A HISTORY OF PAINT ROCK VALLEY AND ITS EARLY SETTLERS

by The Reverend W. W. Thompson (written August 23, 1933)

I realize that trying to write a history of the Valley at this time (1933) that I have waited too long - for all of the early settlers died some years ago. So I will have to rely on my memory as to what some of the early settlers told me as no one so far as I know has ever written a history of the Valley.

The Valley got its name because of a legend that some one, perhaps the Indians, had painted the rocks on the bluff where Paint Rock River empties into the Tennessee River. It does not seem that many Indians ever lived in the Valley. However, a number of arrowheads and other Indian relics were found in different places. Many long years ago there was a rock mound in what is now (1933) the schoolhouse yard between the schoolhouse and John Beason's (the old Beason Homestead), which was thought to be over some Indian graves. (I may say just here that some things I write about may sound a little fishy because conditions are so different now than when the Valley was first settled.)

I am now 83 years old (born 1850), and I remember how some things were many years ago. Then I heard my parents and other elderly people tell how things were when they first came to the Valley. As the Valley was when the first settlers came, I may say that it is a long narrow valley winding its way in the main in a southern direction between mountains on either side. The river is formed by the conjunction of two creeks - Hurricane and Estell Fork, which gradually increased in size by a number of creeks merging. First, and perhaps the most important one, is Larkin Fork, which heads up into the mountains on the state line between Tennessee and Alabama. Next is Lick Fork Creek; then Guesses Creek; next Clear Creek, with a number of big branches or small creeks that merged from time to time.

We should consider the Valley first and then the people. The land in the Valley was very rich and the mountain sides were, also. There was a very heavy growth of very large timber of different kinds. If the timber existed now (1933) as it did then, it would bring millions of dollars or would at least a few years ago before the depression struck us (in 1929.) The most of it was cut down and burned up to get it out of the way. At an early day, there was so much big timber and vines and canes and ponds and lakes that the first settlers lived in the caves and cleared up and cultivated the hillsides as they were easier cleared. They were loose and rich. I have heard my father say that in the spring of the year a man could bend a dogwood tree large enough for a big hand spike - a stick used to roll logs - and pull it up by the roots, the ground was so rich and loose. Conditions as they were then account for most of the old graveyards being put up on the sides of the mountains.

The first settlers had small fields or patches of corn. Some years the squirrels and coons and an old bear would eat up nearly all their corn. The bear's habits were to go into the field at night and gather 40 or 50 ears of corn to pile up and sit down and eat all he could.

The women did not need to raise turkeys, as there were gangs of wild turkeys. Some of the men would shoot and kill one when they wanted turkey; others would build a pen in a certain way and catch them alive. I have seen a few pens built square and made of 10-foot rails about 6 or 8 rails high and covered with rails so that when the turkeys got into the pens they could not get out. The builders started about 6 or 8 feet from one side of the pen and dug a ditch about 18 inches to 2 feet deep under the bottom rail of the fence onto the middle of the pen and covered over the ditch 2 or 3 feet on the inside of the pen and scattered shelled corn in the ditch. The turkeys would go in; and when they got in and raised their heads, they never stooped down to get back in the ditch. They used their time going around the pen trying to get out at a crack.

As a rule, there were so many beechnuts, acorns, hickory nuts, and chestnuts that they did not have to feed their hogs much - even to fatten them enough for winter.

Birds were plentiful and the boys trapped them and kept a supply on hand. Some winters large quantities of wild pigeons came. Their habits were to select certain trees to roost in; so many roosted on the same limb, the limb would break off.

A little more about the timber - my Uncle Malcom Thompson once owned the place where John Beason lives (in 1933) (the old Beason Homestead.) He cut down a poplar tree and sawed off two cuts and split them in two long thin slabs and hewed them in the right shape and built a two-room house of good size. Again, some men would find a big hollow sycamore tree and saw off a cut - say 6 or 8 feet long and nail planks on one end and make a wheat grainery. I heard my father say one time that he was down in the bottoms where there were some sawed off, and he rode his saddle horse through one. Again, a man, I do not remember his name, cut down a big poplar tree on the bank of the river just below Cove Spring where the bridge is on the Robertson farm and made a boat of it. He put his family and provisions in it and went down the Paint Rock River to the Tennessee River; on down to the Ohio River; then to Cairo, Illinois; then to the Mississippi River; and on to the mouth of some river in Arkansas, then up it to find a home to suit him - which I hope he did.

