

Civil War Comes to Mooresville

By: Jerry R. Barksdale

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(On June 16, 2018, Daniel Barksdale (portrayed by his great-great grandson, retired Athens Attorney, Jerry R. Barksdale) told the following story at a Bicentennial event in Mooresville, Alabama. He spoke while standing on the front porch of the Woodroof home referenced in the story.)

Good afternoon folks. I hope ya'll are tolerably well today. Welcome to Mooresville, the oldest town in Alabama. I'm Daniel Barksdale, just a plain, gray dirt farmer. I live three miles east of Athens on the Athens-Fayetteville Pike in a log house where I've lived since coming here from Lincoln County, Tennessee in 1839.

The story I'm about to tell you is true. I lived it. Major James W. Woodroof and wife, Harriett, along with their three infant children lived in this house before the Civil War. Major Woodroof came to Alabama from

Virginia at age 9 after his father was killed in battle during the War of 1812.

Major Woodroof married Harriett Wright in 1853 and they moved into this house shortly thereafter. The family prospered. When the Civil War broke out he owned 3400 acres of land and 83 slaves.

Mooresville residents were living gracefully and peacefully. On January 11, 1861, in Montgomery, at 2 p.m., Alabama withdrew from the Union. Graceful living and peace was about to end. Folks in Limestone County were against secession. Our two delegates voted against it, but it passed anyway by 22 votes. When the news reached Athens, folks were upset. Sentiment boiled up and two weeks later on a Saturday night a large crowd gathered on the courthouse square to show their support for the Union. I was present along with my neighbor and good friend, Emanuel Isom who founded Isom's Chapel Methodist Church 11 miles North of here

on Mooresville Road. A sea of pine torches lit up the night. The crowd chanted, "The union now – the Union forever." Old Glory with her 33 stars was hoisted up the flag pole.

"Nail it to the pole!" someone shouted. A hundred-gun salute was fired. Old Glory continued to fly over Athens for 2 months. Athens was called a "union hell hole." Mayor Press Tanner finally took it down and stored it in his desk, perhaps to bring it out on a happier day in the future. Athens was the last place in the South to pull down the Stars and Stripes.

Sentiment in Mooresville was different.

On March 25, 1861, a public meeting was held in Mooresville and they voted unanimously to support the newly created Southern Confederacy.

About two weeks later, Confederate forces fired on Ft. Sumpter in Charleston, South Carolina. Three days later, Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to “put down the rebellion,” as he called it. It was obvious that Lincoln intended to invade the South.

Trouble was coming down the road. And it didn’t take long to arrive.

Slave Insurrection

Around the middle of May it was discovered that slaves in and around Mooresville were planning an insurrection against their masters. Parson Peter Mudd, a slave owned by Dr. John Pickett of nearby was the ring leader. He was sneaking around at night telling slaves that Mister Lincoln would be here directly to free them and they were to rise up against their masters.

Folks were scared and rightly so. There were more slaves in Limestone, Madison and Lawrence Counties than white people.

Daniel Hundley, a Harvard educated lawyer whose family lived Southeast of here at Hundley Hills Plantation, joined a committee of public safety to root out the insurrectionist. They patrolled at night. It was discovered that the Rice Plantation in Mooresville was a hot bed for insurrectionists. After a “speedy trial”, three slaves were hanged and one sentenced to prison for life. The insurrection ended.

Mooresville Militia Drilled

Young men of Mooresville prepared to fight. When word spread that the Mooresville Militia would drill for public inspection, residents turned out to cheer

them on. They drilled in a field on high ground just east of the graveyard down Broad Street. Some wore fine clothes, some pieces of uniforms that their grandfather had worn during the Revolution; others the War of 1812. Carriages gathered along the edge of the drill field and old warriors too old to stand cheered on their sons and grandsons. Occasionally, a lace trimmed handkerchief flicked in the hand of a lady in the crowd causing the young men to forget their commands.

Thirty-two men from Mooresville area answered the call of duty and joined the Confederate Army. Some left on fine horses, some in carriages that took them to the train station in Decatur or Huntsville and some marched off with only a gun and blanket across their shoulder. They were filled with pride and confidence. They would win the war and be back home in 3 months. Women didn't sit idle. Clothes had to be made for the men. Miss Mollie Walton, the wealthy, spinster

half-sister of Major Woodroof, who lived in a cottage on Market Street, went to the work with needle and thread. She supplied every man in Company D, 35th Alabama Infantry with a uniform. They named their company “Molly Walton Guards” in honor of her.

