

# "A SKETCH OF CLAY COUNTY - THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE "

By

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## A SENSE OF ISOLATION

I began this brief sketch of Clay County in an attempt to explain how our landscape and people came to be as they are. This proved to be no easy task, because even to us natives, Clay County seems to have an evasive identity - a split personality of sorts. The county is at once an island that is isolated by both nature and man, while at the same time it is encircled and influenced by an array of nearby modern cities. From its earliest days, Clay County has been isolated on the west by the rugged expanse of the Talladega Mountains, with their dense forests and paucity of natural gaps. To the east, the region has been blocked by the deep defiles and swift currents of the Tallapoosa River. Even after white civilization belatedly came to the area following the expulsion of the Creek Indians in 1836-37; either through design, necessity, or pure circumstance, major communications arteries have shunned the area. Today, there is only one railroad line, no interstate highways, only one small airport and no navigable waterways. These factors tend to keep Clay County off the beaten path. Clay County's 66,800 remote acres within the Talladega National Forest further adds to its sense of isolation. And finally, although the county is ringed by the cities of Atlanta (80 direct miles to the east), Birmingham (55 direct miles to the west), and Montgomery (65 direct miles to the south); all of these lie outside reasonable commuting distance. These natural and man made barriers have somewhat isolated Clay County, allowing it to maintain a distinctly Appalachian society. Although it is located at the extreme end of the mountain chain, it is Alabama's best and most intact example of the geographic features and culture known as "Appalachia." Those practices, methods and ways of life found in the FOXFIRE series books very nicely describe this county of yesterday, with many signs of it still evident today.

While this sense of isolation may seem to make Clay County have one foot in the past, it definitely has its other foot in the modern hi-tech South. While it is not unusual to see a farmer using a mule-drawn plow or syrup mill in Clay County, his grandchildren are learning to "surf the web" in one of the county's public schools. Even though Clay Countians can seek solace and refuge from many of the pressures and stresses of modern times here in our "fortress;" within a short drive they can take advantage of the many amenities of the large, modern cities. Although the large cities ringing the county are outside normal daily commuting range, those urban dwellers have nevertheless "discovered" our county. The county's scenic mountains and hill country; blessed with an abundance of forests, streams and wildlife, have drawn outsiders. Some of these become part-time residents, while many become a full-time part of our communities. This tourism and retiree influx has added a new and important dimension to the county's economy as well as impacting its culture.

## NOT NEO-CLASSICAL MANSIONS, BUT ROUGH LOG CABINS

Clay County is not from the publicized ante bellum South of William Faulkner or Margaret Mitchell. The traditional ante bellum mansions, with large land and slave holdings, were found in most any direction from Clay County, but were never a part of the landscape here. With the mountain land being unsuited for the economic production of cotton, and since it was held by the Creek Indians until the mid 1830s, this county was settled primarily by the less fortunate late comers. These frontiersmen owned very few slaves, lived in rough log cabins and had relatively small land holdings. When the log cabins finally gave way to homes built of sawn lumber, they remained small, simple and rough, such as the old Lamberth house and barn lying along the Chapman Road in southern Clay County.

Thus, the economic golden era of the ante-bellum South largely bypassed Clay County. Although there were brief flashes of prosperity from mining and timber, it did not produce a broad based economy. Clay County was primarily a land of “one horse” farms during those better times that existed in other parts of the state.

Nevertheless, most of our Clay County ancestors were staunch supporters of the Confederate cause when the American Civil War came. With a predominance of Scotch-Irish ancestry, the perpetual champions of individual and states rights, Clay County probably sent more men to the war per populace than many of those slave holding plantation areas nearby. Even a cursory look at the tombstones in the county’s cemeteries dramatically attests to this fact.

## THE LANDSCAPE AS AFFECTED BY ECONOMIC TRANSITIONS

While the culture of Clay County has remained relatively intact over time, its landscape has undergone major change as its economic base went through transitions. When the American frontiersman began to arrive here in the mid-1830’s, they found a heavily forested region, crisscrossed by mountains, streams and narrow Indian trade trails. By the start of the Civil War, a large portion of the dense forest had given way to the axe and the plow as subsistence farming had replaced the hunting/trading economy of the Creek Indians. With the harsh administration of the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era, many local farmers perceived that they had a choice to either transition to an ill-fated corn and cotton cash crop system or to migrate elsewhere in search of more productive land.

Minerals and timber had brief, but intermittent prosperous runs for the Clay County economy from the late 1830s until the end of World War I. Gold was discovered in Clay and other east central Alabama counties in 1830. That boom lasted only until most of the miners abandoned their claims and headed to California in 1849.