The early settlers surely did have a hard time getting the land cleared so they could cultivate it and houses to live in. They either lived on dirt floors or on puncheon floors that were made of slabs - split out of logs and hewn smooth with a broad ax. A good broad ax during those days was a valuable tool. It is said that on one occasion a number of men had met to help a neighbor build a house. Someone had a good, new broad ax and they were looking at it and talking about it when they saw a man coming that was a great lover of puddin' and talked much about puddin'. One man picked up the ax and said he could keep him from talking about puddin' for a while, so when he got there the man with the ax commenced to show him what a gaood ax it was and asked him just to try it on a log; so he took it and said, "Yes, it is a fine, big ax. I wish I had a puddin' as big as I could split open with this ax."

I heard my father say he helped roll logs 40 days one spring. At that time they worked from sun up 'til dark. They never heard of a 6-hour day. When I was a boy, all the cedar was big, old cedar - especially that on the side of the mountain. If I had all the cedar that was burned to make molasses in the Valley, I would be wealthy. You could hardly find a small cedar tree to set out in a yard.

Most of the old settlers came from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and a few from Tennessee and Kentucky. Some people keep up their family tree and are able to tell who their ancestors were and where they came from. A number of the early settlers of the Valley were of Scotch-Irish origin. An historical fact is that they may not have any Irish blood in them. Many years ago some Scotchmen settled in Ulster in the north of Ireland, and a number of them came to America and settled in Virginia and the Carolinas. A number of their descendants came to Paint Rock Valley, including McCord, McCullough, McDouglas, McFail, Malloy, Eustace, Graham, Sorrell, and Thompson. A number of their families moved on west and the old ones died - making the family name extinct in the Valley. The Scots that settled in Ireland were mostly Presbyterians and the native Irish were Roman Catholics. The English government has had much trouble keeping them reconciled.

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EARLY SETTLERS

Beginning at the head of Hurricane Creek, we have (Gideon, George, and Roda) GIFFORD, SUNDIE, (John, Pleasant Riley, and James) DODSON, (David and Evans) JACKS, (Jones) BISHOP, (Richard) MCCULLOUGH, (Stanwick) MARTIN, (Archard W. and William) COLLINS, and (Joshua, Kataia, and John) ANDERSON.

On Estell Fork: (James, Elihu, and Henry) BURK, (Joseph and Thomas) WILSON, MIMS, SIMS, GRAY, (Hiram, William, Wesley, Daniel, and Elijah) SISK, (Francis and James) ROBERTSON, (Alfred Calloway) COLLINS, and (William) GAYLE.

On down the river: (William) GRIMETT, (Jacob) VANZANT, BULMAN, HOLLAND, (Thomas, William, and George W.) HINSHAW, TURPIN, (James) AUSTILL, MORRIS, (James) Martin, (Richard C.) ROBERTSON, MILLER, (Simon) WALKER, (Ferman and James M.) FOWLER, and (Hiram) GRANT.

On Larkin Fork - (Elijah, Elizabeth, Solomon, and Stephen) KENNEDY, (James, Rufus, and Carter) MCCOLUM, SHEPARD, (Jonathan, Isaac, and John) BEASON, CAGLE, (Rufus, Henry, William, and John) ARNOLD, JACKS, KING, (Sabra, Samuel, Stephen, and William) COX, (Matthew, Elias, and James) RIDDLE, (Mary, Sarah, Benjamin, and James) BREWER, (Elias and Rachel) DUBOIS, (Hollis) ALLEN, BUTTE CLUNG, HALL, TRICE, (Elijah, George, Henry, and Thomas) REED, (William C. and Candice) HICKMAN, (Alexander Hamilton, Shipman, and John) REID, CALLOWAY, AND (Micajah and Milcah) SIMMONS.

