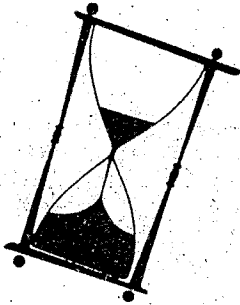


Ira Harmon A Riverboat Man

(Excerpted from "The History of St. Clair County," by Mattie Lou Teague Crow, 1973).

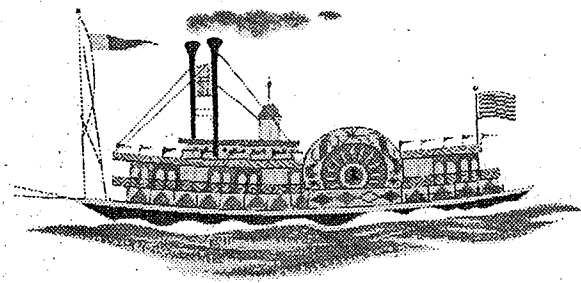
Ira Harmon was a man who possessed those qualities that make a story live forever. He was born in 1826 among the western foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains in Green County, Tennessee. When he was six years old, his parents Jacob and Lucinda Gann Harmon, moved to Talladega County, Alabama. Pioneer methods of travel are illustrated by a description of the move. The elder Harmons placed their family on a flatboat on the Nolichucky River, floated down this stream to the Holston River, and continued down the Holston to the



Tennessee River. They floated down the Tennessee to a point near Chattanooga, and from Chattanooga the family

During the Civil War coal from mines in St. Clair County was supplied to the Confederate arsenal at Selma. Most of this coal was mined by Ragland and Sims at a place called Trout Creek (later Ragland), two miles west of the Coosa River. Part of it was mined by Crandle and Anderson at a place one mile west of Ragland. From these mines the coal was hauled to the river on wagons and there loaded on flatboats. Some of these boats were floated down river to Yellow Leaf (now Wilsonville), and there the coal was transferred to railroad cars and shipped over the Selma, Dalton, and Rome Railroad to Selma. The greater number of boats were floated down the Coosa River to the Alabama River, and from there by Montgomery to Selma. Ira Harmon acted as pilot for these boats. It was in the face of great difficulties that he supplied coal to the arsenal.

The mine operated by Ragland and Sims from 1861 until 1865 was not under the control of the confederate government, but their coal was sold at Montgomery and Selma. During the latter part of the war, Crandle and Anderson operated their mine under the supervision and control of the Confederate government. The labor at both mines was done chiefly by Negro slaves, many of whom had been recently brought to that section as



caused much trouble, especially if the boats were loaded with cotton. The time required to go from Montgomery to Selma was two days and nights. On delivering the coal, the men sold the boats, and the return trip from Selma to the Coosa River was made by rail. The price received for coal in Montgomery from 1861 until 1865 was one hundred twenty-five dollars per ton--in Confederate money. The price paid a pilot for his services on

each trip during the war was one hundred Confederate dollars.

Ira Harmon's home was at Fountainrun. Some of his descendants who are living in Pell City today are: J.N. Harmon, Wasson Harmon, Kenneth Tucker, Cecil P. Gray, Jr., Harmon Gray, James V. Gray, Elain Gray Goodgame, Mary Gray Litty, and Martha Smith Lonnergan. Ira Harmon died in 1903.

"divide" to the headwaters of the Oostanaula River. Here they built another boat and floated down to Rome, Georgia, and from there down the Coosa River to Talladega County, where the Harmons settled, and where Ira Harmon was reared: When he was a very young man, he moved across the Coosa River into south St. Clair County, where he bought land and married Semira A. Payne. Here they reared their family.

The Coosa Valley was rich in agricultural products, but there were no railroads to get them to market. Ira Harmon became a flatboat pilot and had many exciting experiences while floating produce down the Coosa River to market. He could not remember the date of his trip to Wetumpka, but he said that on this trip, when his boat was twelve miles north of there, at the "Devil's Staircase," Miller's (sic) comet made its appearance, causing alarm among the crew. On reaching Wetumpka the next day, he found the town in commotion and excitement because of the comets's appearance.

To those of you have seen the Coosa River above Wetumpka, it is evident that no small degree of courage and judgment were required to conduct loaded boats safely over these shoals. There are cliffs projecting into the channel at many of the abrupt bends in the river, and if the boats were not steered clear of these menacing rocks, it meant destruction to craft and freight, and perhaps the crew. These same projecting rocks produced the giant whirlpools whose circling vortexes swallowed up everything that entered them. The most dangerous of all were hidden rocks in the channel of the stream which had to be avoided.

Tennessee. Negroes also constituted the crews for the boats which were made of sawed lumber and were fifty feet long, eighteen feet wide, and thirty inches deep. The amount of coal carried on each boat was from twenty to fifty-two tons. The trip down the



river could be made only when the stream was swollen. On a trip down the river, from two to eight boats were carried at the same time—usually five. Five men were required for each boat. Under favorable conditions the trip from Ragland to Montgomery could be made in three days. Mr. Harmon stated that he had made the trip from Ragland to Wetumpka in a day and a night, but sometimes the trip would require two weeks. If weather conditions were unfavorable, the boats were tied up to the bank at night, and if there was wind or fog on the river, it was sometimes necessary to remain tied up for several days. Wind



To Display Crafts

Mrs. Pat Spradley, left welcomes Mrs. Anice Carroll of Cropwell to the ranks of artists and craftsmen who have entered the First Annual Coosa Arts and Crafts Fair. Mrs. Carroll is pictured here with a sample of the many and varied "bottle dolls," bonnets, denim purses and aprons she has fashioned. (Photo By August Lehe.)

