small board was nailed to one end that would fit nicely into the vat dividers. It was called a rake, even though it looked like a hoe. So large are these vats, you could remove the dividers and wash a couple of kids in the thing or use it as a birdbath for pterodactyls. The rhythm of juices flowing along the partitions was enough to pull you in, a sight that grabs the eye like the slope of a horse's back or the gunwale of a schooner.

Four hundred years ago, the European longing for the sweetness that was boiled in a kettle got the first colonial economy going, and was part of what set the slave trade in the Americas on a trajectory that would last for centuries. There is a lot of history in these kettles, as well as the evaporation vat. But for the last hundred years, cane sugar syrup was the main source of sweetness in small communities when everything else was too expensive. Sometimes the vat was referred to as a "kettle" but that somehow puts in mind a cauldron one might see in a high school pro-

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# The ECHS *Journal* Section

## A Southern Sugar Cane Mill

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duction of Macbeth. There is no good English word for the simple beauty of this stunning object.

Cane was moved from the field to the mill the day before the grinding and boiling started. The furnace was already loaded with lighter-wood and oak, and ready for the fire as soon as the cane juice could be extracted and poured into the vat. Each cooking contained about fifty gallons of juice and after boiling for some four to five hours one could expect to get eight gallons of syrup.

Excitement began for we children when invited neighbors drifted in from far and wide to attend our syrup cooking soiree. First to arrive was our dad's brother, Lee and his wife Aunt Kate, along with their oldest son Grover. Next to arrive were brothers Tom and Dewey Hawkins, who owned large farms adjoining our land. Then, another set of brothers showed up, Earl, Frank, Henry and Tom Lisenby, who lived about a mile away with their respective families. Bill Grissett along with his wife were next to arrive, and then his brother Roy Grissett came.

The local general store owner, Ollie Gilmore, joined the operation, and later in the morning Ollie's brother-in-law, Bill Kelly, owner of a large general store in Brewton (location of the county seat) joined the group. The wives of some of some of the men came later in the morning, bringing covered-dish food for the noon meal. To Southerners the mid-day meal is called dinner and the evening meal is called supper. To Northerners the mid-day meal is lunch and the evening meal is dinner. We say, "Whatever works for y'all."

When the early arrivals were finished with the daily gossip, they each started with a chore. Uncle Lee lit the fire, and Aunt Kate prepared coffee in her large enamel blue with white specks percolator pot, placing it over some hot coals to boil. Daddy returned with the mule and wagon carrying large boxes of galvanized tin syrup buckets. Ollie Gilmore unhitched the mule from the wagon, and moved the mule over to the grinding mill.

The grinding mill was a piece of art all to itself. This contraption started with three or four legs made from cuts of tree trucks buried several feet into the ground. Sitting on top of the structure was the metal

platform holding the two grinders, or rollers, sitting upright next to one another with about a quarter inch space between the two. Attached to each grinder was a metal cog wheel that meshed with other cog wheels bolted to the center of a thirty-foot long log that was about eight inches in diameter.

The mule was hitched to one end of the log and as it walked in a circle all day long, the cog mechanism turned the grinders (rollers) and crushed the cane as it was fed into the small space between the grinders. The cane juice was captured on a piece of metal sheeting, slanted to a barrel placed on the ground beside the grinder. A cloth covered the top of the barrel to strain the juice and catch any debris that might fall from the cane stalks. It also kept the honey bees away from the juice. The crushers could take two cane stalks at a time. When the barrel was nearing full, the juice was carried by the bucketful to the vat for boiling.

When the vat was filled to its boiling capacity, the kids were allowed to have fun by running and catching, wading in the stream put out by the artesian spring, trying to capture a few minnows in the stream, and just generally having fun. The mule was taken to the spring for a cool drink of water, and given a small bucket of oats for lunch, or did he call it his dinner. At the vat the juice was beginning to boil and the men took turns with the rake to keep it moving.

Heating the juice causes a foam to form on top which must be continually removed with a long-handled sieve. The foam was kept in a small wooden keg, along with a small amount of juice, and after a few days some yeast was added. If other stuff was added, we don't know what it could be. Daddy and Uncle Lee then would drink the concoction as a cheap beer, or maybe it was about to be wine. We just never knew what to call it. All we know is they would never let us children taste it.

When it was syrup making time, all the kids would be looking into the foaming broth to catch that magic moment when the concentrated liquid would thicken into syrup, but honestly, we were looking to see if there was anything else in that vat besides nostalgia. I remember asking one of the older men what his job was here, and he said he was "project consultant," which, he explained, "means I ain't doin' a lick of

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work.” A burst of laughter cleared the bottomlands of birds and squirrels.

One fellow kicked the dirt and confessed that he didn’t really understand a whole lot about what they were doing. To which another “consultant” started in on a story – about a young fellow, newly hired at a stable, who confessed to the foreman that he didn’t know a lot about horses. “Yeah,” said the foreman, “stay around here long enough and you’ll find out how little all these other people know.” Once again, the squirrels bolted for the deeper woods.

