

A HISTORY OF CALICO ROCK AS I KNEW IT

In the year of 1901 we lived in Hardy, Arkansas and Dad was running a store. He was an applicant for the post office and altho he had the recommendation and approval of the county committee, passed the exams etc. the other fellow had the money and so got the office, which Mama said was a blessing.

That summer Dad and a group of men came to White River fishing and pearling, they didn't find any pearls but Dad bought a big one for \$100 and later sold it for \$700 - also on that trip - knowing that the R. R. was coming he bought the lots where the hardware now stands.

One of the contributing factors of our move from Hardy to Calico Rock was the big drouth in the summer of 1901 and the distress that it brought to the people. Business was bad in the little store and the big profit made on the pearl led him to believe a fortune could be made in dealing in pearls- that proved not to be true for a later purchase of a large one for \$800 was sold for almost nothing, it had a sand pit in it which he thought he could peel away but it went all the way thru.

On February 12, 1902 we started our move from Hardy to C. R. at the breaking up of the "Big Sleet" a six weeks seige of snow and sleet. We had been packed for the whole six weeks - Dad had Uncle Arch and a Mr. Floyd and son bring

three wagons to move us. We started out with the 3 wagons and a cow and calf.

The Floyds were in the first wagon - Uncle Arch and Uncle Dee in the second and Dad, Mama and I was in the third one, the going was rough for the melting ice and snow made deep mud, but we made it to Strawberry River the first night, the river was up from melting snow and ice but the front wagon drove into the river and was soon caught in the current and swept down stream, the team pulling this wagon was a big horse and a small pony and as luck would have it the big horse was on the upper side and broke the current, also for some reason the bed to this wagon had been tied to the running gear, otherwise it would have floated off and the men might have drown as neither could swim.

The second wagon had already started into the stream when we arrived and Dad saw what was happening, so he yelled for Uncle Arch to stop. Uncle Arch said we had a camp meeting on the creek bank, Dad preached, Mama and I cried and he and Uncle Dee exhorted. The Floyd wagon finally made the opposite bank about 1 mile below the ford. The remaining two wagons and the cow and calf had to spend the next two nights in a tumbled own log cabin that stood on the bank above the ford. We made camp in the cabin as it had a usable fireplace- and it was our good fortune to have the "grub-box" in our wagon, our bedding was in the wagon that had gone on but we had a rag carpet and the quilts in the seats for cover. News of the incident soon reached Franklin

so we had lots of visitors. After two nights the creek had run down enough for us to ford the stream and we found the other wagon at one of Mamas uncles where they had unloaded the wagon and were drying things out.

Now we were on our way to Bandmill where Uncle Arch and Mr. Floyd lived. Here we added another wagon to the caravan, rested, let the teams rest and on the 27th started on the last lap of our journey. We arrived at Calico Creek about sundown and even with four wagons were still having to double team on the hills and deep mud. All the way from Hardy we had had trouble with the cow and calf. The mud made them tired and when they found a piece of ice they wanted to stay on something solid. Coming thru what is now the Harbor Lane the wagons mired down and the men got over in the field and was throwing rocks out into the road for a footing when the owner came out and stopped them. (Asa Benbrooks father)

When we arrived in Calico we found the creek at flood stage from backwater and this time no one was foolish enough to drive into the water. The men came to the river and borrowed the ferryboat to ferry us across the creek, getting the boat up to the ford was no little job for they had to cut out trees and drifts to get up the creek. We got across and moved into a little log cabin that stood on the now vacant lot south of the theatre. In this one room and side-room cabin we established our home and a barber shop and to

top it off Mama had two borders. I was four and one-half years old at this time.

Calico Rock was an old indian settlement in the early days - (lots of Indian artifacts have been found such as arrowheads, grinding stones, etc.) Where our house stands and in the caves pottery and bones, in 1916 a flood uncovered a large Indian burial ground on the Copp farm across from town. The first white settlers arrived around 1820 and the steamboats began to come up the river to C.R. about 1825. Calico Rock got a postoffice in 1851.

