

ECHOES



The
Escambia
County
Historical
Society,
Founded
1971

The October 2021 Newsletter
The October Regular Meeting will be
Tuesday, October 26, 2021
at 3:00 pm in the Meeting Room
in the Museum (mask required)
at Coastal Alabama College in Brewton.



**Speaker Lou
Vickery**

The Program

Atmore native Lou Vickery will present a program based on his new book Alabama Creek Indians. Vickery is an American Creek Indian through the Moniac lineage, one of the original Poarch Creek Families. The book has been described as a well thought out and thoroughly researched book that offers the reader a fascinating journey into the history of the Muscogee and Creek Indians. Vickery offers timeless material that helps the reader truly navigate the historical, genealogical, and biographical aspects of the Alabama Creek Indians.

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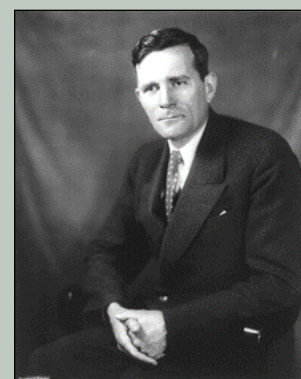
**Remember to
Support our
Business Members**

There will not be a November Meeting of ECHS.



**Girls making
bedspreads
at Gees Bend,
Alabama 1938—
This was part
of the National
Youth
Administration
Program
(Library of Con-
gress).**

**Headed by Aubrey
Willis Williams of
Springville, Ala., the
National Youth
Administration (NYA)
was a New Deal agency
in the US that fo-
cused on providing
work and education
for Americans be-
tween the ages of 16
and 25. It operated
from June 26, 1935 to
1939 as part of the
Works Progress Ad-
ministration (WPA).
Text and photo from
<[https://www.
alabamapioneers.
com/](https://www.alabamapioneers.com/)>.**



**Aubrey Williams
who became the
second highest
ranking U. S.
Relief Official
in the FDR
Administration.**



**David Scott King
of Mount Pleasant, AL
ca. 1890**

**Volume 48 No. 10
October 2021**

The Program

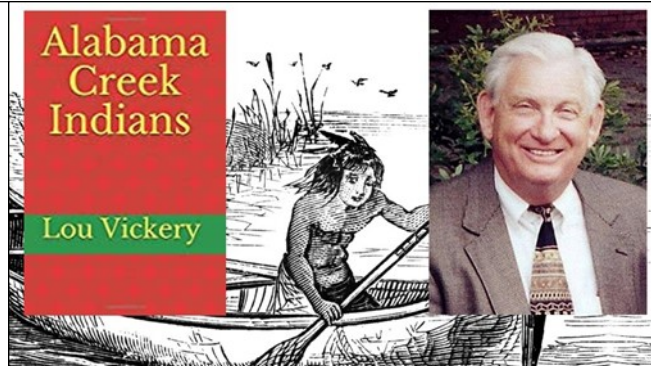
(Continued from page 1)

Lou will tell us some fascinating facts and revelations about the Creek Indians, such as how the Creek tribal government and its lifeways evolved over the last several centuries, and how Europeans settled and integrated in Creek country with the construction of the Federal Road in the early 1800s.

Lou Vickery draws this information from first person accounts, letters, government reports, and records to paint a beautiful and honorable picture of the Alabama Creek Nation.

Lou is no stranger to ECHS. At the March 2010 meeting of ECHS, he presented a program on his first book about the Creek Indians of Alabama, The Rise of the Porch Band of Creek Indians.

A Troy State grad, he is a Fairhope resident and former professional baseball player. He hosts a weekly TV show on BLU TV entitled UP TALK.



Lou writes about the book: "History cannot be changed by simply ignoring the scars from the past. Some wounds have a way of resurfacing if we don't remind ourselves of the cause."

Picture courtesy of Baldwin County Genealogical Society Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/events/baldwin-county-genealogical-society/gcgs-researching-german-heritage/564675320697172/>>.

News and Announcements

Event to Honor Major David Moniac November 15, 2021, 10:30 am Old House Chamber in the Alabama Capitol Building Second Floor



From General Richard F. Allen, these details about the event: The ceremony will be in the Old House Chamber in the Capitol Building on the second floor. Moniac descendants are welcome to come together at 9:30 AM in the office of Ms. Lee Sellers, the Governor's Project Officer, to meet and get acquainted for those who do not know each other - Room N. 102 of the 1st floor of the Capitol.

