

Jacksonville State University

World War II on Etowah County

Department of History

By

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Etowah County is one of Alabama's more historically enriched counties. The early days saw the Spanish explorers led by De Soto cutting through the wilderness and exploring the Coosa River. The Cherokee Indians also lived in Etowah County during these early years. Etowah County saw several acts of heroism from its citizens during the Civil War such as Emma Sansom and John Wisdom. The Coosa was also enriched with great history from many different steamboating activities. Etowah County also saw a dramatic change in industry at the turn of the twentieth Century.

On June 3, 1539, De Soto and his Spanish army left their ships at Tampa Bay to begin their exploration. On June 5, 1540, De Soto and his men found the Indian village of Chiaha. The next week the army crossed the Big Wills Creek, Canoe Creek, and the Coosa River. Etowah County can be identified in America's earliest period with De Soto's march (Watson, 7).

The Cherokee Indians had been the residents of Etowah County during the aboriginal period. These Indians became known as the "mountaineers". All were of Iroquoian stock. The Cherokees were strongly nationalistic and would sacrifice any pleasure in defense of their territory. Battles such as Wills Town and Turkeytown were important early fights between the Indians and settlers. These battles help to shape the frontier in Etowah County. The Treaty of Echota in 1835 said that the Cherokees would move west of the Mississippi River by 1838.

Soon it was evident that the most effectual element for the Coosa River Valley commercial development would be the steamboat (857). During the nineteenth century, steamboats went from Gadsden to Rome two days a week. The use of steamboats for commercial purposes ended with the Civil War. The steamboats then carried Confederate soldiers and supplies down the Coosa. Gadsden also built several steamboats during the 1880's.

During the 1870's, mystery was added to the Coosa by several sightings of a river monster by several respected citizens (89). Steamboats would soon become a part of Etowah County's past as roads and big businesses soon made Gadsden into a city.

Gallant is a small farming community located in the western portion of Etowah County. It lies about ten miles south of Atalla. Gwen Bradley was born on May 1, 1934 in her grandmother's house which had no electricity. She went to school in Gallant where three grades shared a classroom. She was born Gwen Stanfield; her father was Ewell C. Stanfield and her mother was Odell Morton Stanfield. They lived in Gallant during the late 1930's and soon her father had to go fight in the Second World War.

In 1934 when Gwen was born, Benjamin Meek Miller served as governor of Alabama. Soon Frank Murray Dixon of Jefferson County would serve as governor as Alabama prepared for the war (Stewart, 186). Alabama played a major role getting the United States ready for war. In 1941 the governor, Frank Dixon set up the State Defense Council.

"Lest it be concluded that Alabama's contribution to the war effort has been largely material, let it be noted that Alabama stands among the first two or three states in men enlisted in the armed forces in proportion to population>"(Sparks, 3).

Alabama has long been a very important military center. During these war years, these facilities increased in size and many new facilities were built. The war practically ended unemployment for that period. In 1934, 268,000 Alabamians were out of work. By the end of the war only 15,000 Alabamians were unemployed (Martin, 4). Alabama was forced to industrialize which would help the state after the war. In the cities, many women worked in industries producing war materials. In the country, such

as Gallant, the women stayed at home to keep up the farms. Women for the first time had unlimited opportunity for different jobs. Women soon started enrolling at a rapid pace in the colleges. The Alabama School of Trades in Gadsden admitted women and soon they were the majority. Propaganda was used to discourage women from continuing to work as the war drew to a close. A survey in Mobile revealed that seventy eight percent of the women wanted to continue working. Blacks also received many opportunities due to the labor shortages. Many of these wartime industries were converted back to a full peacetime production after the war.

The war had several harsh effects on the farming communities such as Gallant. With most of the men fighting, the women had to practically run the farms. Many farms in south Alabama were industrialized for the war. Many farmers had to turn away from cotton and produce more meat and dairy products for the war (Martin, 67). The income for the Alabama farmers was much lower than the farmers in the U.S. on the whole. Farmers had to work with several handicaps during this time.

Communication with soldiers was very difficult during this time. In Gallant, a black horse would drive to your house to inform the family that a loved one had been killed. Because there was no television, people in Etowah County would drive to the movies to watch the news reels that were played after the shows. Writing letters was the main source of communication during the war. While Gwen's father Ewell was fighting in Europe, she would go for long periods of time without receiving any letters. When he was fighting in the Black Forest, she went forty days without hearing from him.

The Second World War had a great effect on business and industry. Alabama was one of the industrial centers of the southeast (Martin, 73).

Construction rose steadily after 1937 then skyrocketed in 1941 and 1942. The Federal Government spent 520,000,000 on the construction of industrial plants, housing, and military establishments. The steel and iron industry began increasing output early in the defense program by building new furnaces and mills and by renovating older ones. Coke and steel ingot reached a historic level of production. This strained the Birmingham area. They then had to rely on other producers in the Anniston, Gadsden, Muscle Shoals, and Tuscaloosa regions.(Martin,77). The war born aluminum industry also became an overnight success. The electric energy consumed dramatic increases in the amount used by these plants. The war also enabled many untrained men and women to be taught skilled crafts and trades. After the war, there was a better balance between agriculture and industry. Many men who came back from the war in Gallant left farming and went to work at Republic Steel and the Goodyear Tire Plant in Gadsden.

