

Neighborhoods, hamlets, clusters, and “wide places in the road” in and around Cowan

By L. Jarod Pearson

Those of us who grew up in Cowan understand that certain parts of our small town have interesting names and designations. The following information represents my effort to get the “story behind the story” on several of these.

The Bottom

Cowan's oldest African-American neighborhood is located across Boiling Fork Creek from the old cement plant and next to the fill that supports the railroad right-of-way. It is so-named because of its low elevation that was notorious for flooding during heavy rain. The Bottom was the second housing development of the Davidson, Hicks & Greene Timber Company and was built specifically for the black employees and their families. When the timber mill closed in 1927, Cumberland Portland Cement took its place and employed most of the former mill workers. The cement plant employees used their local product to construct a retaining wall to help control the flooding problem in The Bottom. The wall serves that critical purpose to this day.

The most prominent area landmark is the former Rayburn Chapel A.M.E. Church, which is the second oldest church building in Cowan. The church was originally located on the creek bank and was exposed to flood waters in every season. In 1907 the church members moved the building about 300 feet to a hillside in the area where it stands today. From 1907 and until the retaining wall was built, families camped out the church building whenever the flood waters took hold.

The Bottom also had a grocery store on the upper end of the neighborhood and facing the railroad track.

Sadly, most of the houses in The Bottom are long gone and population in this historic neighborhood is dwindling.

Centennial is a rural community west and south of Cowan connected by the Boiling Fork Creek and Norwood Creek. The most significant area landmark is the Goshen Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Franklin County's first organized church, and the related Goshen Cemetery. Franklin County's first schoolhouse was also at Goshen and later moved to a nearby location on Norwood Creek.

Centennial is primarily a farming community. Pioneer settlers in the area established the first farmer's education society in 1818 to increase productivity and tap into the growing cotton trade. That same year a mill and cotton gin was built on Norwood Creek by the Gross family. Most

area farmers switched to grain production in the early 20th-Century with the help of a local granary owned and operated by the Money family.

The community was anchored by Centennial Grocery through the latter half of the 20th Century. Centennial Grocery was a small general store with gas pumps. In the early 1980's, Mrs. Lill Waggoner added a kitchen with short-order lunch service. Centennial Grocery took on a new role as the local hangout for residents, Money Brothers employees, and customers for the other area businesses.

There were several popular businesses in the area up until the early 1990's, including Vaughn Welding shop, Reid Bus Tours, and Evans sawmill. The most popular area business was Ray Judge's Gun Shop that attracted visitors from a three-state area.

Commerce at Centennial all but disappeared by the early 21st Century. Several farms still operate in the area, but some have been subdivided for new home construction. The population at Centennial is growing even though the community is less connected now it lacks an anchoring business.

Roughly half of the residents in Centennial are descended from some of the original pioneer settlers of Franklin County and specifically the town of Cowan. Common surnames in Centennial are Bell, Cowan, Holder, Keith, Kinningham, Knight, and Williams.

A cluster of houses in the Centennial community is locally known as **Henley Row**. The Henley families in this area are descended from pioneers who first settled Sewanee and also settled Henley Hollow in Roark's Cove.

Chocolate Row refers to a group of houses along East England Street in the southeast quadrant of Cowan. The wood frame one-family houses were built in the late 1920's to house employees of the Davidson, Hicks & Greene Timber Company. When the houses were constructed, DH&G had an over-abundance of brown paint in storage. Since that time, the houses on East England were affectionately called Chocolate Row even though most were repainted or sided in the 1950's.

The houses at Chocolate Row are well maintained and some have shady lawns bordered by a thicket that overlooks Boiling Fork Creek. The entire neighborhood benefitted from a 2010 sidewalk expansion project.

City Limits refers to a commercial trading district on the west side of Cowan. This area developed as the growing popularity of Highway 41A created a niche for businesses with highway frontage and abundant parking.

In the post war years the City Limits was a trendy part of town with two drive-in restaurants and a roller skating rink. The automobile orientation of the district, built in an east-west orientation,

contrasts with Cowan's historic downtown that was developed with a north-south orientation along the railroad.

Cowan's only liquor store has been a prominent anchor in the City Limits District for over four decades. Other well-known businesses that existed here were Jim's Drive-in, Flo's Restaurant, Cowan Roller Rink, and the Rolling Acres Motel. WZYX Radio moved from downtown to the City Limits in the early 1970's.

Frogtown is a cluster of houses between the railroad yard, the railroad swamp, Mars Hill and the old Thorogood School in the northwest quadrant of Cowan. The name derives from the close proximity to the railroad swamp. Historically a black neighborhood, Frogtown once had more than two dozen houses along with a popular African-American owned business, the Railroad Inn restaurant.