Then, the logging industry, led by the giant Kaul Lumber Company of Hollins, brought in more jobs and income until the prime long leaf pine trees were largely exhausted by the early 1900. Then the Kaul Lumber Company moved to the Tuscaloosa area to set up shop. Following this timber era, minerals again returned to center stage as graphite, pyrite, etc. pumped a spurt of cash into the county’s economy until the end of World War I.

These short periods brought temporary prosperity to the county, but it soon returned to the subsistence and emerging cash crop farming to eek out the normal lower standard of living for most of the county's population. However, as a partial stopgap, during the period starting with the steam engines in the late 1900s, several Clay County men took advantage of the lumber needs and began operating small "peckerwood" sawmills. The author's grandfather, John Aubrey Cleveland, was one of these. He, along with other Clay County men, moved their small portable mills from timber tract to timber tract to cut the remaining larger trees. These operations provided an income for many Clay Countians until the scraps of larger timber were exhausted in the late 1950s.

Nevertheless, settlers continued to arrive, and by the 1920's, Clay County reached an apex in population (over 22,000) and in numbers of farms (over 3,500). By now, almost all the forestland had given way to cultivation. However, with the ultimate depletion of the topsoil and the onset of the great American depression, the cotton and corn fields began to go fallow as most of the farmers either went to the towns and cities in search of jobs, or again migrated in search of better land.

Through natural regeneration, the efforts of the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the beginnings of commercial reforestation operations by large timber and paper pulp companies, the forest began to reclaim the abandoned farmland. With the advent of government and state cost share assistance programs for reforestation, the farmers themselves contributed to bringing forestry and forestland back to its original position of dominance. With this profitable reforestation movement, the price of Clay County forestland began a dramatic rise in the early 1970s. These timberland prices rose from the cheapest forestland in the state to some of the most expensive.

During the late 1990 and early 2000s, these elevated land prices motivated the numerous industrial forest landowners such as Union Pacific, Inland Rome, Kimberly Clark and others to divest themselves of thousands of acres. This land was quickly gobbled up by private individuals, LLC (Limited Liability Corporations) and REITs (Real Estate Investment Trusts). Presently, over 95 percent of the county's extensive forestland is owned by private, non-industrial owners.

When row crop farming bottomed out in the 1950s, after 100 years of struggle, Clay County farmers finally hit upon a form of agriculture suited to these rocky hills - cattle, chickens, and pine trees. By the 1980s, Clay County was a matrix of dense forest with interspersed pasture land, and dotted with the long houses of the chicken industry.

Supplementing the timber and agricultural economy of Clay County today is a new trend of small and medium industry. These family-owned and corporate satellite businesses employ a sizable portion of the county's available labor force.

Another positive economic factor for the county was the completion of Lake R.L. Harris (aka Lake Wedowee) in 1984. Although only a very small sliver of this hydroelectric impoundment is in Clay County, it nevertheless brought significant economic benefit in the form of housing construction and service jobs.

These latest economic trends have brought with them a new phenomenon that could have an impact upon our demographics of the new millennium, and ultimately the culture of the county. As these industries expanded and increased in numbers by the early 1990s, they found the size of the local labor pool to be insufficient. Like many areas, notably in the southwest, west coast and Florida, Clay County began to receive and influx of Hispanics to fill the labor void. Today, these workers continue to arrive from Mexico, Cuba, Central and South America.

## THE PEOPLE AND THEIR ORIGINS

Along with the land, it is the people that make up the character of a county. The forefathers of today's Clay Countians probably mirrored the ethnic makeup of Southeastern settlers in general, but there are also some specifics we can point to. The migration of settlers into what is now Clay County came via two primary routes. First, there was the major one, commonly known as the Coastal Plain/Piedmont route. This migration route usually began in Virginia, then passed through the Carolinas to Georgia, and finally to Alabama. Most families using this route would stretch its traverse into six or seven generations. They normally spent 2-3 generations in the Carolinas and another 2-3 in Georgia, before moving on to Alabama. The ethnic makeup of these migration routes is far too complex to discuss herein, but in general, the Coastal Plain/Piedmont route largely consisted of English, Scott, Irish, Scotch-Irish, plus a few Germans and French. A second and less significant migration route leading to Clay County settlement is commonly known as the Inter-Mountain route. This route also usually began in Virginia and then went southwest into Tennessee, and finally southward into Alabama. This settlement stream was primarily English, Irish and Scotch-Irish.

Along both these migration routes, some of our Clay County forefathers found Native American brides. These full and part-blood Indian women were from the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, or in the case of the earliest Clay County settlers, the women were from Alabama. Some historians and ethnologists believe that around 25% of Alabama's population can count some American Indian blood. Those doing so in Clay County would primarily claim either Cherokee or Creek.