All attendees should enter the Capitol at the front main entrance and be prepared to go through a security check point - no weapons allowed, of course. Then

proceed to the elevators to Old House Chamber. Parking is scarce, but street parking is available, and there are a few handicapped spaces in front of the Capitol.

Seats will be reserved for family members if you let me know in advance that you are coming, and seats will be reserved for the Tribal Chiefs. The event is open to the public but seating is limited.

So far we know that family members are coming from Korea, Washington D.C., Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida, and of course, Alabama, to be a part of this historic and unprecedented event. We have not heard from the Western Tribe yet.

The Governor will present the award honoring Major Moniac to family representatives. If other family members would like to have a copy of the award certificate, let me know and I will make sure copies are available. If family members are unable to attend, I will mail a copy if you let me know.

The event will be live-streamed on the Governor's Web site for those who cannot attend in person. If you have questions about that, please contact Ms. Sellers.

If you have other questions, do not hesitate to call 334-241-8002 or contact by email <rfa@chlaw.com>. If no answer to phone call, leave a message.

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News and Announcements

(Continued from page 2)



Williams Station Day
October 23, 2021
9:00 am – 4:00 pm
Pensacola Avenue
Atmore, AL

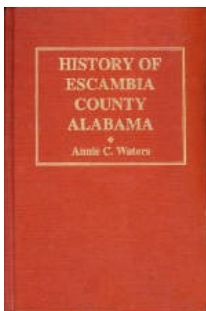
From the Atmore Chamber of Commerce:

Join us in Atmore, Alabama as residents turn back their clocks to 1866 when their community was named Williams Station - just a supply stop along the Mobile and Great Northern railroad. We guarantee a fun day of family entertainment. Williams Station Day is packed with great venues to fit every taste. For the young and young at heart we offer an old fashioned sampling of southern heritage seasoned with the blues, arts and crafts, cane milling and heritage displays.

Atmore is an easy hour's drive from almost anywhere in Baldwin, Monroe, Escambia, and Conecuh Counties and only an hour's drive from Mobile and Pensacola.

For more information, contact the Atmore Area Chamber of Commerce at (251) 368-3305, email Receptionist@AtmoreChamber.com, or follow Williams Station Day on Facebook.

* Note: ECHS will have a booth at Williams Station Day with books to sell, give out information about our society and solicit new members. Don Sales will be in charge of the ECHS booth. Please come along and help in the booth if you can.



Work on the Reprinting of Annie Water's History of Escambia County, Ala. Underway.

Tom McMillan is in charge of this project. The book is being digitized before being reprinted. Ms. Water's book has been our best seller, most requested title, and we long ago sold out of the second printing.

In order to have clearer illustrations and photographs, there has been a search for the originals or good copies of the photographs and illustrations in the book.

All but the following have been located: :
Page 31 Calvin McGhee, Chief

- " 35 Indian Artifacts at McMillan Museum
- " 68 First Letter Major White Youngs
- " 68 Second Letter Major White Youngs
- " 74 Copies of 1812 Muster Rolls, Joel Crawford
- " 75 Site of Fort Crawford Historic Marker
- " 110 John R. Tattnell's Nomination
- " 116 Tattnell and Crook Records from a Muster Roll
- " 155 Map: Civil War Raids
- " 191 Map: Early Communities
- " 232 Early Motorists in Atmore
- " 282 Esc. Co. First Visit by Airplane
- " 358 Bergen Memorial Chapel at Southern Normal
- " 363 Dooley Hall

These items will be returned after ECHS makes a copy. If you know of the location of any of these items, please contact ECHS at: Phone, 251-809-1528; Address, P.O. Box 276, Brewton, AL 36427; or E-mail <escambiahistoricalsociety@gmail.com>.

ECHS is also interested in locating a copy of the original printing of the Waters book. The copy would be placed in the McMillan Museum.

Baldwin County Heritage Museum
Presents
**"WWI & WWII -
Memories of Baldwin County"**

Recipient of the
Alabama Legacy Project
200
ALABAMA
BICENTENNIAL

Honoring the men & women who
served from Baldwin County, Ala.

Oct 13 thru Dec 11, 2021
Baldwin County Heritage Museum
25521 U.S. Hwy, 98 E:
Elberta, AL
Wednesday thru Saturday
10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

**The Baldwin
County, Ala.
Heritage
Museum in
Elberta will have
a WWI & WWII
Exhibit on Dis-
play from Oct. 11,
2021 – Dec. 13.**

Entitled "World War I and World War II Memories of Baldwin County," the exhibit honors those who served from the County.