Frogtown was originally accessed by Greenhaw Road, which gave residents an easy north-south access and a direct street connection to Thorogood School and Thorogood Cemetery. However, the closure of the railroad crossing rerouted Greenhaw to College Street and eliminated direct access to Frogtown from the north. Subsequently, the former section of Greenhaw Road that accessed Thorogood School was truncated at the Swain residence and thence renamed Swain Street. Since that time, Frogtown has been relatively isolated from the rest of the community. For the past few decades local residents have referred to the area collectively as Mars Hill (even though Mars Hill is a different cluster of houses situated near Mt. Sinai Baptist Church). Consequently, the name Frogtown is less and less known among local residents.

Greenhaw is a farming community north of Cowan situated in a valley along Wagner Creek and below High Top Ridge and Land's End Ridge on the southwest side of Sewanee Mountain. The community was built around a deep well that supplied water for homes and livestock for several decades. A school operated beside the well into the early 1920's.

An old stagecoach road connected Greenhaw with Sewanee to the east and Decherd to the west. This road is listed on some early area maps as Brakefield Road, though it was originally an Indian trail. A popular legend holds that Confederate soldiers buried gold and other valuables in the mountain near the old road during the Civil War. A Confederate cemetery is landmarked and documented in a field along Greenhaw Road.

A Primitive Baptist Church was established at Greenhaw in 1866 near the well. The congregation relocated to Decherd in the 1920's and the church was purchased by members of the Penile Hill Baptist Church about a decade later. Greenhaw Baptist Church was organized and established in this building before relocating into a new building across the street in 1959.

In the early 1900's effort was made to start an Episcopal congregation in Greenhaw. Services were held at the local school for a brief period by students enrolled in the Theology Department at The University of the South. There's no record of the church's name, if it had one.

The Greenhaw well is still a visible landmark and a community pavilion is located on the site of the original Baptist church. Several Greenhaw residents have pioneer family roots, namely the Gipson's who are descended from Allen Gipson, a prominent Sewanee settler who donated land to The University of the South.

Greenhaw made state-wide news in 2009 when a quiet land acquisition brought the possibility of a rock quarry. The community launched a massive effort to fight the plan and drew in support from surrounding communities and environmental organizations. The campaign to fight the quarry uses the slogan "Keep Greenhaw Green".

Hawkins Cove refers to the farming valley immediately below Sewanee's Memorial Cross northeast of Cowan. The Hawkins family that owned the cove helped settle both Cowan and Sewanee and contributed land to The University of the South.

Hawkins Cove Road is part of an old stagecoach route that connected Cowan and Sewanee through the better part of the 19th Century. The Squire Brooks Hawkins house, now owned by the Rigsby family, is one of Franklin County's oldest houses and was once a stop on the old stagecoach route.

A sizeable population of Cherokee Indians lived in the area until the 1830's, which made arrowhead collecting a favorite pastime for local residents. The area between the old Squire Brooks Hawkins House and Sewanee Mountain was a burial mound.

The Hawkins family and the Pearson family were closely associated, and the creek through Hawkins Cove right below the Hawkins house is called Pearson Creek. Several members of the Pearson family still live in the Cove.

Hawkins Hill is the highest point in the City of Cowan. This was the site of Franklin County's First Court House, the pioneer home of Major William Russell. The hill is so named because the Hawkins family purchased this particular land holding from Major Russell in 1815. The house at the top of the hill was constructed by the Hawkins family over the original footprint of the first court house. Another large house at the top of the hill is the Shook-Wright house. Mrs. Oattie Shook gained notoriety as a contestant on the game show "The Price is Right" where she won a Mercury automobile.

Keith Cove is an area immediately south of Cowan named for a prominent family of pioneer settlers. This cove is noted for beautiful mountain scenery and rich farmland. The historic Sloan House is located in the cove and was built by a former surgeon and physician for the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railroad. One of the Franklin County's first school buses operated in Keith's Cove, which was a mule-drawn covered wagon affectionately named "The Goose". Keith's Cove was realigned in the late 1930's thanks to the political efforts of the local Good Roads Movement. The primary reason for the realignment was to make it easier for school buses

to route through the Cove to pick-up and deliver school children. Keith Cove never developed a commercial trading district because of its close proximity to downtown Cowan.

Lakeview was the last group of houses constructed by the Davidson, Hicks & Greene Timber Company. Completed in the late 1920's, Lakeview was a settlement located on top of the mountain southwest of Cowan in a clearing created by the massive logging operation. To supply water for the houses and for steam-powered equipment, DH&G built a three-acre lake below one of very few mountain streams in the area. The lake combined with the spectacular view of Cowan earned it the name Lakeview. Besides a group of houses, a small hotel was built for visitors and term residents. A school existed in the area that consisted of two railroad cars that could be moved from one camp to another when necessary. Lakeview was also served by a mountain railroad that connected the various logging camps with the enormous sawmill in Cowan adjacent to the mainline railroad.

