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OLD Bonner Thrived on Retail Trade

By Margaret Leigh

Just to the south of Ruston, where State Route 3061 branches off from Highway 167, lies the remains of the old community of Bonner. Before the Civil War this was a prosperous little village, which if that tragic event had not intervened might have been named the parish seat when Lincoln Parish was organized. Certainly, it would have become the principal town in the area.

Martin McLeroy (1798-1876)

The first white man to establish a home here was Martin McLeroy, born April 15, 1798, in Oglethorpe County, Georgia, and died December 5, 1876, at Bonner, Louisiana, in Lincoln Parish. He was the son of Andrew Alexander McLeroy (born in Cork, Ireland, between 1740 and 1750, and died in Madison County Alabama, June 6, 1823), an ardent patriot and Revolutionary soldier.

Andy McLeroy, who seems to have originally settled in Oglethorpe County, Georgia and then eventually to have moved on to Alabama, was married twice—first to Johannah Hancock, and second to Phoebe New Meadows.

At least two children were born to his first wife: Green and Martin. Green married Miss Marry ("Polly") Bell and continued to live on the home place in the northern part of Alabama near the Tennessee line. Martin, however, after his marriage to Miss Nancy Welch (September 9, 1803-May 13, 1846 or 6, the date on her tombstone is blurred and illegible) moved to a community in central Alabama, not far from present day Talladega.

Here Martin and Nancy lived happily for about 25 years and reared a family of eight children—five boys and three girls. They were: Paralee (1821-1884), Permelia (1822-1883), Thomas Welch (1825-?), Johannah (1827-1882), Louisa (1829-1911), Francis Marion (1821-1874), Sara Alabama (1837-1908), and Martin Sanford (1840-1864).

Then Nancy, aged 42 or 43, sickened and died. Martin buried her, packing a few personal belongings and mementoes, bid farewell to his sons and daughters, and set out for parts unknown, in effort to bury his grief.

In the meantime, other families had arrived in this same little central Alabama community, among them being George and Adam Riser, from Newberry District, South Carolina. It is necessary at this time to mention these two men by name for each married a McLeroy daughter.

Paralee, being the eldest child of Martin and Nancy McLeroy, was naturally the first to marry—she and George Riser took this important step on February 17, 1828. Their example was followed two years later by Permelia McLeroy and Adam Riser, on October 22, 1840. The third wedding to be celebrated was that of Johannah and John W. Mallory, on May 30, 1844.

At this point, Nancy died and a grave-site was offered the bereaved family by the two Riser sons-in-law. Thus, she was buried in the Riser lot in Ashley Cemetery, some fourteen miles from Talladega. Martin committed the care of his younger children to the older ones and set out on his travels.

As he made his way across Mississippi, Martin kept hearing accounts of highly desirable land further west, on the far side of the Ouachita River--wherever that might be. After crossing the Mississippi River these confused rumors suddenly come into clearer focus, and he determined to see for himself what they were all about. At last he arrived in Trenton on the west bank of the Ouachita River and the unofficial capitol of the hill country. Here the rumors took on still more substance and the details became positively glowing.

Martin began to enquire as to where the best land was and how to obtain possession of it.

Finally, in 1846 he selected a site which pleased him.. This site lay about midway between the towns of Vernon, then the parish seat of Jackson Parish, and Vienna, which stood some 20 miles to the east near the boundary with Union Parish. The land belonged to David Park of New Orleans. So Martin, determined to gain ownership of a generous portion of this fabulously rich area, went to New Orleans to dicker with Mr. Park. The upshot of the whole business was that Martin was able to lay claim to 8,528 acres, for which he undertook to pay \$10,650.00, or \$1.25 an acre.

Returning to Jackson Parish, Martin built a home, and took unto himself a second wife. On November 22, 1849, he married Miss Delilah Williams (January 3, 1824-May 10, 1894). One child, a girl, Ella, was the result of this union. Soon, with a more settled life in prospect, Martin began to long for the children of his early manhood.

Accordingly, he wrote and urged them to join him. Telling them of the rich soil and the acreage he had bought, he offered to sub-lease land to them. With the opportunity of buying it.

Adam Riser (1809-1898)

Back in Alabama, the first crop of McLeroys continued to marry and establish homes. On February 21, 1849, Louisa married M.W. Ashley; on May 8, 1850, Thomas Welch married Miss Emily Allen; and later, Sara Alabama married Colonel Thomas Cunningham Standifer. Last of all, Martin Sanford married Miss Adelia McLeod on September 1, 1859. This second Martin was killed at the Battle of Atlanta, on July 20, 1864, when he was barely 24 years old. Francis Marion died unmarried.