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News and Announcements

(Continued from page 3)



The Museum, shown above, is located on HWY 98. It is open Wednesday-Saturday 10:00a.m. – 3:00p.m.

It displays historically significant buildings, documents, and artifacts that typify community life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The facility consists of a 20,000-square-foot main building and five acres of grounds and features a church founded in 1909, a blacksmith shop, vintage farm implements, and a school house.

Two large pieces of early farm equipment in the Museum's collections include: the Fairbanks-Morse engine which was used to power machinery on farms and in early industry during the first decades of the twentieth century and a steam engine tractor such as the 1911 Titan pictured to the right.



Fairbanks-Morse Engine
Picture from Encyclopedia of Alabama



1911 Titan Steam Engine Tractor
Picture from <<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/352547477055694109/>>.

Did You Know Alabama Has a State Fossil?

From the article "Museums' Collections Spotlight: Basilosaurus Cetoides," on the University of Alabama's museums, this introduction to the state fossil <<https://news.ua.edu/2017/02/museums-collections-spotlight-basilosaurus-cetoides/>>.

Basilosaurus cetoides is an early archaeocete (ancient whale), a whale that lived in the shallow seas along the Alabama coast 34 to 40 million years ago. During that time,



Reconstructed Skeleton of Basilosaurus on Display in Grand Gallery of Alabama Museum of Natural History Smith Hall.

the Alabama coastline was along where Clarke, Washington and Choctaw counties are today.

Basilosaurus was 50 to 60 feet long, had different shaped teeth and vestigial hind limbs. Based on stomach contents, it is believed that Basilosaurus fed mostly on sharks and fish, but some bite marks on smaller whales lead some researchers to believe it might have also eaten them.

(Continued on page 5)

Did You Know Alabama Has a State Fossil?

(Continued from page 4)

Basilosaurus was a primitive whale and is not directly related to the modern groups alive today

The earliest specimens were found in Alabama in the 1830s, where their enormous vertebrae were used for furniture and building construction materials. Basilosaurus came to the attention of scientists in 1834 when Judge Creagh of Clarke County first sent bones to Richard Harlan in Philadelphia. Harlan then sent the specimens to England, where Sir Richard Owen formally named it in 1840. Originally, it was believed that *Basilosaurus* was an extinct reptile, hence its name, which means "king lizard."

In 1984, *Basilosaurus cetoides* was adopted as the state fossil of Alabama.



Skull of the Basilosaurus cetoides. The whale's sharp pointed front teeth and saw-like back teeth identify it as a predator.

Picture and text from Encyclopedia of Alabama.

In 1845, fossil hunter Albert Koch mounted a tour of what he promoted as the extinct sea serpent "Hydrarchos."

In fact, the skeleton was constructed with fossils from at least five *Basilosaurus cetoides* skeletons that Koch had collected in Alabama, as well as a number of invertebrates.

The skeleton was destroyed in the Allied bombing of Germany during World War II.



An artist rendering of Basilosaurus.

Notes from Canoe

Posted on the Canoe Civic Club Facebook Page
<<https://www.facebook.com/canoecivicclub/posts/2807746019484799>>.

In Canoe Station toward the end of the Civil War:

8000 Union cavalymen headed towards the sound of the cannon's thunder at Spanish Fort and a detachment headed to Monroe County. Mid-day saw another 5000 men stop at Canoe with rations for 100+ Confederate prisoners as the end of the war drew near and the good people of Canoe Station prepared for the days ahead. In a 24 hour period Canoe Station had the largest population in the history of Escambia County at that time.

From June 7, 1906 Pine Belt News

Notice

The traveling public is informed that I have a well –equipped, first class Livery Stable at Canoe, Ala., and can furnish good rigs and careful drivers to any part of the country on short notice. Teams meet all local trains at depot. A share of the public patronage solicited.

T. B. Bailey, Canoe, Ala.

Comment on the advertisement:

.....today passengers rent a car at the airport. In 1906, travelers rented a horse and buggy at the depot!