Calico Rock was named for the bluff east of town that at that time was colored from the water that flowed over the bluff.

Our first weeks in C. R. were rough ones for we contracted malaria, we had been warned to not use the water from the spring in the creek bank below the gin but didn't heed the warning so paid the penalty.

Now for a history of C. R. as I know it.

The original town was built facing the river and along the bank, the foundations were there when we came, there were three families here, 2 white and 1 negro family. One white family lived in a log cabin where Ota Benbrook now lives, one in the hotel where the Cheney store is and the negro family in a log cabin where we now live. The village had two stores. a postoffice, hotel and schoolhouse. Ten days later the construction crews for the R. R. (St. Louis-Iron Mtn.- and Southern) arrived and from that day on we

were a boom town in the best western manner. Overnight tents and shacks were thrown up and the natives moved in, most of whom were farmers for the drouth had driven them to the R. R. for work and the pay was good - \$1.25 per day for common labor and \$4.00 to \$5.00 per day for a man with team, depending on the size of the team.

John Wolf in his history of the old town says it was always a rough and rowdy town with its share of drinking, fighting, and shootings and for the next five years I can assure you they didn't reform.

Thirty days after we arrived the store building was up and ready for business - but without shelves or counters - cracker barrels and packing cases serving in their stead. The original building was about 30x60 ft. of box construction, with living quarters upstairs, where we lived until 1910 when we moved to the bluff. Later side rooms were added, one on the north used for storage and one on the south for a barber shop.

The first five years were exciting ones for true to frontier style we had the bullies, roughnecks, robber gangs and an abundance of drunks. Two or three fights a week were par and most of them were in front of the store. It seems to me that I spent the first few years under the bed, for when trouble started Dad sent me upstairs out of reach. Some examples of what happened was a bunch of local roughnecks (who it later developed were part of the gang of thieves) resented anyone who objected to their way of

wanting to run things, Dad was one of those and so a feud developed. One afternoon a gang fight started between the gang and the store crew and up and under the bed went "Little Audrey" such yelling - crashes and bangings was going on I was sure the house would fall from under me but it was a rick of firewood that Dad had stacked by the side of the store. The gang was throwing it into the store and Dad and the clerks were heaving it back at them. Dad threw one stick with such good aim that one of the gang was laid up for some time with a busted head and typhoid fever. He later married one of my cousins.

Another time a stone mason by the name of Thompson who was building the first bank building (where the P.O. is now) got drunk and picked up a stone, walked over to the store front, drew back and whamed it into the store at Dad's head. A ferryman by the name of Jim Ward was sitting in front of the store, saw what was taking place and yelled at Dad to dodge. He did and the stone daved the edge of a warming-closet of a range they were giving as a prize in a contest. Night after night we slept with feather beds and pillows between the bed and wall to keep the bullets from coming thru. I'm not sure they ever shot at the house but we were afraid they would.

The right of way for the railroad was let in three mile strips with a boss for each three miles, then construction gangs were moved in and they were made up of Greeks, Italians and ~~some~~ convicts, local men being used also. We

visited a Greek camp one Sunday. It was on the point between the switch bridge and the main bridge. They did their homework, washing, cooking and mending on Sunday. They were baking bread in the European manner with a hole in the creek bank lined with stones for an oven. They gave us a loaf of the bread, yum, yum. A few weeks after that they had a disagreement with the boss and tore up and broke everything in the camp and left. Dad went over to the camp to see what had taken place and came home with a small trunk. It is in the smoke-house now 85 years later.

The contractor for the three miles by town was a man by the name of Cushion. When he had completed his three miles he and his wife were to leave by steamboat so they brought their baggage to the pay masters tent by the side of the store, so it would be handy to load when the boat got in. This time it was night when it tied up at the landing, when he went to load there was a trunk missing. Mr. Cushion told Dad, and Mama said she had seen two men go up the dump with what she thought to be a bale of hay. Mr. Cushion and Dad got their guns and started after them. They saw them about where the cave in the bluff is and ordered them to halt. The men ran and there was a citizen of the community who was not seen around for sometime. He had a "bad leg." Quite a few things happened while the road bed was being built. The contractor who was building the bed along the lower bluff thought a good idea would be to blow all the bluff over at once so he had holes drilled about 20 feet back from the

edge and close together, and filled them with dynamite and powder and wired them to all go off at once. He thought the bluff would fall over like a slice of bread. The blast went off but the top still stood. One of the men said he would go and see what happened but was persuaded to wait and in a few minutes the top dropped into the river. Hence the big rocks in the river down there.

