

AN ABLE ADDRESS.

REMINISCENCES OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA.

An Address Delivered at the Lyceum Friday Night, Nov. 7, 1890, by Col. A. T. Davidson.

[From the Lyceum, of January.]

I was born on Jonathan's creek, Haywood county, N. C., May 19, 1819; my father William Mitchell Davidson, son of William Davidson, well known to the early settlers of Buncombe, having moved to that county in 1804. I have a distinct recollection of men and things for 65 years.

The country at that time was a vast mountain wilderness—only then about twenty years from the first settlement of the country—fresh, full of beauty, and of game. This occasion will not allow me to speak of my childhood sports and gambles, and I must hasten on to the men who felled the forests, subdued the wilderness, led in public affairs, and planted the very highly intelligent and respectable population that now inhabit that county. The immediate neighbors of my father were first, David Nelson, who was one of the very first men on Jonathan's creek, having come with Jonathan N. McPeters, for whom the creek was called, on a hunting expedition. He was illiterate, of fine physical form, honest, brave and hospitable. He raised a large family of sons and daughters; was the uncle of Wm. H. Thomas (of whom I will speak hereafter), died at 87 highly respected and lamented. Peace to his memory.

Then there were Joshua Allison, George Owens, John and Reuben Moody, brothers, all sturdy, hardy, well-to-do men, and good citizens, with Samuel Leatherwood, who constituted the near neighbors, those whom I first remember as my father's friends. They all raised large families, with strong physiques, sound and good constitutions, and all without a doctor. Joseph Chambers of this neighborhood moved to Georgia about the first of the opening and discovery of the Carroll county gold mine, say about 1831 or '32. He was a man of more than ordinary character, led in public affairs, raised an elegant family for the times; his daughters marrying well. They were splendid ladies, and their descendants belong to some of the best families in Georgia. His wife was a sister of John and Reuben Moody.

Then there was John Leatherwood, who was well known for his industry, thrift, fine hounds, fine cattle, and good "old time apple brandy"—a good citizen, lived to a good old age. James McKee, father of James L. McKee of this city, lived on this creek, was the sheriff of Haywood for many years, and died at an old age near Asheville. He was very popular and was never defeated for office. Near him lived Felix Walker, who was the representative in Congress from this district in 1820-22. He served till '24, and was succeeded by Dr. Robt. Vance of this county. He was a man of great suavity of manners; a fine electioneer inasmuch that he was called "the old oil jug"; was the author of the now National phrase, "I am talking for Buncombe." He went after his defeat for Congress to Mississippi, and died about 1835. I remember him well, although I was only five or six years old when he left the State.

The manufacture and trade in gin sing was begun on this creek by Dr. Hailen, of Philadelphia, who employed Nimrod S. Jarrett and Bacchus J. Smith, late of this county, to conduct the business. It was abundant then and very profitable, the green root being worth about seven cents a pound. A branch of this business was established on Caney river, in Yancey county. I well remember seeing the great companies of mountaineers coming along the mountain passes (there were no roads then only as we blazed them), with packed horses and oxen going to the "factory," as we called it; and it was a great rendezvous for the people, where all the then sports of the day were engaged in, such as pitching quoits, running foot races, shooting matches, wrestling and sometimes a good fist and skull fight.

But the curse and indignation of the neighborhood rested on the man who attempted, as we called it, "to interfere in the fight, or double-team, or use a weapon."

One other incident of my early

recollection of Jonathan's creek and I will leave that locality and try to find other interests. The first school-master I remember was an old man by the name of Hayes. He was a good old man, and had a nice family; came to that back country to learn the "young idea how to shoot." I was about six years old. We could not then get spelling books readily. I had none; was more inclined to fun than study. The old man, or his daughters, dressed a board as large as a broad shingle, printed the alphabet on it, bored a hole through the top, put a string in it, tied it around my neck and told me to get my lesson. I did not make much progress; was greatly indulged by the old man; "went out" without the "stick," which was the passport for the others. The old man wore a pair of black steel-rim spectacles, with the largest eyes I ever saw, and was a great smoker. There were no matches in those days, and no way to get fire except by punk and steel; hence he had to keep fire covered up in ashes in the fire-place to light his pipe. It was, therefore, necessary to add a few sticks now and then to keep "seed." As I was generally at leisure he would send me out for wood (or sticks). It was the early fall, the time of the buckeye. When I would bring in the sticks I would usually bring in two or three buckeyes. As I would cover the wood in the embers I would slip in the buckeye. The wood would smoulder to a coal and the buckeyes would get hot; they would not explode until the air reached them. The old man would charge his pipe, a very short stemmed one, and go to the fire-place to light it. As he began to stir the ashes to get a live coal, as soon as the buckeye was exposed to open air it would explode and go off, like the report of a musket, scattering the hulls, ashes and embers all over the house, in the old man's face and against his spectacles; whereupon he would say, "Allen, you really must quit putting this popping stuff in the fire." You can well imagine the condition of the school room at this time. The good old man never did discover what was the cause of the explosion. He has long since gone to his reward and I remember him with the tenderest affection.