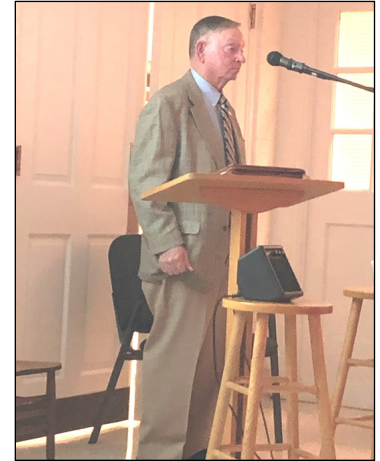
Snapshots from the September, 2021 ECHS Meeting



Always Nice to Have Beautiful Flowers at the Meeting.



Guests and Members with Face Masks and Phones, Signs of Our Times.



Our Guest Speaker, Gen. Richard Allen.

Two Experiments with Camels for Farm Work in 1859

The Selma Sentinel carried this short notice of Benjamin M. Woolsey's experimentation of using camels for agricultural work on his plantation in Dallas County in 1859.

Camels in Dallas County

We have been informed that it is the intention of Capt. J. A. Machodo who had been engaged for several years in importing camels to the United States, to send, in a short time, some three or four camels to our countryman, B. M. Woolsey, who has consented to take them, and ascertain practically if the camel is really adapted to the wants of this section of the country.

Mr. Woolsey, we learn, will receive these animals in the course of 10 or 15 days, and will make such experiments with them as will prove their adaptation to our farming pursuits. There are quite a number of gentlemen in our vicinity who have been anxious to test the uses of the camel, and that this may be done, Capt. Mackodo has consented that Mr. Woolsey may make the test, in case they prove to be what they are represented, he can furnish any number to our planting friends.

Selma Sentinel reprinted in Montgomery Daily Mail, April 15, 1859.

From Alabama Heritage Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/alabamaheritage/photos>>.

The following comment from The Montgomery Daily Mail for December 9, 1859 discusses a Grand Camel Plowing Match organized by a Ms. Watson of Montgomery. The camels will be sold after the match.

There is reference to a letter to Ms. Watson from Benjamin Woolsey, and the advertisement of the Grand Camel Plowing Match, but neither a copy of the letter or the advertisement appear in this notice.

Camels in Montgomery

Ms. Watson's Camels— *Read the letter, in another column of Benjamin M. Woolsey, Esq., of Dallas, in regard to Mrs. Watson's Camels, as also the advertisement of this lady, who intends having a Grand Camel Plowing Match next Monday, on a vacant lot near the Capitol, to test the capacities of the camel.*

We are requested to state by Mrs. Watson, that after the test of the capacities of the camels on Monday, in plowing and drawing, they will be offered for sale on Tuesday. Price from \$300 to \$500.

From Alabama Heritage Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/alabamaheritage/photos>>.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Alabama's Prisoner of War Cemetery

By Charlie Ware

Several years ago, I became interested in the German and Italian prisoner of war (POW) camps that existed in Alabama during World War II. I have read books, visited museums, attended lectures, and done many hours of on-line research on the subject. In the course of my study, I had found several references to a German/Italian POW cemetery located on Ft.

McClellan, a former army post located near Anniston, Alabama.

Recently, I happened to be driving down I-20 in north Alabama and spotted a sign for an exit to Ft. McClellan. I remembered the cemetery, so I decided to stop and see if I could locate it. I expected that the cemetery would be unmarked and overgrown and I doubted that I would even find it, but the first person that I asked for directions, pointed me straight to its location.

It was not at all what I had expected. The cemetery was in a park-like, hillside setting surrounded by tall pines and was in immaculate condition. It was about half acre in size and contained 29 graves, all clearly marked with marble headstones. A few graves had fresh flowers on them. It was not unlike any American military cemetery.

As I was reading the names on the headstones while walking quietly among the graves, I began to ask myself questions. How did the cemetery get there? Who was buried there? Do family members of the deceased ever come to visit? Who is responsible for maintaining the cemetery and keeping it in such great condition?

During World War II, over 500,000 German and Italian prisoners of war were brought to the United States and kept in hundreds of POW camps located across the country. Twenty-four of these camps were in Alabama and several were near Atmore. The largest of the camps were in Aliceville, Opelika, Ft. Rucker, and Ft. McClellan. In all, there were over 16,000 POWs in camps throughout Alabama.