Today, there's hardly a trace of old Lakeview. The original houses are gone, the hotel fell to the ground in the 1970's, and the dam that contained the mountain stream gave way causing the lake to dry. There are a few luxury homes built in the Lakeview area with an attractive bluff view, but the lack of reliable water supplies has precluded further development. Several hunting clubs lease thousands of wooded acres around Lakeview.

Mars Hill refers to an elevated area in the northwest quadrant of Cowan above Miller branch*. Historically an African-American neighborhood, the name has biblical significance. Some locals believe that the correct name is Morris Hill in reference to a family that lived in the area, and some simply refer to it as "The Hill". Mars Hill covers an elevated area between the railroad and the old Thorogood School. A relatively large grocery store was operated in the community by Mr. Dewitt Moseley. Mt. Sinai Baptist Church and Thorogood Street Church of Christ are both located in the area as well as the Thorogood Cemetery.

**Note - the tiny stream referred to as Miller Branch is actually a large drain culvert that carries water away from the railroad and flows into Boiling Fork Creek near the bridge at Water Tank Road. (This area is sometimes referred to as old Iron Bridge.) This Miller Branch is not to be confused with Miller Creek that flows through Miller Cove and joins up with the Boiling Fork east of Cowan.*

McAmis Lane is a 1-mile road that connects East Cumberland Street and Highway 41A on the eastern city limits of Cowan to the historic Georgia Crossing Road. Locals also refer to McAmis Lane as a cluster of houses on the northern end of the road where it meets Georgia Crossing.

Most of the houses on the east side cluster were built in the 1970's on sections of land that were part of the old Holder and Miller home place, later purchased by the Forgy's and the Pearson's. Two houses on the west side were owned by the Shedd's and Miller's, of which the Miller house still stands. The cluster also includes houses that front Georgia Crossing Road near McAmis.

McAmis Lane is unique in that it has two separate and distinct connections to Hollywood. The most notorious connection to Hollywood is the beige-sided house brought into the neighborhood from Decherd in 1991 during the construction of Highway 64. Sasha Mitchell, a Hollywood actor and movie star, leased the house in 1995 in order to relocate his family from California to Tennessee. The move caused quite a stir in Franklin County and created a media frenzy that multiplied the traffic count in this otherwise quiet neighborhood. A true Hollywood drama emerged prompting a visit from the *National Enquirer* and a controversial story that made its way into the court house and onto *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The Mitchell family moved back to California the following year and the neighborhood was quiet again. Since that time the "Sasha Mitchell House" has become a point of reference and a landmark in its own respect.

The oldest home on the lane is the McAmis-Sawyer house built in the late 19th Century. Craig Sawyer, an aspiring Hollywood actor, grew up here and still visits from time to time.

Miller Cove refers to the farming valley below High Top Ridge and Armfield Bluff on Sewanee Mountain north of Cowan. Miller Creek flows through the Cove on its way to Boiling Fork. The Miller family settled the area and built a large plantation with a large antebellum home at the foot of the mountain. Miller Cove fronts Georgia Crossing Road, but is scarcely populated. The vast land is used exclusively for farming while the side of the mountain leading up to the Domain is leased for wild-game hunting.

Slagtown, or Slag Town, represents Cowan's oldest subdivided neighborhood. The area was originally the site of the Sewanee Furnace that made Cowan the largest producer of pig iron in the world in the late 1800's. One of the by-products of the iron smelting process was enormous mounds of slag, a metallic rock substance. The Tennessee Coal and Iron Railroad Company, which owned the furnace, constructed dozens of houses near the slag piles, hence the name Slagtown. Most of the houses were demolished in the early 20th Century after the Furnace closed and relocated to Birmingham. However, in the early 1920's the Davidson, Hicks & Greene Timber Company constructed another group of single family housing units as well as a boarding house near the slag piles, but closer to downtown. This development also took the name Slagtown.

Tantallon is a local mystery, and some locals refer to it as a ghost town. Located along the railroad south of Cowan and along Crow Creek, the only visible indication of the town's existence is a railroad marker and an unpaved road known as Tantallon Road. The town may have been populated by a few railroad workers operating and maintain a track switch by the same name, which was common practice before the development of automated signal systems and two-way radio.

It's possible that the switch was named Tantallon by a railroad worker from Scotland who helped build the Cumberland Mountain Tunnel, and who probably recalled the name of Tantallon Castle in his native land. There was a scattering of houses near the railroad switch. A map of Franklin

County from the early 1850's references Tantallon along with the only other "town" that existed in the Crow Creek valley, Anderson, down on the Alabama state line. (This was about 20 years before the town of Sherwood was organized.)

Vanderbilt Drive specifically refers to a street in the northeast quadrant of Cowan, but colloquially refers to a group of houses on and near Vanderbilt Drive built during the post-World War II housing boom. Most of the houses are a low-profile ranch design with extra-large windows in a style that defined America suburbia for almost a generation. Most of the homes in Vanderbilt were built by prominent Cowan business owners and other well-known families.