Those African Americans that have deep roots here in Clay County can probably count their lineage from either of two possible sources. It was either from slaves severed from their Indian owners after the 1813-14 or 1836 Creek Indian wars, or from slaves freed from White owners after the Civil War. There is another significant demographic trend applicable to the African American population of Clay County. In the 1940s and 1950s, there was a major migration of young adult African Americans to the large steel and automobile industry cities of the North. As these individuals reached retirement age beginning in the 1980s, many have moved back to Clay County to reclaim their roots.

## CLAY'S NOTABLE PEOPLE

The often explosive history, rough landscape and hardscrabble economic existence of Clay County natives has produced a breed of citizens with a great deal of individualism, grit and determination. Coming from mostly humble backgrounds, many Clay County natives have gone on to make their mark far beyond the county's borders.

Some examples of these individuals are: Hugo Black, member of the Supreme Court of the United States; LaFayette Hoyt DeFrese, private counselor to England's Queen Victoria; Bob Riley, current Governor of the state of Alabama; Oliver Cromwell Carmichael, President of Alabama College at Montevallo, President of the University of Alabama, and Chancellor of Vanderbilt University; Robert Daniel Carmichael, dean of graduate school of the University of Illinois; Patrick Henry Carmichael, dean of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia; Claude Denson Pepper, a long-serving Senator from the state of Florida, U.S. presidential candidate in 1984 and Medal of freedom winner; Irene Vansandt Teel, a noted

fortune teller; the husband and wife doctor team of Wayne and Sarah Finley, who did important medical work in genetics research, and finally, at least 50 medical doctors were born in this rural county.

In addition, there have been sports and military figures from Clay County such as NASA astronaut Joe Edwards, Jr.; Howard Ballard and Johnathan Carter, who played professional football; Alabama's first Olympic Games gold medal winner Edward Yancey Argo; Jack Treadwell, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner; more military personnel per populace than any county in America and probably more 2A and 3A high school football state championships than any county in Alabama. All these individuals proudly proclaim Clay County as their birthplace and native soil.

## CHARACTER TRAITS OF CLAY COUNTIANS

Whatever their ethnic makeup, Clay Countians have some rather distinct character traits that tend to set them apart as a people. These traits have evolved through several generations, molded by the county's historical experience, and influenced by the nature of the rugged landscape itself. By way of example, and for the sake of brevity, some of the more prevalent of these traits will be used below in an attempt to define the character of Clay Countians. Each of the predominant traits listed below are supplemented with an appropriate local "saying."

- A sense of endurance - "You can't keep a (insert family name) down for long!"
- A strong work ethic - "Hard work never hurt anyone."
- Resourceful - "I guess I'll just have to make do with what I've got."
- A sense of community - "We know we can always count on our neighbors if we need anything."
- Calvinistic resignation - "I guess God meant for it to be this way."
- Optimistic - "When you stir up good and bad in a pot, the good always rises to the top."
- A strong religious faith - "We have more churches in Clay County than we have people."
- An awareness of ancestry - "My grandpappy once told me that our ancestors ....."
- Tenaciousness - "I'll get this done if it kills me!"
- Stubborn - "By comparison, he/she makes a mule seem obliging."
- Patriotic - "We had more Clay Countians involved in the Persian Gulf War per populace than any county in America."
- Generosity - "We always raise enough in our garden for us, the deer, and our neighbors."
- Grit - "I will not let this get the best of me!"
- Hospitable - "Y'all come back to see us real soon."
- A love of the land - "My great grandfather and my grandfather lived on this land and hell will freeze over before I let it go!"

## AND FINALLY . . . .

Over the years, very little about Clay County or its citizens has found its way into print. The most notable exceptions up to this point in time have been Garrett Mitchell's "Horse and Buggy Days on Hatchet Creek," Eddie B. Roselle's "Recollections - My Folks and Fields," G. C. Saylor's "Shinbone," Pamela Grundy's "You Always Think of Home - A Portrait of Clay County, Alabama," and more recently, Don C. East's "A Historical Analysis of the Creek Indian

Hillabee Towns.” Finally, the Clay County Heritage Book Committee produced a book of county family histories and selected historical topics. This same source more recently produced a book of Clay County History.

Perhaps some of the once obscure and personal reflections found in these books will help define the county as a place and as a people. If nothing else, perhaps they will ignite an even greater effort to detail our rich history, so that future generations of Clay Countians will not forget who they are, and will continue to take pride in their strong historical and cultural heritage.