Then on down the river - DWYER, (Isaac) DUNCAN, (Elizabeth and Joshua) GRAHAM, (Dr. Benjamin) RUSS, (John) STOVALL, (A. J) MIDDLETON, (John) WILLIAMS, (Robert A. and Edmond) WILLIAMSON, (John P., Peter, Peter Willis, and Norman W.) BLACKWELL,

On Lick Fork: (Richard, John, Sr. and Jr., and Willis) CAMPBELL, (James and Trenton) PATILLO, (Floyd and Alfred) BOSTICK, (Daniel A.) THOMPSON, (Martha) MANLY, (Thomas and John) SCURLOCK, ROWEN, BATES, (James) YATES, (William) WRIGHT, (Mrs. Jane) CORN, (James) SCOTT, DAVIS, (John, Russell, Dennis, and James) CLAY, (James, William, and Hiram) LAMB, (Abraham) VANZANT, MARTIN, (Sanford and Luther) POSTON, and HORTON.

In Thompson's Cove: (Nathan) JOHNSON, (Benjamin, Hiram, and John) VAUGHT, (George and Catherine) BROYLES, (Charles, John, and William) MALLOY, (James S. and John) THOMPSON, and Samuel DAVIS.

On down the river - THOMPSON, (Lorenzo D., Nevels, and Thomas) BRIDGES, (Benjamin and John) FRANKS (Benjamin Franks was a very noted Methodist preacher of that day and time), EUSTACE, WALDEN, CRABTREE, and AUSTIN, and an old Indian who lived where Emmett Eustace now lives (1933). The road went down below the field on the bank of the river. There was a bridge on the branch, and the legend is that it was haunted by a dog that chased some people who happened to cross it after dark. Father said he crossed it a great many times after dark, and it never chased him. He did not believe in haunts.

Princeton, one of the oldest post offices in the Valley, was kept at Mr. (Robert C.) Austin's. At that time he had a big tanyard and tanned a lot of leather. He also had a harness and shoe shop. Mr. Austin was a lifelong Justice of the Peace; wrote all the land deeds for the community; settled most of the law suits; and wrote most other people's business letters. Mr. (Adam) Hyder sold goods there. Princeton was quite a business place.

After a period of time, Princeton post office moved on up the river to where Emmett Eustace lives; then on up to where Mrs. Owens Clemens lives for a while. Then it moved to Mrs. Talliferro's into the old Holly Grove Church house where she lived and sold goods and kept the office. Now it is the new Princeton. When the new school building and Princeton High School are finished, the Princeton Post Office will be here to stay.

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by the Reverend W. W. Thompson (written August 23, 1933)

I can remember many years ago when people in Madison County and in Tennessee were inclined to make fun of Paint Rock Valley. They said we had no school houses, no church houses fit to preach in, and no mills - not even a saw mill and what planks we had were sawed by hand with a whipsaw. The whipsaw is a thing of the past. I left the last one I ever sawed with at Robert Robertson's when I sold him my old home. Quite a lot of planks had been sawed with it. The way it was operated was to build a heavy platform 6 or 7 feet high and roll a saw log on it and one man got on top of the log and one under it; the one on top pulled the saw up and the one under the log pulled the saw down through the log. It was a slow process, but the world had not gotten on wheels then. People did not go so fast.

Then on down the river were the: (Joseph) RUTLEDGE, (James) DRAKE, (E. C. and Jesse) WILLIAMS.

On Dry Creek: (Franklin, Green, Joseph, and Squire) HAMBRICK, (Nicholas) WOODFIN, (James M.) CAMPBELL, (Elijah and Solomon) TONY, (James W.) DAVIS, WILLIAMSON, (Samuel S.) CRESWELL, (William) GARLAND, (Jacob F.) CUNNINGHAM, (Abraham, Benjamin, and Solomon) TONY, HOWELL, (Asa, John P., and Morgan) MONEY, VAUGHT, (William J.B.) PADGETT, (Samuel B.) DAVIS, and (Holden, William, Calvin, and Claiborn B.) HILL.

