

COAL BARGING IN ALABAMA IN WAR TIMES -- 1861-65

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During the War of Session coal from mines in St. Clair County, Alabama, was supplied to the Confederate Arsenal at Selma. Most of this coal was mined by Ragland and Sims at a place now called Ragland two miles west of 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 flat boats. Some of these boats were floated down the river to Yellow Leaf, now Wilsonville, and there the coal was transferred to railroad ears and shipped over the Selma, Dalton and Roan railroad to Selma. The greater number of the boats were floated down the Coosa river to the Alabama river, and thence by Montgomery to Selma. Ira Harmon, who acted as pilot for these boats is still living. The writer recently visited him at his home one mile south of Easonville in St. Clair County. The statements set forth in this article were made by Mr. Harmon on this visit. He is an intelligent old man, now feeble with the infirmities of age, but his straight-forward, blunt statements bear evidence of the energy and courage of his earlier years.

Ira Harmon was born among the western foothills of the Great Smoky mountains in Green County, Tennessee. When a child of six years his father moved to Talladega County, Alabama. Pioneer methods on travel are illustrated by a description of the move. The elder Harmon placed his family on a flat boat on the Nolichucky River, floated down this stream to the Molston River, and continued down the Molston to the Tennessee River. The latter stream was followed to a point near Chattanooga. From this point the family was carried overland across the "divide" to the headwaters of the Oostanaula River. Another boat was here built, and they floated down to Rome, Georgia, and thence down the Coosa River to Talladega County, where the elder Harmon settled and where Ira Harmon was reared.

Talladega County was rich in agricultural products before the days of railroads in that Section. Ira Harmon gained his experience as a pilot while floating these products down the Coosa River to market. When asked the date of his first trip, he could not remember, but stated that on this trip, when his boat was twelve miles north of Wetumpka at the "Devil's Stair Case", Miller's comet made its appearance, causing alarm among the crew,

and on reaching Wetumpka the next day, the town was in commotion and excitement, caused by the appearance of the comet. To those who have seen the Coosa River above Wetumpka is evident that no degree of courage and judgment were required to conduct loaded boats with safety over these shoals. Higher up the river are other rapids, where the fall is greater, the current swifter, and the passage more difficult to make. There are jutting cliffs projecting into the channel at many of the abrupt bends in the river, and if the boats were not sterred clear of these menacing rocks it meant destruction to craft and freight, and perhaps the crew. These same projecting rocks produce great whirlpools wh circling vortexes swallowed up everything that entered them. What was most dangerous o all were the hidden rocks in the channel of the stream whose location must be known to avoided.

It was in the face of such difficulties as these that Ira Harmon supplied coal to the Confederate arsenal at Selma. He states that the mine operated by Ragland and Sims from 1861 to 1865 was not under the control of the Confederate government, but that 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 refugees from Kentucky and Tennessee. Negroes also constituted the crew for the boats which were made of sawed lumber and were fifty feet long, eighteen feet wide and thirty inches in depth. The largest boat built was seventy-eight feet long, twenty-two feet wide, and thirty inches in depth. 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. Sometimes the loaded boats would have to wait for months until there was water enough in the river to enable them to pass over the shoals. During this time of waiting the boats crew was employed in building new boats. They would go into the forest, cut down trees, split them, and hew the halves into shape for the sides of the boats. Since tall large trees, free from knots were required, such timber was not always easily found. Some of the trees were hauled six to eight miles. Pine and poplar, chiefly pine, were used to make the gunnells with wooden pegs. On a tr

down the river from two to eight boats were carried at the same time - usually about 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 states that he had made the trip from Ragland to Wetumpka in a day and night. Sometimes it would require two weeks for the same trip. If conditions were unfavorable the boats were tied up to the bank at night. If there was wind or fog on the river it was sometimes necessary to remain tied up several days. Wind gave much trouble especially if the boats were loaded with cotton. The time to go from Montgomery to Selma was two days and nights. On delivering the coal the boats were sold and the return trip made from Selma back to the Coosa River by railroad. If the coal was sold in Montgomery, the crew went on down the river to Selma to return from there by railroad. The price received for coal in Montgomery from 1861 to 1865 was one hundred to one hundred and twenty-five dollars per ton. The price paid a pilot for his services on each trip during the war was one hundred dollars in Confederate money. The price paid before and after the war was as much as fifty dollars. There were others boating on the Coosa during the war, and many boats with their freight were lost.

Mr. Harmon relates many interesting stories connected with these trips. One occasion the coal on a boat was discovered to be on fire. In removing the coal to put out the fire, it was discovered that the negroes on the boat had stolen a hog before starting on the trip, and had hidden it beneath the coal, to be eaten as they went down the river.

About thirty miles below Wilcoxville the country is mountainous and wild. The river here runs for some distance, close to the base of tall, almost perpendicular, rocky cliffs. For two years, on different trips smoke has been seen rising from beneath an overhanging rock among the cliffs. On one occasion, the river being very high, Mr. Harmon was enabled to run his boat close up to this "smoking rock". Then he saw a fire burning, and nearby, were eight men lying on the ground with their faces downward. They had seen the boat approaching and did this to avoid recognition. They were bushwhackers--men who were in hiding to keep out of the Confederate army. This was their rendezvous. The overhanging rocks sheltered these wartime cave-dwellers from the rain: the river cut off approach on one side and the cliffs made their retreat almost inaccessible on the other. Several months afterwards Mr. Harmon mentioned this discovery to a Confederate officer at the mines.

time that this was a bushwhacker camp?" "Yes," said Mr. Harmon, "but had it ever occurred to you which is of more importance to the Confederate government, coal for its arsenal at Selma or these bushwhackers as soldiers?" "To disturb these men means to endanger the life of every man who passes those cliffs on a flat boat." Perhaps, after all you are right, Mr. Harmon," said the officer and the bushwhackers went unmolested.

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IRA HARMON DIED IN 1903 AND IS BURIED AT EASONVILLE, ALABAMA.