My youngest son, Dudley Richard, barely 22 and single, joined Company G of the 35th Infantry. He said he wanted to cover himself with glory instead of farm dirt.

Not much changed around here right away. Folks gathered their corn and cotton and life went on much as it had. Most of the fighting was in Virginia and other places.

Yankees Invade North Alabama

Then on the morning of April 9, 1862 North Alabama saw their first Yankee soldier. Gen. O.M. Mitchell's 3rd Division struck unexpectedly from Fayetteville, Tennessee and captured Huntsville along with 16 locomotives, 100 rail cars and 170 Confederate recruits.

He ordered Col. John Basil Turchin – a name that will live in infamy – to burn the Decatur Railroad Bridge over the Tennessee River. Turchin's birth name was IVAN VASILEVITCH TURCHINOFF. He was born in Russia, educated in military school and served his adult life in the Russian military. He and his Polish born wife moved to Chicago in 1856 where he worked for the Illinois Central Railroad; the same railroad Abraham Lincoln once represented as a Corporate Lawyer.

On May 1, 1862, Col. Timothy Stanley's 18th Ohio Regiment readied to move out from Huntsville to Athens to guard the railroad running North and South. "The locals will raise the flag of our Union the moment you enter Athens," Gen. Mitchell assured him. It wasn't to be.

Col. John Scott's Confederate Cavalry pounced on Athens and Col. Stanley and the Yankees skedaddled toward Huntsville riding South along the railroad. Several Athens residents jeered at the retreating Yankees and called them names. At the same time, Gen. Mitchell was on a train heading to Athens. Confederates burned the railroad bridge over Limestone Creek just North of Mooresville and attacked the train. 20 cars were burned and 2 Yankee soldiers killed. Gen. Mitchell chugged back to Huntsville. His blood was up. He ordered Col. Turchin to Athens. "Leave not a grease spot there," he said.

Sack of Athens

On May 2, 1862, Turchin marched into Athens. The 19th Ill. and 18th Ohio stacked arms in the street. "I vill turn mine head vor two hours," Turchin said. The sacking and pillaging of Athens began. Homes and businesses were broken into and possessions stolen. The Post Office where my brother-in-law, R. C. David was Postmaster was looted and money stolen; a young slave girl was raped; smoke houses were cleaned out of meat. They stole horses, mules, cows, hogs, hay, corn and fodder.

Turchin was court martialed. Presiding over the court martial that began in Athens was Brigadier General James A. Garfield of Ohio. He was a smart man. It's said he could write Latin and Greek and do it with both hands. I don't know if he could do both at the same time. But he didn't know that he wasn't suppose to

drink the water from the finger bowl while eating. I guess a fellow can't know everything. He was elected the 20th President of the United States and assassinated 6 months later in 1881.

While Garfield was encamped near Decatur, AL in '62 with the 20th Brigade of the Army of the Ohio, Dr. John Hundley, father of Daniel Hundley of "Hundley Hills", invited Garfield to preach at Mooresville Church of Christ on Market Street. He preached several times, but I don't know if anyone answered the altar call.

Turchin was convicted and dismissed from the Army. When he returned to Chicago, he was welcomed as a hero. When his case reached President Lincoln's desk, the conviction was set aside and he was promoted to Brig. General. He later served with distinction at the Battles of Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge.

Turchin was Jefferson Davis's best recruiter. Four of my boys and son-in-law, James M. Newby joined the Confederate Army. We had to defend our homes and family. Almost 1700 men from Limestone County joined the Confederate Army – about the same number of registered voters. Sentiment had turned. This brings me to my dear old friend and neighbor, Emanuel Isom. He openly supported the Yankees. He was accused of tattling to the Yankees when Confederate soldiers came home on leave. Sheriff McKinney threatened to hang Emanuel. It sure caused a breach in our friendship.