On down the river - (Abel) PENNINGTON. In the "good old days" before we had any kind of prohibition, a good many of the men got drunk at public gatherings. Some of the bankers of Madison County were related to Pennington. Some of them were fighters. Father said on one occasion on Dry Creek, Jack Baker was there and got into a fight. The fighting got to be a general thing. That is, a number of men were fighting and somebody knocked down a man that had a great big boy - then in his shirt tail - by the name of James. He got him a good rock and went crying around. Someone asked him what he was up to and he said he was going to kill the man that hurt his daddy. He got a good chance and knocked the man down; then he started to run. Someone acted as if he wanted to catch him. They said James ran so fast you could have played cards on his shirt tail as it floated out behind him. Finally Jack Baker went west, and it was said that he was killed by the Mormans in the Mountain Meadow Massacre.

On down the river: (Milly, Sanford, and William) BERRY, (Jesse K.) WEBB, HETHERING, FRAZIER, WILLIAMS, (Leonard) CARDIN, (George and James) HUNTER, (John and Jonathan) LATHAM, WILSON, (Daniel, Isaac, and Edward) KIRKPATRICK, (Aquilla) WILBOURN, (John and Asa) CRAWLEY, (Jacob) SMITH, SEARCY, HALE, JONES, DERRICK, DANIEL, ROUSSEAU, (Augustus) LILY, (George W. and Lewis) CLARK, (Richard) SINCLAIR (ST. CLAIR), (Sanders) FLANNAGAN, (Samuel) MEAD, (Joel Daniel, Grant, and Henry) LEWIS, and (Washington and Isaac) RENFRO. It is said that Sam Mead did not like Renfro and Mead said that when the Lord finished making the rest of the people he had a little mud on his fingers and slung it off and said, "Go it, Renfro."

Nashville and Trenton deserve some notice. At an early day, Trenton was a little village - some stores and a church house. It stood close to the spring. Whit Drake of Huntsville bought out the Trenton settlers and turned Trenton into Negro quarters, as a lot of Negro houses were called. The Civil War freed his Negroes and broke him up, so Trenton went back to a little village. I preached a number of times after the Civil War in the old church house, as it was left standing through the War. Nashville was on the east side of the river at the mouth of Guesses Creek. At one time there were some stores, a mill, a shop or two, a post office, and several families lived there.

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Years ago I preached a number of times in the old church house at Trenton and held two protracted meetings for the Baptist Church before the Presbyterians had a church house. On one occasion I was assisted by a Baptist and a Northern Methodist. The plan at that time was for one preacher to preach a sermon and the other preacher to take charge of the service and sing or pray or talk as he thought best. The Baptist preacher thought it was the Methodist's time to conclude, so he got up and stood there and turned around to me and said, "Well, you will have to conclude for it doesn't suit my complexion today." So there I was; I had not known then nor do not until this day what his complexion had to do with the closing.

As the Valley is naturally an agricultural country, farming was the main business of the first settlers. They raised corn, oats, wheat, pumpkins, some cotton, horses, mules, cattle, sheep, and hogs. They cut the wheat and oats with a scything cradle, prepared a hard place on the ground, and then rode horses around and around until they trampled the wheat out. They had what they called fans and they took the straw and chaff from the wheat. Father and a neighbor bought the second thrasher that was in the Valley. Mr. Walker and father had the first cotton gin I ever saw. I have been told that someone had a gin in the Valley before Mr. Walker. (NOTE BY EDITOR: Allen Ivy of Paint Rock Valley had a cotton gin in 1840, per Jackson County, Alabama, Deed Book A, page 598.)

Cotton seeds at that time were not considered worth anything, except for planting. I was in south Alabama during the Civil War, and I saw thousands of bushels of cotton seeds rotting in the gins. The first sorghum that was made in the Valley was from cane ground on mills with wooden rollers and, oh-o-o, how they would screech. The lever was drawn by a horse, and the rollers went round and round. The molasses were made in wash pots. They were black, but oh-o-o how sweet! Mr. Walker G_____'s father bought the first evaporator in the Valley. It is also said that he was the first man that ever covered any corn in the Valley with a plow. The plow was to lay off the rows and then drop the corn and cover it with a hoe. The first farmers only had two kinds of plows - a bull tongue and a turning plow, both made in shops in the Valley. The turning plows had wooden maulboards. Mr. Nevels Bridges made many of the plows. Much of the wheat was carried either to the Bell Factory in Madison County or to the Hale's Mills in Tennessee to be ground.

