

Jerry McKelvy's  
**SANDYLAND CHRONICLE**

Vol. 20 – No. 3

[sandman43@att.net](mailto:sandman43@att.net)

March, 2020

\*\*\*\*\*

**KING COTTON**

Someone driving around in Nevada County would be hard pressed to find any cotton being grown today. I don't know of any cotton fields. At one time, cotton was the main crop being grown. It was once said that "Cotton was king". The last cotton I remember being grown in Nevada County was back in the mid-1960s when I worked for the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. One of my jobs was to check farmer's fields to see if they were in compliance with various agricultural programs available at that time. I can remember cotton being grown on our farm in the early 1950s. I think we only grew it for one year. I remember dragging a cotton sack and helping pick the cotton when I was just a small child.

Back before the Civil War, much of the cotton was grown on large plantations in the South with slave labor being used to tend to the crop and harvest the cotton. Following the Civil War, slavery ended and landowners had to find another way to obtain the labor needed for growing cotton. Wage labor was introduced. In 1866, the average wage for farm labor was \$13 per month for men and \$9 per month for women. The tenant system was also used. A typical cotton tenant in Arkansas (black or white) farmed forty acres using their own mules, harrow, planter, and the family for labor. They were allowed to live on the land. When the crop was harvested, the landowner got one-fourth of the profit and the tenant got the rest.

Some years were more profitable than others depending on the weather, the price of cotton, insect damage, etc. Cotton usually produced from one-half to two bales per acre. A bale to the acre was considered to be a pretty good crop. A bale of cotton weighed 500 pounds.

Another labor system was the sharecropper system. The sharecropper, many of whom were very poor, lived in shacks on the land and used the landowner's tools and equipment. The sharecropper usually got fifty percent of the profit and the landowner got the rest. Since most sharecroppers had no way of traveling very far, they were forced to buy their supplies and personal items from the plantation commissary at high prices.

According to newspaper reports, Nevada County ginned 14,035 bales of cotton in 1931 which was more than the previous year. During the Great Depression, cotton prices declined and one of the government programs was to pay farmers to plow up their cotton crops to reduce the supply and raise prices. In 1933, Nevada County farmers plowed up 16,000 acres of cotton for which they received \$200,000 from the government which amounts to \$12.50 per acre. The landowners who received the government payments were told to divide the money with their tenants, but many kept the money and ordered the tenants and sharecroppers off their land.

One of my favorite old movies is *The Grapes of Wrath* in which sharecroppers forced to

## SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

leave their land in Oklahoma decided to go to California to find work. As cotton prices declined, many small farmers were forced to sell their land. Many moved to the cities to find other types of work. The government purchased some of the worn-out farm land from farmers during the Great Depression. That is how the Poison Springs State Forest in our area came about. The state of Arkansas purchased about 20,000 acres from the U. S. Department of Agriculture in 1957 and turned it over to the Arkansas Forestry Commission which used it for growing timber. It was called Poison Spring State Forest named for the site of the Civil War battle of Poison Spring which is located in the state forest. A small state park has been developed at the battlefield site. Most of the forest land we see around Bluff City was once cultivated crop land. It's hard to imagine all that open land. My uncle once told me they could see lights from nine houses from their front porch in the Rocky Hill community.

Mechanical cotton pickers appeared in the 1950s which eliminated the need for a large labor force to grow cotton. Many farmers switched from cotton to soybeans. Cotton is still a major crop in parts of Arkansas, especially in the Delta regions in the eastern part of the state.

Many of our ancestors were cotton farmers. They grew other crops also, but cotton was the main money crop. Families were larger in those days and kids were used for farm labor as soon as they were old enough to work in the fields. It was a very labor-intensive crop. Fields were plowed with horses and mules and that in not an easy job. When the cotton began to grow, it was necessary to walk each row with a hoe to remove excess plants leaving two or three of the best plants in each hill. Any weeds were removed at the same time. This was called "chopping cotton" and involved working long hours in the hot sun. Cotton loves the hot temperatures of summer. When the crop matured in the fall, the cotton had to be picked by hand. Men, women, and children walked the rows, picking the cotton, and putting it into a long cotton sack with a strap over their shoulder and dragging it along behind them. Workers were paid by the pound, so the cotton harvested by each picker had to be weighed using cotton scales like in the picture below.



## SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

The harvested cotton was put into wagons or trucks and taken to a nearby cotton gin. The ginned cotton was bound into 500-pound bundles which were about 55 inches high, 33 inches wide, and 21 inches deep. The cotton was then hauled to cotton buyers located in places such as Prescott and Camden. The first farmer to bring in a bale of cotton sometimes won a prize. In the steamboat days, the bales of cotton stored in warehouses at Camden were finally loaded onto steamboats for shipment down river to New Orleans and then shipped to factories where the cotton was used in making clothing and other uses.

About all I know about cotton gins is what I read since I never saw one in operation. The cotton gin was invented in 1793 by Eli Whitney. The purpose of the gin was to remove the cotton seeds and other impurities from the cotton fibers. Whitney's cotton gin was operated by hand, but later the gins were improved so they could handle large quantities of cotton. Cotton gins were located in many communities where cotton was grown. In the early days of Bluff City, a cotton gin is mentioned as being on the Tom Starnes place near where White Oak State Park is today. R. W. Black was said to be putting in a ginnery in 1916 located two miles west of Bluff City. The same year, Henry Payne was said to be putting in a first-class ginnery at Bluff City running full time. This is probably the gin mentioned by some of the older people I talked to. They said it was located along the edge of the bluff on what is now Hwy. 299 across from where the water tower is today. It was operated by George Herbert Weaver from about 1927 to 1941.

A few years ago, Mr. Jesse Wood (now deceased) posted a photo on the Bluff City Facebook page of the Barham cotton gin. It is a very good old photo and gives us an idea of what cotton gins looked like. Barham is shown on old maps. It was located on the Gurdon-Camden branch railroad between Reader and Chidester. According to researchers, Barham was named for Charles R. Barham who built the first sawmill on that railroad. Mr. Wood mentioned that there was also a sawmill at Barham ran by a Mr. Bryant. This could have been the same sawmill first started by Charles Barham. We don't have a date for this photo of the Barham cotton gin.



*Barham Cotton Gin*

# SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

## Writing about Riding -- by Don Mathis

It was back in the days I can barely remember remembering. Daddy decided it was time to take the training wheels off my bicycle.

"Oh, Dan, be careful," Mom advised.

Daddy balanced the bike and trotted along, pushing me.

"Pedal," Daddy said, "pedal."

I did.

And I kept glancing back to see his smile of approval.

"You're doing it," he said!

And I looked back one more time to see him standing 10 feet... 15 feet... 20 feet behind me, smiling and waving.

I panicked. I forgot to pedal. I forgot I knew how to steer.

Somehow, I must have figured crashing into the bushes would be less painful than hitting the pavement. I got a little scratched up by the shrubs. My tears were more from abject terror than from pain.

Daddy got a tongue-lashing from Mom.

A day or two later, Daddy gave me more guidance; how to brake, how to keep balance.

These are two important lessons in life:

Know when to slow down.

Always strive for balance.

*(Don Mathis is the son of Dan Mathis, the son of Walter and Alice Mathis of Camden, Arkansas)*

### Estray Notice.

On the 24th day of May 1910, in township of Union' in the county of Nevada, the undersigned took up as an estray a certain gray mare about 12 years old, weighing 660 pounds. Branded on right hip, wearing large bell with leather collar.

Now if at the expiration of ten days from the date of this notice said animal has not been proven away, notice of the taking up of the same will be given to W. R. Dewoody a Justice of the Peace of said county, that the proceedings may be had according to law. (Sec. 7838 Kirby's Digest.)

This 24th day of May 1910.

P. C. Dewoody.

The word ESTRAY was commonly used up until about 1920 to mean an animal that had strayed from the farm where it belonged. The owner sometimes put a notice in the paper about his animal in hopes that someone would find it. Notices such as this notified the public about an animal that had been found and what would happen to the animal according to the laws in effect at that time.

I like the name of this medicine. Sounds like a sure-fire cure for about anything that ails you.

## RUB-MY-TISM

Will cure Rheumatism, Neuralgia, Headaches, Cramps, Colic Sprains, Bruises, Cuts, Burns, Old Sores, Tetter, Ring-Worm, Eczema, etc. Antiseptic Anodyne, used internally or externallv. 25c

RAINFALL FOR JANUARY – 7.5 INCHES