When the road bed along the lower bluff was finished the contractors moved to the west bluff and that is when we had the "big explosion" that shook houses 40 miles away. It happened this way - they had planned another huge blast similar to the one used on the lower bluff - they had moved a large quantity of powder and dynamite from the storehouse and stored it in a tent on the spot where Dr. Copp's house is. They timed the explosion for 12 noon so as many as possible would be inside. We had just sat down to the table when the cry "Fire in the hole" was given to warn people to take shelter. Dad said lets go watch the blast, and also that would put us in a safer room as the living room had a ceiling. Just as the blast went off Dad said "My God the powder house" and pushed us all back from the window. With that the four walls came together. When we had fought our way out of the wallpaper etc. I was screaming and bloody. They tried to find where I was hurt but could not find any wounds. It was not me that was hurt but Dad. He had pushed us all back from the window and got the full force in his face. They picked over 40 pieces of glass from his face and

head. The force of the explosion threw the four walls of the buildings inward, shattered windows, blew the wallpaper off walls and ceilings, even blew the ceilings down in some houses. Everything went to the middle of the room. The basement of Dr. Copps house was blown out at that time for that was where the powder tent was. The big stone in the yard at the Mixon house was blown from the bluff over there. At the hotel on the old hotel lot an Irish paddy was eating dinner at a table on the porch. It blew the ceiling of the porch down on the table but they said he never stopped eating.

The first revival held in C. R. after we came was in the front room of a "blind tiger" that was built where the Riverview Hotel now is, it was a large unfinished room and in the back room they were selling liquor even while services were going on but there was no disturbance even tho they had to pass to and fro thru the meeting room.

In 1904 the planer was built by a couple of men by the name of Thomas and Maddox also the two large houses where the Smiths live. From now on the town began to be a trading point and to grow. More stores, a bank, churches and a new school building were erected. (Two rooms) For recreation there was skating, sledding and parties in the winter and picnics, barbecues, pleasure lunches on the river, ice cream suppers and more parties.

Store-keeping in the early 1900's was quite different from today. The farmer came to town very seldom. When they

came from as far as Oxford or Wideman they would come to stay all night, getting to town in the afternoon. In the fall they brought their cotton to sell, down in the flat where the footbridge is was a campyard with a small cabin that was used in bad weather. If the weather was good the farmer and his family slept in the wagon on hay and quilts. They always had a "grub-box" in which you found the food already cooked, ham, sweet potatoes, fried chicken, cake and all the good things they would take on a picnic or camping trip. The stores stayed open at night for they had to buy their supplies and be ready to load up and get on their way early the next day. Also they had a world of fun talking and visiting till all hours. Dad worked 16 and 18 hours a day back then. He bought cotton for 60 years and in all those years lost money only two of them. One of those broke him and his Dad and the other was after the first World War.

The merchants went to market in the fall and spring and bought for the full six months. What a thrilling time it was when the huge wooden packing cases began to arrive from St. Louis. I could hardly wait to see what was within. In all my 35 years in the merchandising business I never did get over the love of opening up new goods, but in the early days the big thrill was the new hats for women. In later years the "drummer" started coming with his sample trunks. When Dad would come back from a buying trip in the fall we would ask him what he bought and he would describe this and that and then say he bought so many pretty coats and a lot of

"dog hair and molasses". By that he meant ugly ones that would keep the purchaser warm but wouldn't do anything for them.

