

(From a Protective Life book on Alabama and company history - early 1930's)

GENEVA Named for its own county seat, Geneva County was created in 1868, some 32 years after Henry A. Yonge, a native of Switzerland, had settled in the southern portion of the area and become postmaster of a subsequently developing village to which he gave the name of the famous Swiss city. Through this village of Geneva in early days passed the stage coach line from Pensacola to Tallahassee, Florida. In the same year in which Yonge settled on the banks of the Choctawhatchee River, Captain Milledge Cox established a barge line to Pensacola on the river, which greatly accelerated the growth of Geneva. For many years the river remained the principal outlet for products of the region. The products were mostly logs of cypress and pine.

Geneva County is a perfect rectangle in shape, about 45 miles from east to west and 14 from north to south. The base of the rectangle is the Florida state line. On the east is Houston County, on the west Covington. The five counties of Geneva, Coffee, Covington, Houston and Henry constitute the so-called "Wire-grass" region of Alabama, so called for the stiff grass which would appear each spring to replace the winter carpets of pine needles. It was originally a wild, isolated, pine-forested, grassy country thought to be fit only for the pasturage of herds of cattle and hogs. The counties in the area were contemptuously called the "cow counties." Their sandy soils were considered unproductive, the dense pine forests defied the farmer's axe, there was practically no transportation, and malaria was believed to be about the only certain product of living there. In 1870 the total population of Geneva County was only 2959, located largely in scattered small farms, squatter cabins and lumber camps. The Mobile and Girard Railroad Company, which owned thousands of acres in the Wiregrass, did not value the acreage enough to pay taxes on it, and a great deal of the land was sold for taxes at one cent per acre.

The Wiregrass region was destined, however, to the most notable eventual development in the entire agricultural processes of Alabama. This development began in the late seventies and early eighties when turpentine men from the forests of Georgia and the Carolinas came into the area and began "boxing" the stately pines for juice. Upon the heels of these turpentine producers, who had developed a huge industry in the Wiregrass by the early eighties, came lumbermen, felling the trees and floating the logs down the small rivers or over tramways to saw mills in Alabama or Florida. Soon, with the clearing

of the lands and the discovery that the soil responded exceptionally well to intelligent use of fertilizer, farmers began to come from other sections of the state and from Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia and the Carolinas. By 1890 Geneva County's population had grown to 10,690. Fields of cotton, corn and sugar cane appeared; the lumber and turpentine industries continued to grow; and new towns sprang up everywhere.

Fresh impetus was given to this Wiregrass development after 1890 by the building of railroads. Prior to that year the only railroad transportation was the Mobile & Girard's line from Troy, in Pike County, to Columbus, Ga., and this line barely touched the region's borders. In 1890 the Alabama Midland Railroad (now the Atlantic Coast Line) was run from Montgomery through the eastern section of the Wiregrass to Bainbridge, Ga. Within the next ten years branch lines of this railway were completed from Grimes, in Dale County, to Abbeville, in Henry County, and from Waterford, in Dale County, to Enterprise and Elba, in Coffee County; the Central of Georgia extended the old Mobile & Girard line from Troy to Andalusia, in Covington County; and the Louisville & Nashville was built from Georgiana, in Butler County, through Geneva to Graceville, Florida. "The prosperous farmers of the Wiregrass" became then a newspaper by-word. Geneva County's population grew from 10,690 in 1890 to 19,096 in 1900; Covington County's growth was even greater; and the entire Wiregrass section showed a population increase of more than 65 per cent. Although cotton continued to be the chief agricultural product, much attention was given to the raising of livestock, and original successes with sugar cane brought visions of a sugar cane development surpassing even that of Louisiana.

The bright promises of Geneva and other Wiregrass counties at the turn of the century have been realized and enlarged in the three succeeding decades. The towns of Samson, Slocomb, Hartford and Geneva, in Geneva County, have become places of importance on the maps of the state. Lands which the Mobile & Girard Railway allowed to go for one cent an acre and which were sold again before 1900 for from fifty cents to a dollar and a half an acre, and a few years later for five to ten dollars an acre, came to be transferred in recent years at twenty-five to fifty dollars an acre. The population of Geneva County rose to 26,230 in 1910; to 29,315 in 1920; and 30,104 in 1930.

With economic development came the schools, churches, homes, banks and other measures of civilization which brought social development, too. The early settlers had been mostly poor men, arriving in wagons with (as one observer put it) nothing much of

“anything except children, dogs and hopes.” In his *History of Alabama*, Albert Burton Moore quotes a description of these wagons and their contents thus: “A wagon with its canvas covering, forming a protection for half a dozen tow-headed children, a couple of 'possum dogs tied with a rope to the rear axle, an assortment of pots and kettles decorating the hind end of the wagon, driven by a man with a bushy beard and cowhide boots.”

Semi-tropical in appearance, with Spanish moss hanging from many of the trees and palmettoes growing in the lowlands, with riotous flowers in almost all the seasons, with a wealth of cotton, corn, oats, rye, potatoes, beans, sugar cane, truck crops, fruits, hay, peanuts, hogs and cattle—modern Geneva can look upon its normally prospering scene with satisfaction at sixty-five years well run. The woods castaways of 1870 have found a blessed home. The “rosin chewers” of the eighties have come to feast on fatted calves.