George and Paralee (McLeroy) Wiser preferred to remain in Alabama, but Adam and Permelia decided to accept her father's offer and they began making their plans for the long trip. They seem to have arrived in the early 1850's and were followed in short order by their brothers and sisters, both McLeroys and Risers. A little community began to develop. They grew cotton and some corn, and established a sort of community tannery, which soon become the largest such industry anywhere around.

According to the most authentic information available, the first member of the Riser family to immigrate to the American colonies was Martin Luther Reisor (later anglicized to Riser). This Martin Luther was a native of Germany who, with his eight sons, settled in Virginia in the middle 1750's. The old man and all of his sons were zealous patriots and all were involved in the American Revolution, either as soldiers or in some civilian capacity.

One of these stalwart sons was George who sometime before 1763, settled in Newbery County, South Carolina. He married twice (first, Francena Kounts, or Counts, and second, Elizabeth Long) and had a total of eight children, five boys and three girls. Of them all, however, only one is of concern to Lincoln Parish-Martin, grandson and namesake of the emigrant.

Martin II died in 1844, the survivor of three wives, after having fathered twelve children and accumulated a considerable fortune. Again, only two of them played a part in the history of Lincoln Parish George II and Adam. These two moved to Alabama and married daughters of Martin McLeroy, as related above.

When Mr. McLeroy made the offer to the children of his first marriage to establish themselves in the new country to which he had moved, Adam and Permelia were among the first to accept.

Adam and Permelia produced five sons. The eldest was Bachman, who was killed in the Battle of Vicksburg during the Civil War. He was followed by Andrew Hartwell, who married Miss Sarah Helen Tomlinson. He also fought in the War, but was luckier than his elder brother. Third in line was George M. who married Miss Fannie Lampkin. Fourth was Walter Frank who married Miss Bert Lampkin. The fifth was named Hugh Tom, and he also married a sister of the wife of one of his brothers- Miss Hattie Tomlinson. All of these, with the possible exception of Bachman, are buried in the Riser Cemetery, just south of Ruston. The youngest child of Adam and Permelia was a daughter, Sallie, who married T.H. Osborne, and moved to Texas.

Although Adam did some farming, he was essentially a businessman. Wherever he went he established a business of some kind- generally a small general store. His arrival in Jackson Parish was no exception, and as soon as he conveniently could, he opened a little backwoods store.

Since all of this occurred before 1873 (the date of the formation of Lincoln Parish), the little community of McLeroys and Risers lay in Jackson Parish. Vernon was the parish seat, and for this reason, and because Vienna was about 15 miles to the northeast and off their beaten track, the settlers looked to the former for their supplies and a market for their produce.

In a field, not far from the Riser home, a school was built which soon became known as the Riser School, and it was here that the children from miles around learned their ABC's and how to write and cypher-reading, writing and arithmetic. To the southwest, near Woodville, a camp-ground had been set aside where families assembled to listen to the itinerant circuit-riders sent out by the Methodist Church and for a few days vacation from the hum-drum and exacting duties of frontier life. This campground blossomed into Wesley Chapel.

After the Civil War ended Adam Riser built an expensive home and furnished it elegantly a "square" piano, a secretary, a clock, and other articles, all of which are still in the possession of his descendants. This House, which was built of logs and then weather-boarded, is still in relatively good condition and is occupied by his granddaughter, Mrs Georgia Redwine.

And thus, the settlement developed into a community and the community grew and prospered, and began to give itself some of the airs of a town.

The Store

The little general merchandise store run by Adam Riser was in existence by January 1859, but no one knows exactly when it was established. There is in the possession of Adam's descendents a set of books, the first page of which is dated January 26, 1859. However, this is not the beginning of the ledger, for this page bears the number 45, and it probably is not the first such book kept, although it is the first extant.

This little store was located on what was then known as the Old Township Road, but which today bears the unimaginative designation of State Route 3061. The building was typical frontier architecture - built of logs, it was long and narrow and probably sported a front gallery which not only provided a covered entrance, but also a hitching rail. Inside, as might be expected, it was dark and dingy since it was first lighted by candles and later by coal-oil lamps. Everything was to be found in it - dry goods, medicine, shoes, clothing, groceries, books, and leather goods.