Wilder's Lightning Brigade Occupy Mooresville

In November, '63, Yankees thicker than hair on a dog's back marched into Mooresville. The music of song birds was replaced by bugle calls, braying mules and clomping hooves. The 123rd Ill. Regiment, part of Wilder's Lightning Brigade,

was commanded by Lt. Col. Jonathan Biggs. They were infantry, but rode horses and mules. And they were armed with 7 shot, 52 caliber Spencer repeating rifles that would fire 20 – 30 times a minute. They were very effective against the Confederate single shot rifles that took about 15 seconds to reload. Col. Biggs established his headquarters down the street near the big spring and called it “Camp Biggs”. The men encamped on Piney Creek.

They tore down the Mooresville Female Seminary on High Street that was established in 1836 by Rev. Robert Donnell, and they used the material for firewood and the walls and chimney to construct winter quarters for officers. Their mission in Mooresville was to guard the Memphis and Charleston Railroad bridges over the creeks and patrol the north side of the Tennessee River.

Yankees combed the countryside – living off the land - taking horses, mules, pigs, goats, sheep, hay, fodder and corn and cleaning out smoke houses of meat. They called it foraging. Locals called it stealing. At the time Major Woodroof and wife, Harriett, now with 4 children, age 7 months to 7 years lived in the Woodroof house on High Street.

During the occupation, Andrew John Zeitler, age 24, arrived with the 73rd Indiana Infantry. He was an Army sutler, a civilian merchant who travelled with the Army and sold provision to soldiers out of the back of his wagon or tent. He had come to Indiana at age 9 from Bavaria in Germany. No doubt Zeitler drove his creaking wagon down High Street and past the Woodroof house on many occasions, never imagining what the future held for him Mooresville.

Yankee Prowler Injures Major Woodroof

One night a Yankee prowler, looking for something to steal, sneaked up on Major Woodroof and struck him on the head causing serious injuries – serious enough to send him to bed. Mrs. Woodroof decided to hide her chickens in the cellar for safe keeping. She locked the cellar door. A couple of nights later, Yankee soldiers, learning that they were stored in the cellar attempted to pry off the lock. The family heard the noise and was greatly frightened, but Major Woodroof was confined to bed and helpless. Mrs. Woodroof was a courageous woman. She quickly dressed, slipped out a side door and ran to Col. Biggs quarters and told him what was happening. Biggs was an honorable man. He returned with her and ran off the thieves and posted a guard. Later, Col. Biggs posted the following order:

“The house and premises of J.W. Woodroof is protected from search of arms, et cetera, against the officers and men of this command as to our certain knowledge, he

possesses nothing in the way of arms or munitions of war.”

That order, now framed, hangs in the house today.

Dr. William Thomas Thach and wife, Kathryn lived on Market Street (in a house where future President Andrew Johnson once boarded). Dr. Thach was away serving in the Confederate Army. The front door bell consisted of a knob attached to a wire that went beneath the house to a bell on the back porch. When the knob was pulled the bell rang. One day Mrs. Thach answered the front door and there stood a blue clad Yankee officer. Trouble for sure. While they talked the bell rang. The Officer wobbled the knob thinking it might be defective. It rang again. Mrs. Thach froze with fright. The Yankee was puzzled - - and suspicious. “Madam there is something very strange going on,” he said.

Finally, Mrs. Thach told the truth. “Officers, hogs are hidden under the

house. They are bumping against the wire.”

The officer was taken aback momentarily, then burst out laughing.

I don't know who ended up eating those pork chops- Yankees or the Thach's.

Mooresville was a Confederate town occupied by Yankee troops.

Residents made nice with the invaders. They had no choice. Not only that, the people were kind, courteous and hospitable by nature.

Captain Gatch with the 9th Ohio wrote to his wife in May, 1864 “that Mooresville bears the traces of a once wealthy place. The inhabitants are very kind to our Army and have been protected more than any neighborhood.”

While sick with the flux-a loose and bloody bowel-he stayed in the Woodroof house and slept in a feather bed. "I find Mrs. Woodroof very kind. They can't do too much for me...", he wrote.

In September, 1864, he again encamped at Mooresville." I stopped for supper and breakfast at my old friend Mr. Woodroof and was welcomed heartily," he said. "Mrs. Woodroof asked after my wife. She had just buried her little girl - - a sweet and smart child."