Yet it was probably around a roaring fire like this one a few decades back where the first mysteries of cooking dinner blazed into revelation, as the women folk busied themselves with food preparations: collard greens, corn bread, roasted corn on the cob, fried chicken, and of course, fresh cane syrup. And if that’s the case, then not much has changed except the location.

Down in southern Alabama where we grew up, the syrup mill has traditionally been powered by a mule walking in a circle while hitched to a pole, which directly turned the mill’s crushing rollers. Now we are told that the more modern use of a tractor for power didn’t seem to affect the taste, but for our memories, just using the mule added live drama, and we don’t want to visit a cane mill to see a tractor fly-wheel running, which is noisy, smelly, and out of place. If we need syrup, we’ll go to the store.

The community party got into full swing when the juice was being boiled down to syrup consistency. When the test was necessary, one of the “consultants” brought a glass of cold water to the vat and took a spoonful of hot syrup out for the test. The crowd gathered around. All became very quiet as the man held the glass high to the sunlight.

As he lowered the glass to his chest, he spoke in hushed tones, saying that he would deliver a drop of warm syrup into the glass of cold water and if the drop turned into a ball before it reached the bottom of the glass, it would mean that the syrup had reached its consistency. But, if the drop dissolved and no ball was formed it would mean more boiling was necessary.

The crowd held its breath in unison. The spoon was

tilted and a drop rolled into the water. The droplet stayed together and formed a ball before it reached the bottom. A roar went up from the crowd. The juice had been boiling for four hours and was now ready for the buckets. The men decided to push the vat onto a rack beside the hearth and let the syrup cool while the crew enjoyed the vittles the good women had prepared.

Aunt Kate busied herself with making huge cathead biscuits and frying fat back bacon by the hearth. Her favorite baking dish was a large iron skillet with an iron lid that she could place directly onto the red-hot coals. Once the skillet was hot, the biscuits would brown in about twenty minutes. There is nothing finer than hot and fresh cane syrup sopped with a biscuit on a plate laden with fried pork.

One of the essential rituals was to see how much syrup one could pour into a fresh biscuit and still be able to get it into your mouth without suffering a sticky tragedy. Kids were the most skilled at this sport. Also, every kid old enough to carry a pocket knife also carried a stick of fresh cane. It was big fun to deftly peel and cut off chunks to chew – swallowing the juice and then spitting out the empty pulp, and maybe also cutting off a chunk for a smaller, as yet uninitiated kid. If you didn’t have a knife, not to worry, your teeth worked just as well to strip off the tough skin from a section of raw cane.

We youngsters knew it was midday when the women folk began to gather and spread quilts on the ground, with covered dishes of food, salads, and deserts aplenty spread about. No dish was touched until the men uttered a brief blessing that always began with, “Gracious Lord, we are gathered to partake of your bounty--.”

When the eating time ended, the men gathered the barrels and emptied the vat of the warm syrup, setting it aside to cool before filling the new one-gallon tin buckets. Water was brought from the spring to wash the vat and prepare for the next cycle of juice. Three young men from the neighborhood came by to make music for the crowd, bringing two guitars and one fiddle. They sang a couple of gospel songs. One that we remember was titled, “When The Roll is Called Up Yonder I’ll Be There.”

The mule was hitched again to the pole and

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## A Southern Sugar Cane Mill

*(Continued from page 12)*

continued his journey in a circle. Someone fed cane into the crusher and swatted honey bees with his hat. The bees were a pest but nobody got stung. As the afternoon wore on, some people became tired, and the women with children went home.

In early afternoon, the vat was filled again with fresh juice and the boil was underway. As the process involved a lot of watching and stirring, during the last batch for the day, the men at times just stood by the vat, staring into the rolling boil, seized by a silent reverie, Novelist Herman Melville might recognize. It's hard to say which is more mesmerizing, the reddish depth of the juice bursting onto the surface in an amber lather, or just the vat itself.

A chilly November wind kept the small crowd close to the steaming vat. If the cooking was done in a shed, the atmosphere would become too hot and humid, so open hearth was the best by far. With that in mind, our daddy and Uncle Lee opted to build everything under the hill by the spring, as the trees and hillside protected the workers from the chill.

The time of day was getting late and the batch would not be finished boiling until just before sunset. Daddy and Uncle Lee knew they could handle the situation, letting the syrup cool overnight and be

ready for the buckets the next morning. The vat would be covered with pine boards for the night. Ollie Gilmore, the local store owner in Wallace, was ready to go home, but asked if he could buy a couple buckets of the new syrup for his store. He was sure that the turpentine still workers would buy the stuff.

He was given two buckets and dad would take no money, letting the man have the syrup for his day's work. At a later date, he told our dad the two buckets sold right away and he wanted to buy more for his store. Mr. Gilmore's brother-in-law, Bill Kelly, asked for two gallons to take to his place in Brewton and he wanted to give them to special customers as Christmas gifts. Again, Dad would take no money. Home-made syrup is said to be milder and more complex than the potent bullet of sweetness that is granulated sugar. So, Mr. Kelly wanted to know, was there something not quite real here, something different in that vat that his patrons might not recognize? Or was this just an exercise in old-timey fun?

It was hard work, but you be the judge. We thought it was old-timey fun.



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**ECHOES**  
THE NEWSLETTER FOR  
THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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