But although it was a frontier store it was not a "back. woodsy" store. The residents hereabouts might be living under primitive conditions, but they were not poverty-stricken and in spite of the many difficulties, they maintained a surprisingly high standard of living.

This ledger does not show cash sales, only those for credit, and on that day, January 26, 1859, Mr. Riser entered a total of \$29.60 in such business. Which might not seem like a great deal today, but wasn't bad for the place and the times. To illustrate the variety of goods sold, on that same day Mrs. Lou Ashley bought a tin bucket for 38 cents; Mr. T.C. Standifer bought a blanket for \$3.00; Mrs. Susan Riser, a pair of spectacles for 38 cents; and M. McLeroy, a bonnet for 21 cents.

There was hardly a day that a business of \$25.00 or \$30.00 was not written up. And as the year wore on, Mr. Riser's credit sales became larger, and larger. For instance on April 28, 1859, they amounted to \$53.11, and on January 20, 1859, to \$49.96.

Monday, April 18, 1859, was really a high spot of some kind the sales came to \$521.02! It began early when "W.B. McLeroy, self & lady ",ran up a bill of \$137.22, including a side saddle at \$22.00, and a linen bonnet at \$11.00. Then "Rufus D. McLeroy, self & lady" purchased goods totalling \$33.01. Among other things, they bought "I black Mantilla" for \$14.00, "1 pr. Penet Gloves" at \$1.10, 1 powder puff for 45 cents, and "I blue cloth coat" for \$14.50. Later, Mrs. Lou Ashley came in and bought I side saddle at \$12.00. She was followed by "Charley Gullatt, self, lady& daughter".

They bought 1 black mantilla for \$8.00, 1 linen bonnet at \$11.00, 2 extra hoop skirts, \$8.00, 1 set per, silver spoons at 88 cents and a salt cellar for 25 cents.

The handwriting in this ledger shows every sign of having been done with a quill pen and is, of course, in the ornate, heavily shaded style of a hundred years ago. It is beautifully kept and is perfectly legible. Most of the pages are headed simply with the date, but on May 25, 1959, this was varied by the use of the name Plankville, showing that by then the community was beginning to be referred to in that way. By January 18, 1873, the name Bonner was in common use.

According to several sources, Mr. Risers's business eventually came to \$50,000-60,000 a year. From the examples given above, it is easy to realize that such might have been the case.

Henry Bonner

For some time the little community got along very nicely without a name, then an enterprising settler erected a sawmill, and the village slowly became known as "Plankville". This was several years before the Civil War, about 1854.

In 1854 a Mr. Henry Bonner appeared on the scene and began buying up all the land he found for sale. At that time the Queen and Crescent Railroad was making every effort to establish train service between Vicksburg and Shreveport. The swamps which lay between these two towns, and through which the right-of-way- had to run, made this no small undertaking, Bonner was a member of the team of surveyors employed by the Company to plot a route for the rails that were slowly approaching Monroe. Bonner saw to it that this line ran through Plankville, hence his activity in buying up quantities of land along this westward line of survey.

And then came the Civil War, which touched the lives of the hill people mainly because their sons enlisted in the Confederate Army and marched off to battle. This bitter tragedy was followed by Reconstruction, which was much more ruinous from a commercial and political viewpoint than was the War itself. The South lay prostrate under the heavy hand of Carpetbag governments, reinforced and backed up by an army of occupation. Things did not begin to approach normal until after the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876.

All this time Bonner hoped for and looked forward to the reorganization of the Company.

At last this time came, but the Company had changed hands and the railroad was now known as the V.S. & P. The initials stood for Vicksburg, Shreveport and Pacific, but they were soon satirized as the Very Slow and Pokey.

About 1870 rumors began to fly thick and fast, and Bonner was sure he had it made, that the railroad would follow the line he had helped survey so many years ago. Plankville was just as sure it would become a railroad stop, and in honor of its benefactor changed its name to Bonner. The ledger from the old store of Adam Riser bore the heading of Bonner by 1873.

But alas! the bubble burst, as bubbles have a habit of doing.. A new survey was run in 1881 which missed Bonner by about two miles! Ruston was founded, and the

would-be railroad center was doomed! As were, for that matter, Trenton and Vienna, Vernon and Woodville, and a host of other long forgotten pioneer communities. The name survives in a street of the New Town, and in an old cemetery, all that is left of a man's ambitions and a community's hopes of survival.