Alabama had vast manpower to use in the war. Before Pearl Harbor, Alabama had been the leader in the South in the production of war materials. the first problem was how to train the men and women to work in the plants. The State Council of Administrators was formed to train and recruit these workers. The Division of Vocational education and the State Department of Education was also formed throughout the state (Martin, 85). Many problems such as a lack of housing and over-burdened community facilities were common problems in growing war manufacturing towns. Alabama had a large number of skilled workers after the war.

Business and industry grew like never before during the war. Money flowed into the state and many new jobs were created. Women took over many jobs that had previously performed by men. Many highway

improvements and several other materials felt huge shortages because of the war. The average pay for these factory workers more than doubled. Under Dixon however, the state saw many improvements. The state Civil Service was started, and the "little Hatch Act was Passed"(Summersell,531).

Gadsden's first practice blackout was held on March 17, 1942 and lasted 35 minutes. Because Gadsden produced so many war materials, it was designated a defense area. The Federal Government supplied Etowah County with a supply of defense materials. 37,055 gas masks, surgical and medical equipment along with first aid kits were issued. The opening in 1942 of Camp Sibert as a Chemical Warfare Training Center provided a military base for over three thousand men. The Gadsden Ordnance Plant turned out more than sixteen million 105 millimeter high explosive shells.

Etowah County's fighting men achieved recognition in almost all of the ranks. Sergeant Paul Lankford survived the Bataan "Death March" and was imprisoned in Manchuria. He received the Purple Heart. Yeoman Second Class John L. Harrell of the U.S.S. Howell spent over three years in a Japanese prison.

From an economic standpoint the war affected many local industries and businesses. Gadsden had never experienced a greater boom than that which occurred during the post war period (Watson, 133). The population in Etowah County continued to grow even after the industries began going back to peacetime production. By 1946, Gadsden had 25,000 more people than in 1940. Finding jobs was a major concern for veterans in Gadsden. Many women were reluctant to give up their new positions. The problem of housing was also of major concern. Contractors could not estimate building costs and agencies could not lend money on new houses because they could not determine the true value. East Gadsden was the area with

the largest post-war boom. Large farmlands were turned overnight into new houses and buildings.

World War II changed many things for Gadsden and Etowah County. Gadsden grew tremendously in industry and business. Gadsden produced huge amounts of war materials. Etowah County changed from an almost completely agricultural county to a more diverse industrial power as well. Many women stood tall and became industrial and textile workers to help the war cause. Population and new jobs increased to new levels by the end of the war. Etowah County had an abundance of manpower which it lent to the war effort. Many veterans quit farming and began working in heavy industry after the war. President Roosevelt gave the veterans many benefits such as the GI Bill. The war produced the biggest boom in the economy since the city was founded in 1845. World War II helped to pull Etowah County out of the Great Depression and turned it into one of the industrial centers of Alabama. Only the people who lived in Etowah County during the war years can fully appreciate the monumental economic and social changes that the war forced upon Alabama.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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3. Stewart, John. The Governors of Alabama. Pelican Publishing Co. Ontere, Louisiana, 1975.
4. Summersell, Charles. Alabama History for Schools. Fourth Edition Viewpoint Publications. Montgomery Al. 1970.

Gift and Release Agreement

We Gwen Bradley and Vandon Stanfield
Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

do hereby give and grant to Dr. Suzanne Marshall, Assistant Professor of History, Jacksonville State University, all literary and property rights, title, and interest which we may possess to the audio or video recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) conducted at

The home of Gwen Bradley in Gallant, AL.
~~at 231999 at 12:45~~

on the date(s) of Oct. 28 1994 at 12:45 pm

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Gwen Bradley
Interviewee's signature

Address Doymood Drive Gallant, AL
35904
Phone 538-5455

Date 10/28/94

Vandon Stanfield
Interviewer's signature

Address 7101 Lister Ferry Rd.
Rainbow City, AL 35906
Phone 442-3829

Date 10/28/94

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Gwen Bradley M/F Female

Address: 335 Dogwood Dr Gallant, Al

Phone number(s): 205 (538-5455)

Approximate age or date of birth: 5-1-34

Mother's Name: Odell Monton Stanfield

Father's Name: Ewell Stanfield

Places lived and when: born Etowah Cty. moved many places while her father was in the military, Washington D.C., Michigan, then Alabama

(southside, Gadsden, Gallant)

Education: graduated high school in 1952

Religion: Baptist

Business, political and social memberships (past and present) _____

Present occupation: homemaker

Former occupations: office (Baptist Hospital)

Special Skills: gardening, needlework, + painting

Major Accomplishments: _____

National Events in which interviewee has participated: _____

Local Events in which interviewee has participated: _____

National born U.S. citizen? Yes/No

Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: _____

Country from which he/she emigrated: _____

Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: _____

Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: Don Stanfield (brother)

Additional information: _____

OUTLINE

- I. Background: Gwen Bradley's childhood
- II. The Great Depression (Effects on Alabama)
- III. World War II in Alabama
- IV. Korea and the 1950's
- V. Political Events
- VI. Economic Events
- VII. Social Events
- VIII. Raising a family in Etowah County
- IX. Summary of her life in Alabama
- X. Retirement and the Future