In 1910 we moved to our home on the bluff (the first house to be built on the bluff). About 10 weeks later Neva was born, and that same day Neill came to Calico Rock. In about 1912 the Garner firm had prospered enough to build a new building, a concrete block building the same size as the one that now stands. (the C. R. Hardware building)

All thru the years we were plagued by floods - one of the freak ones was a waterspout on an August Sunday in 1914 when the creek washed out all of the bridges - four of them. Then in August 1915 we had one of the biggest of all. In January 1916 we had an even bigger one and it is the one that overturned a two-story hotel into the street. It stood on the lot the city hall and firehouse are on, and floated another two-story house off its foundation as well as washed away a wagon shed and a carload of farm wagons, some of which were never heard of. The store lost countless hundreds of cedar post and cross ties with each flood. Other big floods in 24, 27, 44, and 45 - in 27 the water got 2 inches over the counters of the Harris store.

Calico Rock has been fortunate in not having many fires - but we have had ones when we do. In 1923 on April 7, 221 buildings burned in a little over 2 hours set by the train. The engine had gone down in the bottom to pull a car of cattle out. Dad had been down to see the cattle loaded and

was in the bottom when the engine started up the grade there was a very strong wind blowing and the engine was showering cinders. One hit the roof of the warehouse back of the store and in minutes the whole building was on fire. From that the fire swept the east side of the street (even tho they tried to stop it by blowing up one building) it burned the east side to the lot where the Wiseman house is and then the wind changed and it jumped the street and burned the west side back to the bank. It would have burned the rest of the street had the bank not had fire shutters on the windows. The railroad acknowledged responsibility for starting the fire and had an adjuster, Mr. Robert Guthrie (who had just sold his interest in town) and Dad all make an estimate of the loss. When they were compared there was less than \$500 difference in the three estimates. So they paid the town \$125,000. Other fires were the Commercial College building, a two story, which burned in December 1910. It was rebuilt and is now the Calhoun home, the wholesale in the 30's, I think about 35, the theatre, the gymnasium, the Church of Christ in 1923. It was where Mrs. Hivelys home is now.

The first fire after we came was in 1904 on Christmas morning when the hotel burned. Steve McNeill was living in the hotel and had a stove pipe run up thru the roof. Dad kept telling him he was going to burn the place up and would burn the store when he did. Dad offered to buy a flue if he would put it in but Steve refused. Christmas morning we

were aroused by the cry "Fire". The building housing the hotel and postoffice, also a small store was on fire. It was too far gone to save but the store was saved by the heroic efforts of the townspeople. They took buckets and tubs and carried water up the bank from the river. Into this they dipped quilts and spread over the roof and walls of the side room of the store and saved it. About 35 quilts were burned in this way and most of them belonged to Grandmother Roberts. It was during this fire that some of the funny things that happen in a fire took place. They gathered up the silverware and carried it down to the R. R. bridge, and then gathered the four corners of the table cloth that was set for breakfast up and dropped it from the third story. Also took the furniture and dropped it from the upper floor.

In 1917 an organization was formed to start a fair and the first one was held that fall in the wagon shed belonging to the store on the lot just back of the Wiseman Court. The next year the fair grounds had been bought and a large building for exhibits and stock pens and a reviewing stand had been built, everything was ready for the fair to open the next day and the health department ordered them not to open the fair because of the "flu". The government was to send a War Exhibit train thru on the first day of the fair. There was no way to let people know that the fair would not open so a big crowd came and they let them go thru the train. In three days there were lots of cases of the flu.

There were lots of deaths from the flu. The fair ran til 1925 and being a Tri-County fair drew big crowds.

The first school house was on the tract of land where the John McGinnis house is. After about three years there was a new house built just below the old school building that is now standing. It was a two room building and a few years later two more rooms were built. Then in 1924 the old concrete building was built.

The old town has had its ups and downs. Never too high up but never too low either. In the years that have passed we have had a college, roller-mill, cheese factory, work working plant, bracket mill, at one time we had two banks, 2 wholesales, and three hotels. We have had fun, we have had our troubles just like most small towns, "I've looked the place over for 55 years and think I'll just settle here" as Neill says.

April 25, 1957

Audrey G. Brooks