A wider range would lead me to speak of the habits and customs of the people. The great burdens they bore, the manhood exhibited, the great inconveniences under which they labored, shows a state of facts not known to this progressive age. I speak now of the first generation or heads of families who settled this back country. Time would fail me to speak of their descendants and the many useful and valuable citizens that sprang from this band of heroes. They manufactured all their wearing apparel, tanned their own leather, made their axes and plows, and, in short, bought nothing from the stores except iron. In fact, they had nothing to buy with. There was but one post office in the county, and that was at the town. All the necessities of life were procured from the markets of Georgia and South Carolina. It was a three week's trip with a wagon to Augusta, Ga. For this market the neighborhood would bunch their products, bring their forces together and make trips to Augusta, loaded with bacon, peltries and such other marketable articles as would bear transportation in this simple way. The return for these products was sugar, coffee and molasses, and happy was the family on the return of the wagons to be able to have a jug full of New Orleans black molasses; and how happy the children were to meet their fathers and brothers again and have them recite the many stories of the trip. We then bought salt by the measure, a bushel weighing about 70 pounds. The average price on the return of the wagon was three dollars per bushel. It was interesting to see the people meet to get from the wagons their portion of the return load; and happy was the small family that got a half bushel of salt, 50 cents worth of molasses. There was general rejoicing, all going home satisfied and happy, content with their small cargo, and satisfied that they had enough to do them for the next year. It is remarkable how simple and careful they lived, and with what earnestness and hope they went to their daily toil, expecting nothing more than this small contribution to their luxury for a year to come. A striking fact in the charac-

ter of this primitive people was that they were entirely devoted to each other, clannish in the extreme; and when affliction sorrow, trouble or vexation came to one to all. It was like a beehive—always some one on guard and all affected by the attack from without. They were the constant attendants around the bed of the sick, suffered with the suffering, wept with those who wept, attended all the funerals without reward. It was never known that a coffin was charged for, or the digging of a grave, for many long years. Is it a fact that these men were better than those of the present day? or does it only exist in my imagination? When I look back to them I think that they were the best men I ever knew; and the dear old mothers of these humble people are now strikingly engraved on my memory. The men rolled each others logs in common; they gathered their harvests, built their cabins, and all work of a heavy character was done in common, without price. The log meeting house was reared in the same way, and it is a fact that this was done promptly, without hesitation, regardless of creeds or sect—all coming together with a will, although many of them were not very pious, indicating a fixed belief in the Christian religion. The Baptists, "rifle, axe and saddle bag men," or the Methodists "circuit rider," supplied the people with the ministry of the word, and it is pleasant to look and reflect upon the enjoyment and comfort these humble people had in the administration by these humble ministers in the long ago. Then they came together and held what they called "Union meetings," under arbors made with poles and brush, or at the private residence of some good citizen, often at my father's house. I remember distinctly that Nathan Gibson, of Crabtree creek, converted the top of his mill house into one of these places of worship; and Jacob Shook, on Pigeon, the father of the family near Clyde, turned his threshing floor, in his barn, into a place of worship, and near this was established, about 1827 or '28, Shook's camp-ground. The good old dutchman contributed or donated to the church ten acres of land, which have ever been kept for a place of public worship. Time would fail me to tell of the humble life, deprivations and inconveniences under which these people labored without murmur and without complaint. Happy in their simplicity, fond of their friends, and given to hospitality.

A more general view of the country leads me to the organization of the county of Haywood, and to the men who led in that movement. Haywood county was cut off of Buncombe county in 1808. I am only now to speak of those things which do not appear in the history of the times, and in mentioning families, or names, I can only mention them as families and those persons who took part in the organization of the county. I am at a great loss according to my memory about dates.

The most noted characters of the county, who were in public life, were John Welch, John McFarland, Hodge Reyburn, Thomas Tatham, Gen. Thomas Love, Ninian Edmondston. These represented the county of Haywood for many years, preserved and maintained a high reputation until their death. Joseph Chambers, of whom I have spoken, represented the county for three sessions in the legislature. Some of these had formerly represented Buncombe county in the legislature, notably Gen. Thomas Love, who represented Buncombe from 1800 to 1808, (the sessions of the legislature then were annual), afterwards served in the legislature for Haywood from 1808 until 1828, perhaps the longest service of any one man in the State, continuously. He immediately afterwards moved to Macon county, where he resided for several years, and then removed to the western district of Tennessee; was elected to the Legislature from that State, and was made presiding officer of the Senate. He was a man of very fine appearance, more than six feet high, very popular, and a fine electioneer. Many amusing stories are told of him, such as carrying garden seeds in his pocket, and distributing them, always with the assurance that his wife had remembered the voter's wife and sent them with her regards. The old gentleman was fond of a good toddy, but did not resort to the mean subterfuge of elec-

tioning with liquor. On one occasion, however, it is said of him, that he signed a pledge of the temperance society, which was then very unpopular, so at his first speaking he found that there was a clamour against him on that account. While he would not notice it publicly, he told his friends that he would be glad to have some hard cider to drink while he was speaking, which was procured for him. Some mischievous boys, however, concluded that they would play a trick on him and began to add to a mug of hard cider a little of corn whiskey. It was soon seen that the effects began to excite the old gentleman. He became animated and eloquent, when kind friends notified him that the boys were pouring whiskey into his cider. The rubicon was passed, and with great force he said "he didn't care if it was all whiskey." I have a vivid recollection of the beginning of all his speeches. It was thusly: "Gentlemen and fellow citizens—I have had the honor of representing you in the lower branch of the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina for the last two and thirty years, and I have no doubt, my friends, if I should again be elected, I shall be able to do you abundance of good," etc. Sufficient to say of this man that he made his mark on society, and retained the public confidence until he left the State.

[CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.]

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