Hiawassee - The Early Days, From The Memoirs Of A Civil War Soldier

By Esther Payne Davis

Esther Payne Davis, a freelance writer in Mt. View, California, shares with the JOURNAL readers some of the experiences of her grandfather - Mr. J.W. (James Wiley) Walker - in pioneer Hiawassee, Georgia, up to and during the U.S. Civil War. In his own words in July of 1934, at age 91, Mr. Walker left the following testimonial of the early days of the tiny mountain community.)

"I am in my 91st year, a veteran of the unhappy struggle of a country divided against itself, the Civil War, when our country was less than 100 years old.

Since it was in Hiawassee, Georgia, where I grew up, that I first heard the rumblings of the Civil War, I would like to give you a sketch of Hiawassee's pioneer days and of some of my experiences there before marching off to war.

At the time of this writing, Hiawassee is about 80 years old. My father, Daniel Walker, moved from McDowell County, North Carolina, to Georgia in the year 1848, and settled on Belle Creek.

Belle Creek was then in Union County. In a short time, a strip was taken off Rayburn (sic) County, forming a new county called Touns (sic) County, and Union County also.

The ground on which Hiawassee was built was at that time called the old Muster Ground where the militia was called once a year to make a military parade, marching after the Stars and Stripes and the sound of the fife and drum. At this time, there was a blacksmith shop in Hiawassee and a little house nearby in which the blacksmith kept whiskey to sell. Anyone going there could get a gallon of whiskey for 50 cents. The county seat was located here and called Hiawassee.

Jim Burch and George Standridge were the first men to sell goods there. I helped saw the logs to make shingles that covered their buildings. My father and brothers cut long-bodied chestnut trees that stood around the base of Belle Mountain, dragging them to a place to be worked up. My next older brother and I were only kids but we sawed the logs into blocks, shingle lengths, to be worked up and shaved into shingles by an old man whom we called Uncle Benny Henderson. The third man to sell goods in Hiawassee was Bill McConnell.

The first circuit court held in Hiawassee was in a structure someone had put up. Howard Kerley who lived on Hog Creek was the first clerk of the court. Walter Foster who lived on High Tower Creek was the sheriff.

Someone had dug a cellar, and when Walter had to arrest someone, there being no jail, he put him in the cellar. There were some lively times in those days by certain classes of people, but I don't remember of but one peron being put underground alive.

Contracts were soon let to build a courthouse and jail.

Abner Chasteen, a Baptist preacher, was given a contract to build the jail. It was a huge log structure of two rooms, each about 16 feet square with an alley between. The prison was made of double walls. Outer and inner walls were about eight inches apart. This space was beaten full of rocks as the building went up.

The work on the courthouse progressed slowly as the brick had to be molded and burned, but was in shape for the next term of circuit court.

It seemed that the few years that intervened between the founding of Hiawassee and the beginning of the Civil War were passed briefly. In the years of 1859 and 1860, the forebodings of war grew stronger and stronger until after the decision of the State Convention to withdraw from the Union, after which war was declared. Then volunteers were called for to form an army.

About this time, Burch and Standridge went out of business, but McConnell stayed on in business and held the post office during the period of war. The community was frequently called together to listen to red-hot war speeches.

The Stars and Stripes were discarded, but the fife and drum stayed intact. The fife and drum would start off slowly, and an enlisted officer would begin calling "Fall In," "Fall In." Columns of men and women would follow the fife and drum and after they made the circle, the enlisting officer would go down the line taking the names of those who would enlist. A day would be set a short time hence to meet and march away to some designated place to swell the army.

Crowds of men and women were there to bid the departing ones farewell, shaking hands, with hearts aching and tears streaming down their faces.

I served in the armies of the Civil War three years. I say "armies" because I fought on both sides of the war when hunger forced me to join the other side. We were so starved, we ate grains of corn picked from horse manure. Sometimes, it was brother against brother, as my brother and I fought on different sides at different times.

I grew up to manhood on Belle Creek, Georgia, making my home in that vicinity until the 4th of March, 1885, when I left with my family and came to Missouri. I settled in Polk County four miles east of a small county town called Pleasant Hope.

This same place has been my home for 49 years, the 10th of last March. I have been a farmer all my life except three years I served in the armies of the Civil War.

I am now in my 91st year, having been born in McDowell County, North Carolina, March 15, 1844.

I am happy to have been able to survive these 90 years to tell where and how I spent my youth, those days being mixed with troublesome yet enjoyable times."

J.W. Walker
March 15, 1844 - September, 1934.