People went from place to place either on foot or horseback or in a wagon. There were but few horse wagons, and most of them were 4 or 6-horse wagons. Cotton bales were either hauled to Nashville, Tennessee, on wagons, and it would take 5 or 6 days to make a trip. About 3000 pounds made a load. Some cotton was put on a flat bottom boat and carried down the river, on to the Tennessee River, then to New Orleans. It was some job to take a boat through Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River, where the great Wilson Dam is now.

The farmers raised a great many hogs in those days and would drive them down to south Alabama or Mississippi to sell. they would take from 200 to 300 head in a drove. It was a great trip for a boy - especially if he had never been away from home before, as they were sometimes gone for 5 or 6 weeks. They met with a new way of living. It was common in some places then to have little glass saucers to set your coffee cup in. The style was to pour your coffee in the saucer to drink it. On one trip one boy had never seen them use the little glass saucers and asked some of the other hands what they were for. A mischievious man told him that if he happened to have a chew of tobacco in his mouth when he went to the table he should take it out and put it in the saucer. So the next time he went to eat he put his tobacco on the saucer, and it had not been very well chewed. It soon swelled and ran out all around the saucer.

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The hog driving business brings to mind an incident that had much to do with my early life and to a great extent has had to do with my whole life. A certain man bought some hogs one winter before the Civil War from my father and another man, Mr. Nevel Bridges, and drove them south. In place of selling them for the money and paying for the hogs, he took a Negro woman and wanted one of them to take her and pay the other one for his part of her. As neither one wanted her but needed the money, a man by the name of Poston who bought the hogs proposed to buy her. Since he did not have the money, he got them to go on his note and he borrowed the money and paid them. Then, soon the Civil War came on and freed the Negro and left Poston broke. He took the bankrupt law and left them to pay the note and since the war left them broke, the interest on the note for the 5 or 6 years from the time the note was given until the war ended made it quite a sum for that day and time passed by. Then it fell to my dad, and I helped him work to make the money to pay that debt. Some years we would have a bad crop and have nothing to sell, while the interest still rolled on for at best we could never pay over a hundred dollars or two a year. There was no money for me to go to school on until I was grown. Then a friend let me have some money to go to Lebanon two years. When I left Lebanon and came home, I owed about $600. Father still owed that much or more and was helpless with a sore leg which we all thought would kill him. It finally got well so the only thing I could do was to roll up my sleeves and for years work almost day and night to pay those debts and live. In the fall of 1879, I was ordained to preach. I took charge of my old home church, Holly Grove, and two churches in Madison County. Holly Grove paid me $5.00 for the first two years I preached. I preached on at Holly Grove for 23 years. The congregation increased in number, being about 27 or so local members, to as many as 105 at one time. Then the church union matter came up. I went into the union. The congregation refused to go, so I was dismissed and boycotted. I had a stormy time. As time rolled on, the storm subsided, and as the old members and older people and a number of the young ones died, I went back there and conducted their burial services. Today, I do not have any malice toward anyone and do not think anybody hates me. As I am 83 years old, my race will end in a few more years.

Getting back to happenings in the Valley, on the head of Larkin's Fork, a family, as I understand it, was staying for a time -- I do not know where the man was at the time -- the mother had gone to the spring and some prowling Indians came and killed two of their girls and scalped them. They were leaving as the mother got in sight. As soon as she could, she notified some of the men, and they got up a crowd and followed the Indians to the Tennessee River, but could not overtake them. So the girls were buried in what is now a very large graveyard at Beech Grove, near Francisco. It is said they were the first ones to be buried there.
(EDITOR'S NOTE: See Jackson County Historical Association NEWSLETTER NO. ELEVEN, published July, 17, 1977, for history of Francisco and community, including the above mentioned massacre of two white girls by the Indians.)

