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Aug 3 - 1954

In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

In the Spring of 1870, Shelby

and Cleveland County lost a number of valuable citizens, who left here literally seeking greener pastures in the state of Texas.

Business prospects looked mighty blue for the farmer and small business man in 1870. The population of the entire county was only 12,696, a large number of whom were Negroes but recently thrown on their own resources. Then, too, there was trouble by reason of the presence of the Yankees and carpet baggers who were here trying to cause trouble for the whites through the Negroes.

Our men had gone valiantly to work when they got home from fighting in vain for State's Rights, but progress was mighty slow.

Before the War, the 1860 census showed the cash value of all the farms in Cleveland County to be \$1,310,615. But five years after the war's end in 1870, the cash value of all the farms was just about half that amount. The value of live stock had decreased nearly a million dollars in ten years.

In 1845, Texas was admitted to the Union. In 1850 (and probably later) fertile lands there were selling for 15 cents an acre.

Lured by stories of fabulous harvests, written home by former Cleveland countians who had already settled in the Lone Star state, a caravan of fifty wagons carrying a large number of Shelby and Cleveland county people, set forth one fine April morning in 1870, bound for Hunt county, Texas.

The railroad was in operation between here (at Stubbs) and Texas, at that time but it was not practicable to take household goods and stock on the train.

SIX-MONTHS-TRIP

Due to winds and rains and many adverse conditions, the company was six months reaching its destination.

The caravan was delayed nearly a week on the shores of the Mississippi river. One of the caravanners refused to cross "that flowing tide." Some of the other members of the group argued with him, plead with him, read the Bible to him, and prayed with him, to no avail. He said he would not cross that muddy Mississippi, and he didn't. He and his family left the caravan; went elsewhere; and came back to Shelby about a year later.

Among the group were: Ansel Irvine Hardin, aged 70, his wife, Eliza Ann Gordon Hardin, aged 59, their seven-year old son, Charles, their two daughters, Carrie and Dora, and Mr. Hardin's sister, Lavinia.

FORGOT HER DENTURES

One day in June while the caravan was travelling through Arkansas, Mrs. Hardin suddenly became conscious that she did not have her dentures (false teeth) in her mouth. She recalled that when they had stopped to eat at mid-day, she had washed them after eating and laid them on a stump. She insisted on riding back alone to get them. It was understood that the party should make camp a few miles further on, and she would join them by dusk.

She rode back, found the stump, and without dismounting, recovered her teeth and put them where they belonged.

WHO WAS THE MAN?

As she turned to resume her journey toward the camp, she saw a man approaching on horseback. He was a striking

looking man, dressed in the conventional riding clothes of the period, and was mounted on a handsome horse. He approached her courteously and, since it appeared she was alone, asked permission to ride with her.

As they rode along she probably told him they were going to live in Hunt county, Texas. That her husband had been out the year before; had made some preparation for their home there, and had planted an orchard.

She told him that she had a young brother, William Gordon, whom she had not seen for five years. That during the Yankee occupation of Shelby in 1865, the boy had seen a Negro man insulting a white woman, had thrown a rock and unintentionally killed the Negro. Fearing the Yankees would hang him if they found him, her brother had left home hurriedly, and she had not heard from him since. She mentioned further that the brother had a deformed hand, and was bald except for a fringe of hair that grew around his head.

The strange horseman then asked the brother's full name and various questions about him. He said: "I think I know where your brother is. I think he is president of a small railroad and lives in a certain town in Louisiana. If you will write him there, I believe he will get your letter."

By this time they could see in the distance the smoke from the fires where the caravan had set

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up camp for the night. She asked him to go with her and join the other campers at supper, and spend the night. He courteously declined, and before they reached the camp he said goodbye and rode away without telling her his name.

Mrs. Hardin wrote her brother at the address the stranger had given, and in due time heard from him. Later, she visited his home, and he asked her how did she know where to write him. She told him of the ride with the interesting stranger.

WAS IT JESSE?

Said William Gordon: "I do not know who the man was. There is only one man I know of who would fit the description you have given. That man makes it his business to know all about railroads and who operates them. Since I am president of a railroad, he would know about me. He makes it his business to know what kind of shipments the express company is handling, whether gold, silver, or other valuables of a not too bulky nature. He makes it his business to know about stage coaches and the possible possessions of caravan travellers. That man is the bandit and train robber, Jesse James.

Was the man Jesse James? Was he interested in the possible possessions of the travellers who were members of this caravan?

Mr. Hardin's mother, Mrs. Benjamin Hardin, Jr., must have been a remarkable woman. In looking over family records with Mame Hardin and Kate Hardin Crowder, who told me this story, we found that Mrs. Hardin was born February 5, 1771. Her thirteenth child, Lavinia, was born January 10, 1829. (That's 58 years!)

MECHANICAL GENIUS

In losing Mr. Hardin, Shelby lost a valuable citizen. He was a mechanical genius and had a number of inventions to his credit, including a hill-side plow, a cotton-seeder, and a truss. For the sale rights of the truss he received more than \$10,000, according to records in the office of the Register of Deeds of this county.

Other county records show that in 1853 he was elected county coroner. That in 1854, the high sheriff, C. P. Wilkins, died and A. I. Hardin succeeded him in office.

In the early 1850's, Mr. Hardin built on South Washington street the brick house now occupied by Mr. and Mrs. C. J. Meagher. This residence, usually referred to as the Tom Wells house, was originally intended for an office building, and was built of the hand-made bricks left over from building the Court House. Later, when Mr. Hardin decided to use the house for his residence he added a front porch with eight fluted columns, four of which held up the portico. Architects have been especially interested in the pitch of the inside stairway which leads from the entrance hall to the second floor rooms.

Back of the house were several cottages in which the slaves lived. One slave, known as "Granny Sarah" did not have Negroid features, but was possibly a Portuguese. It is common knowledge that slave traders cruised along the sea coasts of Portugal and other countries and frequently succeeded in kidnapping fisher folk whom they later sold as slaves in various other countries. This woman had been in the U. S. A. since she was five years old. Granny Sarah had exceptionally small feet, so small that as a child she had been taught to dance on an inverted dinner plate. And the story comes to me that she could still do it, even when she was old.

In a room in the back yard of this residence, Mrs. Nursey Beam taught a school. Also a school was taught there by Mrs. Marks. Mrs. Marks taught the children without pay, if the parents were unable to furnish the \$1.50 per month tuition fee.

During the War (about 1863) Mr. Hardin disposed of this house. Later, Tom Wells bought it and lived there for a number of years. On Christmas day, about 1895— I recall the day was so warm and foggy that my mother had the living room windows open —this house was set on fire by boys with firecrackers, and all the wooden portion, including the porches, was burned I believe Will Carroll and family were living there then.

A DANGEROUS FIST

Mr. Hardin was a powerful man, physically. There is a story (which I cannot substantiate), that, he was forbidden by law to strike a man with his closed fist. If this be true, it would have been necessary for the Town Council to enact an Ordinance forbidding A. I. Hardin to strike with his closed fist, classifying such closed fist as a deadly weapon. Ordinarily, a man fighting with his fists is guilty of a misdemeanor. But after such an ordinance the fighter would be guilty of a felony, and liable to penitentiary punishment.

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