Over the past century and a half, representatives of all the major nations of the world have gotten together several times in Geneva, Switzerland to agree on



POW Cemetery Near Anniston, Alabama

and publish rules of war. It sounds ridiculous that there are rules governing how people can and cannot be killed and other cruelties of war, but they do exist, and collectively are known as the Geneva Conventions. One section of the Geneva Convention deals with the treatment of prisoners of war and Article 120 of that agreement states "The detaining authorities shall ensure that prisoners of war who

have died in captivity are honorably buried, if possible, according to the rites of the religion to which they belonged, and that their graves are respected, suitably maintained, and marked so as to be found at any time."

The United States had signed the Geneva Conventions and it was the policy of the nation to follow the rules to the letter. POWs held by the United States were treated humanely and with respect. They were not slaves and were not forced to work. However, most prisoners volunteered to work, either on farms, in factories, or in many other jobs where there was a shortage of American workers. They were paid for their labors. The United States also carefully followed the Geneva Conventions when it came to the burial of prisoners who died and to the care of the POW cemeteries.

About 860 German and 200 Italian POWs are buried in 43 sites across the United States. Most are buried in cemeteries set aside for POWs, but some are buried in post cemeteries next to deceased American soldiers. A few prisoners are even buried in Arlington National Cemetery. All the cemeteries are maintained by the army or by the Veterans Administration and are kept to the same standards as American veteran cemeteries. Most of the cemeteries also have local associations or clubs that do extra maintenance, place flowers, or hold memorial services. Each prisoner that died received a full military funeral, a color guard, and a 21-gun salute fired by American soldiers.

Located a couple of miles north of the city of Anniston, Ft. McClellan was established as an army post in 1917. During World War II, it was a major

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

Alabama's Prisoner of War Cemetery

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facility for basic and specialized infantry training. In early 1943, a huge POW camp was constructed there which became the temporary home for over 3,500 German prisoners.

The first prisoner death at Ft. McClellan occurred shortly after the camp opened when a prisoner was killed in a truck accident. He was buried on a small plot of land near the camp and the area was designated as a cemetery and was maintained for future burials. At the end of the war, there were only 4 prisoners buried there. The other prisoners who died in Alabama were buried in cemeteries near the camp to which they were assigned. When those camps closed, the remains were moved for final burial at the Ft. McClellan POW Cemetery. The cemetery now contains 29 graves.

When the war ended, the Ft. McClellan POW camp was demolished, and the POW cemetery was all but forgotten. The army continued to maintain the cemetery, but very few people in the local area were aware that it ever existed. It was a 1951 letter from the mother of one of the German prisoners who was buried in the cemetery that got the attention of the community and sparked an interest in its historical significance.

The following is a quote from a 2020 Department of Veterans Affairs newsletter referencing the Ft. McClellan cemetery. "One of the Germans interred in the cemetery is Pvt. Frederick Rauschenberg. He died August 28, 1943, shortly after his 19th birthday. Rauschenberg's mother, Alice, had been searching for information about her son when she learned he was buried at Ft. McClellan. She wrote a letter to the mayor of nearby Anniston, Alabama in 1951. She wanted to know if anyone was taking care of the gravesite and asked for a few fresh flowers from time to time since he loved flowers so much. The local Women's Civic Club took up the task and by April 9,



Honoring POWs at Alabama POW Cemetery

1951, flowers were at his grave. A local pastor would also place flowers annually and send a picture of the grave to Alice. With the help of locals, Rauschenberg's mother visited the grave in 1954 and returned with her husband in 1964."

Soon there were several organizations formed for the purpose of preserving the history of the POW camp and to memorialize the prisoners who were buried in the

cemetery. One group took the task of trying to contact family members of all the deceased and provide information about the cemetery and to assist those family members who might want to visit. Over the years, hundreds of Germans and Italians have visited Ft. McClellan to locate the final resting place of their loved ones who died so far from home. The cemetery is still frequently visited, now by the grandchildren and even great grandchildren of the deceased.

For almost five decades, services have been held at the Ft. McClellan cemetery on the second or third Sunday in November to pay tribute to the Germans and Italians buried there. These dates in November have been the traditional dates for the service since they are the German holiday Volkstrauretag, their version of Memorial Day. The solemn ceremony follows the traditional military tradition with speakers from Germany, Italy, and the United States. Flags are placed on each grave and wreaths are laid by German and Italian officers. The army conducted the ceremony until the post closed in 1999. Since that time, the ceremony has been organized by the Fort McClellan POW Association.