At the head of Lick Fork, at a very early date two men - one by the name of Fitch and I think the other by the name of Williams- were out on the west side of the creek up on the top bench of the mountain. The final proof was that Williams shot Fitch and killed him. When Williams went back home and Fitch failed to return, the people got to thinking maybe Williams had killed him for it was said they had some trouble and had reconciled. Fitch thought everything was all right. So Williams was arrested and made to show where they went to hunt. The men hunted about over the side of the mountain for quite awhile until they finally heard a dog barking; they found the dog, and it was Fitch's dog. The dog had stayed with his dead master all the time. At that time, men had rifle guns and they moulded their own bullets. In their shot pouch they carried a piece of cloth off of which they would cut what they called a patcher and put it around the bullet.

The men found the patch that had been on the bullet that killed Fitch, and it was just like the cloth Williams had in his shot pouch. Williams was tried and sent to jail; the jail, as I have been told by elderly men all dead now, was in Old Woodville. It was not a very strong building, and Williams got out, but he went blind and failed to get away. So he was caught and put back. He got to the place he could see again in the jail; then he got out again and went blind again. He was soon caught and put back and was tried, and it is said he was the first man ever hung in Jackson County.

My father and other elderly men told me these things were accepted as facts. I have seen Fitch's grave, as the men that found him just buried him there and put some rocks around the grave; then they cut his name on a tree nearby. The tree may be dead now (1933), as I have not been there for years. I suppose the grave can still be found.

Now as to the intelligence, morals, and religious beliefs of the early settlers. I do not suppose many, if any, of them had ever been to college. But a great many of them were men and women of good, strong minds, good moral people; and a number were religious and members of some church. Among them were the Primitive Baptists, Freewill Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. At an early time, a Cumberland Presbyterian Church was organized on Dry Creek, as the Molleys, McCords, and some of the Thompsons were Presbyterian. The Reverend D. K. Hunter of Madison County, Alabama, and Reverend Henry Larkins of Tennessee were the first Presbyterian preachers. A little later, William Gayle settled in the Valley and preached some as long as he lived. He was a good man and always enjoyed his own sermons as the tears would run down his cheeks. Somehow he never seemed to affect anybody else much. Among the Primitive Baptists were Wesley Sisk and Elder (John) Williams. As referred to before, Benjamin Franks, a local Methodist preacher, was a noted man in the early days. I do not remember who the Freewill Baptist preacher was. Some years before the Civil War in about 1854, the Reverend Richard Tallifero bought a large farm, including the spring where John Beason (the old Beason Homestead) lives and settled there. As he was well off and had a number of Negroes, his wife was a good manager and good farmer. Mr. Tallifero devoted his time to preaching. While he was not a great preacher, he was a wonderful exhorter and successful as an organizer. So under his influence the Missionary Baptist Church got to be a very strong denomination all over Jackson County, as well as in Paint Rock Valley. Before the Civil War, John Erwin, a Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, held some wonderful meetings, especially on Lick Fork. Erwin was a great preacher and Hickman one of the greatest exhorters and one of the ablest men in prayer I have heard. He was a very fluent speaker; the words just came rolling with zeal and enthusiasm. Under Erwin's preaching, I was convicted and converted in about 1859 or 1860.

So many things happened during and just after the Civil War that I will let them go by - - only to mention one remarkable thing. About four years after the war about 20 or 30 families came into the Valley from Calhoun County. Especially the Cambrans who were fine, honest, hardworking religious folks. I cannot name all the families. Several families of the Cambrans, also the Richeys, Rumsies, Baileys, Thomases, Taylors, Davises, Copelands, Purdys, Walkers, and some others that I cannot name now. Most of them finally left the Valley; some went to Texas and some to Tennessee.

Many changes have taken place in the Valley in the last 30 or 40 years. The Pike Road is a wonderful improvement, and when the Princeton School building is completed, it will be another great addition.

The Reverend W. W. Thompson was the father of Mr. John Knox Thompson, who practiced law and was Jackson County Solicitor for a number of years. Mr. John K. Thompson's son, John Will Thompson, shared this wonderful history of Paint Rock Valley with Mrs. Elizabeth Thomas, who, in turn, shared same with the J.C.H.A.