Residents were so nice soldiers composed a long poem, "The Song of Wilder's Brigade" extolling the people of Mooresville. Here are three verses:

*"One day came the order: "Be ready my men;
We'll start back to Huntsville this morning at ten;
We came on to Mooresville the very same week,
And camped on a stream which is called Piney Creek."*

...

"A word about Mooresville I'll have in my song,

*To speak of its people it won't take me long;
For people true-hearted, wherever they be,
In the North or the South, are the people for me."*

...

*"The men are kind-hearted, the ladies are fair,
And are kind to our soldiers, I truly declare,
They welcome us warmly whenever we meet;
We honor the men and the ladies so sweet."*

There were several families like my old friends, the Isoms who sympathized with the Union.

Sgt. Otho McManus, of Wilder's Brigade, told how well he was treated by the Kimbell family near here. In February, 1864, McManus dined with the Henry W. Kimbell family who lived two miles from here. Their 8-year-old daughter, Ann Eliza was present. McManus said, "three darkies served a feast of roast turkey, boiled ham, boiled chine, pickled pigs feet, hominy, salsify, parsnips, and sweet potatoes, along with fresh peach pie and cream." He declared it to be the best dinner he had eaten since

leaving home in Illinois.

The War Ends

That terrible war ended in May, 1865. Of the 32 men who left Mooresville to fight, three didn't return alive, they being John Gamble, Thomas Peebles and Robert Michireux. Between 620,000 to 800,000 men died in the war, about one-half fighting to save the Union, the other one-half fighting to leave the Union. It was a disaster to the South. Folks in Limestone County were suffering – and hungry. Eight thousand slaves in Limestone County were free. They had no home, no education, no job and very little to eat. Fertile fields were overgrown with bushes and brambles. Horses and mules were scarce as hen teeth. Yankees had burned our

courthouse, fairground, eastside of the square and Davidson Hotel.

Yankee troops occupied Limestone County.

Our old way of life was gone forever – swept away by the winds of war. The “morrow” was our only hope.

My four boys and son-in-law, James Newby returned home, half starved and barely alive. There was reason to despise the Yankees, but human goodness dies hard. As the scripture say: “Love covers a multitude of sin.”

Remember Andrew J. Zeitler, the Yankee Sutler who came to Mooresville with the 73rd Indiana? Well, after the war he bought land in Mooresville and operated a business and became a leading citizen. In 1884, he married Ann Eliza Kimbell, age 28, the same Kimbell daughter who was present when Sgt. McManus ate peach pie and cream back in

February, 1864. They moved into the house at the corner of High and Piney Street. Andrew and Eliza had three children before Andrew died at age 50 in 1889. Their son Henry was a good man and well respected in Limestone County. Andrew was the great-great-grandfather of the Mistress of this house (Woodroof), Mrs. Margaret-Anne McCrary Crumlish.

Turchin, the Russian "Mad Cosack" who sacked Athens died in 1901 in an insane asylum. No tears were shed for him in this area.

Col. Biggs was wounded three times and captured at Selma by Gen. Nathan B. Forrest. Following the war he was an Indian agent in Arizona. He died at age 51.

Earlier, I mentioned that my neighbor and good friend, Emanuel Isom had supported the Yankees which caused a breach in our friendship. Well, I'm happy to report that rift ended in 1896 when his granddaughter, Ada

Isom joined hands in holy matrimony with my grandson, Edgar Eugene Barksdale thereby ending our Civil War. (As an aside, they were your speakers grandparents)

Gen. O.M. Mitchell died of Yellow Fever within six months after invading North Alabama.

Following the war, Major Woodroof fell from a horse and injured his leg and had to use a cane. It's said that many years later an Atlanta Journalist came to Mooresville to research a novel she was writing about the Civil War. She read Major Woodroof's diary and stayed in his house.

Her name was Margaret Mitchell and her novel was *Gone with the Wind*. In her novel, Scarlett's father, Gerald O'Hara fell from his horse and was crippled and thereafter used a cane. Was the scene based on Major Woodroof? No one knows for sure.

Mrs. Woodroof died in 1883 at age 62. Major Woodroof died in 1897
at age 84.

Mooreville residents are again living gracefully and peacefully ... and
“the men are still kindhearted and the ladies are fair” - this I truly declare.

Thank you for visiting Mooreville.