One of the founding members of the Association, Joan McKinney, has a special passion for the history of the cemetery and for the relationships between the local community and family members of the deceased. She corresponds with members from most of the families and has developed a personal relationship with many. McKinney is considered the unoffi-

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

Alabama's Prisoner of War Cemetery



Grave of Italian POW at Alabama POW Cemetery



Alabama POW Cemetery



Grave of German POW at Alabama POW Cemetery

(Continued from page 8)

cial historian for the cemetery and has compiled a lengthy biography on each prisoner who is buried there. She is also an organizer for the Alabama/German Partnership (AGP), a statewide, non-profit organization, dedicated to the development of the educational, business, cultural, and social relationships among individuals and organizations with ties to both Alabama and Germany.

Two of the German prisoners buried at Ft. McClellan were shot while attempting to escape from the Aliceville POW camp. Military personnel from most nations are taught that in the event they are captured, it is their duty to try to escape. The prison guards had been taught that it was their duty to shoot prisoners trying to escape. Both the prisoners and the guards knew the rules. They were both trying to do their duty as they saw it. This is one of the tragedies of war. They would probably have been friends if they had met under different circumstances.

Both prisoners who were shot were buried with full military honors with a color guard provided by the army. Prisoners were allowed to make German flags to drape the coffins. Many of the American personnel at the camp attended the burial ceremonies. A sad event occurred on October 31, 1945, when 16 German POWs and an American guard were killed when the

truck in which they were riding was struck by a high-speed train near Kalamazoo, Michigan. The war in Europe had been over for more than five months but the prisoners had elected to keep working at a near-by farm while awaiting arrangements for transportation back to Germany. They were all buried at the Ft. Custer National Cemetery in Michigan.

Ft. McClellan closed as an active military installation in 1999. The POW cemetery continued to be maintained by the army until September 2020 at which time responsibility was transferred to the National Cemetery Administration of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs. The cemetery has been placed on the Alabama Historic Cemetery Registry by the Alabama Historical Commission.

Overall, the POWs who were held in the United States received remarkably humane treatment during a war where millions of POWs died from brutality and mistreatment in other parts of the world. Undoubtedly, most of the over half million prisoners who returned to Germany, carried with them a greater respect for the United States and for its people, and the stories they told went a long way toward helping heal German/American relations after the war. One returning prisoner was quoted as saying, "The POW experience at Ft. McClellan reveals a true oasis of humanity in a war often without mercy."

The ECHS *Journal* Section

A Southern Sugar Cane Mill

By: Therold (Ted) and Darryl (Dobbs) Searcy

Ah! 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 sorts of work and farming was, more or less, a part-time job.

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-butchering, 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 campus protest marches, the drug overdoses, 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 usually was 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

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The ECHS *Journal* Section

A Southern Sugar Cane Mill

(Continued from page 10)

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 several 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 production 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 twenty gallons of juice and after boiling for some four to five hours, one could expect to get eight gallons of syrup.

Excitement began for us 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 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 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 is a piece of art all to itself. This contraption starts with three or four legs made from cuts of tree trunks buried several feet into the ground. Sitting on top of the structure is 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 is a metal

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cog wheel that meshes with other cog wheels bolted to the center of a thirty-foot long log that is about eight inches in diameter. The mule is hitched to one end of the log and it walks in a circle, all day long. The cog mechanism turns the grinders (rollers) and crushes the cane as it is fed into the small space between the grinders.

The cane juice is captured on a piece of metal sheeting, slanted to a barrel placed on the ground beside the grinder. A cloth covers the top of the barrel to strain the juice and catch any debris that may fall from the cane stalks. It also keeps the honey bees away from the juice. The crushers can take two cane stalks at a time. When the barrel is nearing full, the juice is carried by the bucketful to the vat for boiling.

When the vat is filled to its boiling capacity, the kids are 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 is taken to the spring for a cool drink of water, and given a small bucket of oats for lunch, or as in Southern mule language does, he calls it his dinner.

At the vat the juice is beginning to boil and the men take 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 is kept in a small wooden keg, along with a small amount of juice, and after a few days some yeast is added. If other stuff is 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, saying it would rot the tongue right out of our mouths.

When it's syrup making time, all the kids would be watching 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 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 did not 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 running in a circle, 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 has reached its consistency. But, if the drop dissolves and no ball is formed it will mean more boiling is 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

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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 is hot the biscuits will 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 desserts 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 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, and 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 store 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 more mild 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-time fun?

It was hard work, but you be the judge

ECHOES
THE NEWSLETTER FOR
THE ESCAMBIA COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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